
DUNGEON DIVING 304
BRUCE SENTAR

Dungeon Diving 304

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OceanofPDF.com

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Story Thus Far

Last time on Dungeon Diving 303, Ken saved Selene, only to find himself at the point of the Harem Queen's sword. Luckily, he managed to talk his way out of sudden death but found himself not quite seeing eye to eye with her mother, Director Amatto.

Ken stays busy dealing with the aftermath while also finding himself navigating new complexities. The heirs to the UG have not taken kindly to him spreading the cure for threadspawn infection. Rather than deal with their scheming, Ken ends up killing the current heirs to the UG and swiping the metal plates they'd used as stock since the very beginning of the organization.

Before he can use any of that power, he's thrust back into the dungeon, assisting the elves as the drow begin their offensive. In pushing back the drow, Ken discovers that Felin's nekorian clan can be reached from the elven world, and as he searches for them, he encounters more and more drow. While the strange, venomous elves prove to be a problem, one of the more interesting discoveries is that the threadspawn originally came from the drow who used them to keep slaves alive. They also learn that the threadspawn themselves are terrified of drow venom. Still, Ken and company push all the way through to save Felin's people, only taking a short break to gain control of the UG.

Despite all of the chaos, Ken begins tutoring Selene to catch up on the time she’d missed, and the two build a bond, going on their first date. As is usual for Ken’s life, a simple night did not stay simple. A group of women

running a smear campaign against Ken antagonize the two of them until Selene nearly kills them.

This all leads back to the next set of heirs, furious at Ken and company for taking fifty-five percent of the UG and essentially controlling it. As Ken deals with the Banks family heir, he discovers she's made a pact with the threadspawn, and danger once again looms for Earth somewhere in the dungeon. In the dungeon, the threadspawn are ready to swarm Earth once more, and though Ken allows them to escape, it's only so he can track them down at a future date.

While Ken prepares, Des works toward transforming herself completely into a succubus, and Charlotte begins training with Ken's grandfather so she can use melee abilities to take down the Crystal Whale and earn her own trial ability.

Ken has a new ability, [Stat Incubation], as a reward from the demons, that he's ready to put to good use.

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Chapter 1

"Your punches are weak," Crimson taunted me.

I swung as hard as I could, but she caught the hit gently in her fist before pushing it back toward me. Purple lightning wrapped around my body, increasing my speed to an enormous extent. I ducked, dodged, and slammed my fists into her palm.

"How much strength did you put into Selene?" she asked, swinging toward my head, only for me to duck.

I jabbed toward her waist, which she had seen coming.

She swayed like there was a hula hoop around her thin waist, knocking my fist aside.

I growled, grabbed her, and threw my weight into her as the two of us hit the ground and began rolling over each other until I landed on top. Crimson was beneath me, her barely contained chest heaving as she batted her lashes up at me. I groaned at her attempts and popped back to my feet before she could lure me into another type of physical activity.

Crimson pouted, her blue eyes looking genuinely sad before she kicked her feet up and threw them down with enough force to throw herself to her feet.

"Spoilsport." She stuck out her tongue and checked her long black braid to make sure it hadn't come untied with all the physical activity.

"We're training, Crimson," I said, glaring at her.

"Yeah, well. You have a new way to increase your stats." She made a heart-shaped window with her hands right above her hips. "I saw the mark

you left on Selene, and I want my own, dammit."

"Later," I promised.

After Selene, all the ladies in my party had made it a point to participate in the new stat incubation skill. Right now, I was down one hundred and seventy-four stats, and it was noticeable even in this spar with Crimson. She'd mentioned that my hits were light, and that was just because my strength was severely depleted as a result of all the stat incubation.

These women were draining me dry.

"Fine. Just leave me all on my lonesome." Crimson put a hand to her forehead and mimed swooning.

I rolled my eyes at her antics. "Yes, I'm sure it is so incredibly hard for you," I said, sounding less than sympathetic.

"Diving the dungeon is very stressful," she assured me, bobbing her head repeatedly. When Crimson wanted something, she was very good at getting whatever it was she wanted.

Given we seemed to be taking a break, I sat down and started drinking water so I could be ready for what came next. Knowing Crimson, she would likely soon be putting me through another grueling training gauntlet.

Crimson watched me out of the corner of her eye. "What are you going to do when you're all done here?"

"Training, training, and more training. Don't you know, Crimson?" I grinned at her. "With stat incubation, I should be able to level up without having to worry about my stats staying low."

I drained my water and shook the bottle, slightly disappointed that it was empty. "Which means once I get over this first hump of low stats, you'd better be careful, because I'm going to chase after your level."

Crimson grinned. "Is that right? I'll cheer you on the entire way. I hope you won't disappoint me."

I chuckled and shook my head. "We'd absolutely never want that now, would we?"

"Never know, really." Crimson shrugged. "If you can catch up to my level, perhaps we'll have to give you something special." She winked. "Not to mention, I think the whole party will have to do their best to help you keep your stats up."

"They benefit, too," I pointed out, not wanting to come off as too selfish. [Stat Incubation] never took back the original investment. For Selene, I'd

given her fifty-eight points of strength. That would grow into one hundred and seventy-four, and then I would take back one hundred and sixteen.

As a party, the ability would triple whatever I put into the incubation, which was a good way for all of our stats to rise. And that was even more true if we were going to accelerate our leveling. It was the training that had always held us back. If we leveled too quickly without natural training to back it up, we'd end up far weaker than the monsters at any given level.

Crimson hummed in understanding. "Well, then. I hope you can continue your training. Some of us are very eager to have you join us in the dungeon as an equal."

"You say that like there might be another. Are you going to add the Harem Queen?" I teased Crimson, but the way her face turned into one of serious annoyance made me take it back.

"Kidding." I smiled. "But sometimes I do imagine the face Helen would make if I did."

"I'm sure if we all work together, we can get some pretty incredible expressions out of Helen," Crimson responded wistfully.

"Well, you must have plenty of energy if you can make jokes like that," I said quickly and got back on my feet, ready to train.

"It would be far less effort if you just put a little agility in me," Crimson said suggestively, even as I had to drag her back to the center of the gravity chamber.

She purposely dug her feet in and made me physically drag her across the room the whole way. I couldn't help but squint at her for the behavior.

"I need Des," Crimson said quickly. "She's far more able to initiate these sorts of things."

"Des is busy," I reminded her.

"I know, I know." Crimson waved a hand and got back in the center of the gravity chamber, squaring up against me. "Working on the whole 'trying to become a succubus' thing," she said, pulling her hair back and fanning at her neck, pausing to squint at me to see if I would have a reaction.

I didn't. I squared up against her, waiting to see what she would do to start the fight.

Apparently, my pausing wasn't what she wanted, because a brief scowl crossed her face before she darted forward in a blur, and the two of us resumed our training that rocked the gravity chambers in Star City.

***

Felin dropped on top of me out of nowhere, jumping on my back the second I got home. She clung to me tightly with a bright smile. "Kitty wants some cream."

I chuckled, though I thought I noticed a slight change in her. It could potentially be from [Stat Incubation], though I had the feeling it had more to do with rescuing her people than anything else.

"Felin, wonderful to see you." I pulled her off my back, pecking her on the cheek as I placed her gently on the ground.

She planted her feet but pressed her side against me, as if the nekorian had been starved for touch as of late. But I also wanted to meet her needs. Even with her people free, she had chosen to stay with us, and I had to admit I had been afraid of what choice she would make.

I looked up from the gorgeous nekorian to spot both elves hovering at the edge of the room as if waiting for their chance to descend on me. They were also visiting, and I loved having them around more now that some of the drow pressure had been lifted off of them.

"I guess while Ken's being popular, I'm going to go take a nice long soak. Perhaps that'll help with my stress relief," Crimson called over her shoulder as she walked away, clearly telling me there was something else I could do to help with her stress.

I ignored her for the moment.

"Well, if Ken's not busy, I'd like to go try the level-grinding area he proposed recently," Elysara said, doing her best to sound casual.

I smiled at her decent attempt.

The woman was empress of the elves, and while I was technically emperor, it was more of an honorary role. I hoped to not need to use it. The elves were far too proud to let a human actually rule them.

"Well, I suppose I could do some more training today," I said, stretching my arms overhead and popping a few vertebrae. "Are we bringing Neldra?"

"I am almost certain one of the other royal censors will accompany us," Fayeth said.

I stepped over and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Lovely to see you, too, Fayeth. Might I say you're fitting into the royal censor attire quite well," I told her, while giving her a long look up and down. She'd left our class to

attend Elysara, her distant cousin and best friend. A royal censor was the highest law in their world, and they were also the protectors of the royal family.

Fayeth fit into the silver armor well, though some poor blacksmith had to make sure that chest piece could fit her—she was large in the chest for an elf. That and she'd taken to pulling her long blonde hair back into a ponytail, likely to mimic Neldra. It also made her seem a little stricter, which probably helped in her role.

To me, she was a hot, sporty woman with a high ponytail and sun-kissed skin. If it weren't for the ears, she'd fit right in on any beach.

She beamed. "Careful, Ken. Flattery will get you everywhere."

"That's the hope," I answered with an honest grin that lingered between us. "Okay, well, in that case, I suppose we can plan for something in, perhaps, an hour," I offered. Both elves seemed pleased at that proposal.

"We'll get ourselves ready," Fayeth said, grabbing Elysara by the shoulder and dragging the ruby-haired empress away. I turned back to find Felin already staring at me, a massive smile on her lips.

"Yes, you can come, too," I said quickly, which put the party at her, myself, both elves, and likely Neldra.

I supposed that was going to be good enough. Neldra could very likely wipe the floor with the training area. It might actually feel far more like getting power-leveled than anything else. While I hated the idea of being power-leveled, I could at least admit it would be worth it.

In the meantime, I needed to run a quick errand before I left the home in Star City. I turned, heading toward the orkai arbiters.

The area had very little traffic, but that checked out given most adventurers seemed absolutely terrified of the Arbiters of Justice.

As I stepped up, the receptionist took one look at me before tapping something in the air. Orkai had small implants that functioned much like CIDs did for humans, organizing the experience gained in the dungeon and, through electrical pulses, aiding the growth of stats as well as measuring just about every aspect of an adventurer's abilities. They also replaced just about anything a human would use a CID, phone, or computer to accomplish.

"The judge will see you," the receptionist said, glancing up at me before returning to whatever screen she was looking at in the middle distance.

"Thank you," I said, remaining polite.

While the arbiters' underlying mission was general safety within the dungeon, they could also be absolutely brutal in that pursuit. With some of the threadspawn threats we'd been dealing with lately, the orkai arbiters had simply executed entire dungeon floors rather than risk the threat spreading elsewhere. It was a brutal answer, and it reminded me of old-timey medicine, where the answer to a headache was to drill a hole in a person’s skull to let out the evil spirits. I shuddered at the thought.

"Oh, welcome back, Ken," the old orkai said as I stepped past the receptionist's desk. He was waiting for me by the door beyond.

"The map?" I asked, and he nodded, walking with me, his arms tucked behind him.

"I must thank you for being so willing to assist us in this," he commented, and I let a smile play across my face. Though, in my heart, I always wondered what exactly would have happened if I'd said no.

The orkai were aware that I had some ability that allowed me to accurately track people or objects throughout the dungeon. And similar to the demons, that realization had led to me getting a number of jobs.

My latest job was within the old man's personal office. A single tap on his desk brought up a large hologram: a three-dimensional model of the dungeon, at least as far as they'd remapped since the most recent shuffle.

"Would you mind telling me where they are now?" he asked.

I was tracking several threadspawn that had escaped Earth using [Eyes of Wisdom]. This was to hopefully stall any action against Earth and also get in with the arbiters. At the very least, the old judge was having me do this privately, protecting my secret.

The judge was a retired arbiter, which meant he had thrown himself into some of the most dangerous situations and enforced a sense of justice with an iron fist. Apparently, he'd grown old enough to retire, which spoke volumes about his own personal strength. It didn’t seem like a career just anyone was able to retire from.

He looked over at me, waiting.

"Here and here." I pointed.

"Interesting. They don't really seem to stay still, do they?" He looked over at me.

"No, they don't," I agreed.

"Why do you think that is?" the judge asked, and I was unsure if this was a test or if he actually wanted my opinion.

"I doubt they know they're being tracked. However, they lost, so perhaps they're the rejects," I offered. "Threadspawn are weird, but no one really likes to take in those who've already failed."

"Could be, could be. You don't have any other insight?" he asked.

"I'm not omniscient," I answered with a little more bite than I meant to put into the words.

"Of course not. But it is a very interesting ability," he said with a smile, "and one of your harem has it as well."

I nodded slowly.

"Something like this would be more than capable of solving a great many problems in the dungeon. You do realize that, Ken, right?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Also seems like a massive way to make mistakes. I mean, sure, the information hasn't been wrong yet, but it does feel a little prone to missing the point if you don’t ask the right questions."

"Oh?" the judge said, leaning on his cane. "Explain."

"Well, I could ask it to show me any murderers in Star City and help you clean up your city," I offered.

"Ah," he said, likely already jumping to the end conclusion before pausing. "Please, go right ahead. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Well, as you can imagine, every single arbiter would light up under that particular question." I watched him.

"Yes. Nuance is important,” he agreed.

I nodded along, happy that I didn't have to convince him of that one.

"I understand it is a powerful ability, nonetheless, even if we're only tracking the movement of those who've been convicted of great harm," he said, putting a hand gently on my shoulder. "And do not fret. We will be just as careful with our own movements in this regard. I would give you my word that it won't be abused."

I waved a hand. "Just thought I'd stop by since I had a little time, and I was wondering if the arbiters had any method of helping someone level faster."

The judge chuckled. "You've been cooperative in this. I suppose you deserve a reward. However, faster leveling is worthless without stats." He paused and smirked. "Of course, some demons have very unique methods regarding that, don't they?"

"They do," I said quickly, without providing too much detail. "This one even helps the rest of my party, though admittedly not as much as it helps

me."

"No. Demonic abilities are almost always inherently selfish," the old orkai said. "I think one of the best ways for you to level would be training grounds that spawn large numbers of enemies. Ideally near boundless, even if it comes at the cost of loot," he spoke almost as if it were a question, and I nodded.

"I have a location shared with me by the demons, in return for my assistance. It's a lovely spot. A boss that spawns endless adds that generate a good amount of experience," I told him.

"Such places are quite rare and can be incredibly valuable," the judge agreed.

"The arbiters are already extraordinarily high-level," I offered. "There have to be some suitable for someone at a lower level."

"Oh, there are." He chuckled. "But who says the arbiters are only high-level? All of them had to start somewhere. Given you already have something from the demons, I won't give you anything just yet. How many levels do you think you can continue to grind at your current location?" He paused, waiting for my answer.

"With every level, it's slowing down, but I think it's still fairly valuable for another five, maybe ten levels," I told him. "I have a goal to catch up to Crimson."

"Competition. Nice," he said, bright-eyed at the mention of the concept. "Always a valuable training tool, even if often overlooked. After the shuffle, one of the first steps the arbiter organization takes is to reestablish its training protocol, which includes places well suited for experience grinding when that becomes necessary. I will see what the current protocol is for the mid-sixties, given two things." He held up two fingers. "One, you continue your assistance in tracking threadspawn."

"Of course," I agreed quickly. "That was already part of the plan, with or without this boon."

My answer made him beam.

"Good. And the second is you do not allow your stats to become too imbalanced. If I inspect you and they are off, I will not permit you to continue leveling with our assistance," he told me.

I frowned slightly at that condition. "I'll always be able to rectify them later," I argued. "Even if I get a little ahead, it's something that can be solved."

"Yes, but then the solution is time out of the dungeon, or time wasted killing things far too low-level for you. While gaining stats and levels is important for growth, I've seen too many lose their edge by taking the easy way for too long. While it might not affect you, I'd rather not feel responsible for damaging a young man's future."

I felt like there was something he wasn't saying in all that, but I let it be. It was, I assumed, an acceptable compromise. "Agreed."

"Good. Then that is all I need from you here, and I look forward to our future cooperation, Ken Nagato." He held his hand out, and I shook it with the faint thought that he and Grandfather would likely get along wonderfully if the two of them ever met. In fact, they might get along so well that it would be best if they never did meet.

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Chapter 2

Des stood within the circle she had drawn in chalk on the stone slab that Sakura had brought for her practice.

"It has a wonderful shape, and I think the elements are all well done," Sakura said, walking the circle and judging Des's work.

Des put on her best smile. Sakura had been very helpful; however, it left her feeling like she suddenly had a hovering parent double-checking all her homework, unwilling to give her the answers. Instead, Sakura seemed to want her to figure it out for herself. *School for Ken must have been brutal*, Des thought.

"Focus," Sakura scolded her, and Des hid any reaction on her face, though she imagined a few choice responses.

"Of course," Des said quickly. "This requires the utmost focus." It wasn’t like her own family hadn’t been slave drivers for a time.

"Now, back to the formation. Over here in this region." She pointed to a point that had two swirls colliding with a shaft coming out of it.

"The penis," Des said, and Sakura's face was one to behold. "Sorry, I'm a little pent-up, focusing on this and leaving Ken alone for so long."

Unfortunately, Ken's grandmother wasn't very amused by Des's excuse. "I would prefer even the mention of it not appear in our conversations."

Des smirked at the realization that Sakura hadn't even defined "it" in her admonishment. "Sorry, you know how it is."

"I do not," Sakura said stiffly. Sometimes, Des wondered if she was just built differently. It was times like this that made Des fairly certain she was,

though other times she just squinted and wondered if everyone else thought being a prude was the correct way to act.

Des had certainly gone through plenty of that herself before realizing just how freeing it was to admit her needs and preferences. She couldn't wait to finish all of this. The things Des was going to do to Ken…or rather, that he was going to do to her while horny out of his mind, after she finished all this preparation.

"Focus," Sakura growled this time, and Des sat up straight. Her needs hadn't been this bad in a long time.

"Ken's not here. He's diving with several of the other young ladies," Sakura said.

"Which ones?" Des asked.

"The elves and the nekorian," Sakura answered.

Des's mind took that image and ran with it as far as it could, down her internal and seemingly ever-present train of depravity. The three of them would look so delicious writhing on the sheets together.

That thought somehow didn't help. Nothing was helping, though. She knew what would get her back to Ken.

"Focus," Des said to herself and slapped her cheeks. If she could finish this, then she'd not need to deprive herself any further.

"Yes, please. For all our sakes," Sakura said blandly.

"Right, right. So…what do you think?" Des tried to push her toward a final conclusion, rather than going over each part again.

"The whole of it is quite good," Sakura said after a moment. "You just have one step next."

Des paled, but she knew what it was, especially when Sakura handed her the chisel. "Now you have to carve it into the floor, so you have a well for the reagents." She said the word with almost a sneer, perhaps simply not wanting to say "succubus blood."

Des kept it safely tucked away in her CID, for soon it would help her with a final transformation. With all the work Ken was doing with the demons, it was an important step. It was an investment in their future.

***

"You must be one with the blade," Uzamaki said to Charlotte, who lay crisscrossed on the dojo floor, a club across her lap.

Charlotte squinted open one eye. "But you're making me start with a club, and not a blade."

"It is still a blade. It is an edgeless blade," Uzamaki said with mock dignity. "Now, quiet. Are you the teacher or the student?"

"Student," Charlotte answered on instinct, so as not to get hit again. An instinct that had grown surprisingly quickly after working with Ken’s grandfather.

Despite his eccentricities, he'd been a fairly good trainer. Charlotte had already seen significant improvement in the week she'd spent working with him. She wanted to kill the Crystal Whale, but it was a massive test of endurance that would be incredibly difficult for a healer, one that, at the end, required her to be at her best to fight the powerful crystal shark that hatched from the whale. It didn't make sense, but then again, many aspects of the dungeon simply just existed, and she'd long stopped questioning the oddities.

"Breathe, Charlotte. Do not let your mind wander," Uzamaki said. "You must become one with the girthy wood in your lap."

"Blade's okay. We can call it a blade," Charlotte insisted, peeking open one eye to see Uzamaki with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. For as much as he often told her to take things more seriously, he could be wildly unserious about everything.

"If you insist," he said, his chin sticking up in the air.

"And how is becoming one with the blade different from not letting the blade lead me?" Charlotte asked.

"These are such esoteric concepts that will greatly improve your weapon craft. However, they must each be found for themselves and cannot simply be explained," he answered.

"Because that would ruin the mysticism?" Charlotte asked, wondering if this was just paying forward his own tortured training.

"Exactly. Now you understand. And for that comment, stand up and ready your stick… er, I mean blade!" Uzamaki shouted the last part and jumped forward. Charlotte didn't even have time to think before he was on her, attacking. While she had a stick, he had a sword, though it was blunted. His blade clashed against the club in her hand as she did her best to steady herself, drive her foot into the ground, and retaliate.

"Good, good," Uzamaki cheered her on before dodging out of the way. His sword blurred and struck her from the other side.

She moved less by thought and more by instinct, her own club swinging repeatedly, ringing against Uzamaki's blade.

"You're getting better. One of these days, my grandson will bring me someone who's very bad at what they do, and then I'm going to gloat that he finally found a dud," Uzamaki said with far too much glee.

"And if he brings home a dud, we will be very nice to her," Charlotte defended this hypothetical woman.

"In no time, you'll be able to fight the whale," Uzamaki promised her while completely ignoring her comment. "Most of what you need to work on is stamina and timing," Ken's grandfather said, for the thousandth time.

Or maybe it was the thousand and first. Charlotte was starting to lose track. Perhaps if she spent enough time here with the old man, she'd become kooky and crazy, too. She was beginning to think she was already going down that route.

Uzamaki grinned, caught her club, and sent her flying, a massive grin on his face.

"That's mean."

"Dear favorite granddaughter-in-law—" he began before she cut him off.

"Do you always send your favorite landing on her ass?"

"Yes, that's what makes you my favorite," he answered.

Charlotte stared back at him incredulously while he simply smiled, wide-eyed.

"Did you train Ken like this?" she asked.

"Oh no. His was much worse." Uzamaki nodded to himself. "And besides, call me Grandpa," he insisted.

"Yes, Grandfather," she said, and though he frowned, she was fairly certain he was happy enough with her answer. "By the way, what is next?" They'd been doing much of the same training every day.

"We continue to challenge you"—he grinned—"until you are comfortable going out and fighting the whale on your own. Really, it's a measure of stamina. I suppose by the time you can last in the ring with me for… an hour"—he lifted his brow, as if he wasn't quite sure what the number should be himself—"you can certainly take on some stinky oversized fish."

"Yes, Grandfather," she said quickly, and he cooed in turn.

"Again."

"Yes, Grandfather."

"I knew you were the best of them," he said conspiratorially. "Some of the others might like Penny or Des better, maybe even Crimson, but no. To me, you are the best, Granddaughter-in-law."

Charlotte felt like she was being buttered up, but at the same time, she couldn't find it in herself to be too mad at the old man. She wasn't quite sure how he did it, but despite all his antics, it was very hard to stay angry at him for long.

"Yes, Grandfather." It was a singularly aggravating skill that he somehow had complete mastery over. "We'll keep going," Charlotte said with determination.

Bun-Bun, who had been sleeping in the corner, raised his hands with a small squeak and gave Charlotte some encouragement, before the lazy bunny flopped right back down, his giant ears practically begging for Charlotte to grab and pull, though she would never do that.

Perhaps it wasn't that Grandpa was too good at getting away with things. Charlotte could admit she was very likely a softy, the type to let people get away with too much. When Charlotte got tired, she pushed herself, using her healing to supplement rest and common sense. It would catch up with her, but she only needed to last long enough to deal with the whale. It wasn't as if she'd be fighting like this for the rest of her life. It was a little bit of a cheat, she could admit that much, but she would do whatever she needed to do to kill the whale.

As a healer, getting such a massive mana pool would save them countless times in the dungeon. This wasn’t something she could overlook just because healers weren’t particularly fit for this trial.

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I wiped sweat from my brow as it threatened to bead down through my soaked brows and into my eyes again.

"Wow," Elysara stated while she checked her CID. She was definitely the lowest level, and thus, she had seen the greatest benefit from grinding away. Based on the look on her face, she’d done well.

"Ahem. See? It's a good spot," I said with a grin.

Everyone in the group seemed quite happy with the progress, me included. Most of the day had been spent here, but I'd gained nearly a third of a level. At that rate, I could do some serious leveling if I pushed myself.

And it would be faster if I went solo. However, going in a group this size was nice. It gave us a chance to run it in pairs while taking some time off to recover, so that while we were grinding, we could do it at peak efficiency.

"Well, does that mean we're done?" Neldra asked, stepping forward and slicing the boss in two, red lightning crackling off her with pride.

"Oh, yes," Elysara said. "I have… duties to tend to," she said, as though they were something brown and squishy she'd found on the bottom of her boot and loathed having to clean up.

"Please, Empress, you must not speak of your duties like that," Neldra insisted.

"Never in public. But here, in the privacy of the dungeon and with my husband, I will speak my mind." There was a sharpness in her tone, daring Neldra to disagree. Of course, the royal censor was smart enough not to take that particular path, even if it was offered by her empress. When Neldra didn't resist, there was a smug smile on Elysara's face.

I gave her a look that I hoped said, don't push her too much. But when it came to empresses, it was often hard to guess if they understood. She was very capable of keeping her expression neutral. It was a practiced control. But as my woman, I'd like to think I got the message across well enough.

"Of course, Nellie, it isn't too much of a hassle most of the time. Though I think I put up with enough bullshit from some of those nobles that I've earned the right to throw out at least a few stray comments," Elysara stated.

"I'm afraid as a royal censor I can't entertain those notions, as it would make me seem biased on the occasions I must serve our people's best interest," Neldra responded.

There was a flat smile from Elysara. "Of course, I understand."

I had understood that that answer was about as close, in princess-speak, to fuck you as it got. It always made me chuckle how such polite words could carry such disdain. It was truly a skill, and it was not one I had available. When I was impolite, it simply came off as impolite. Neldra, however, understood well enough to squint her eyes at the comment, yet she had enough sense not to continue the argument.

Another fun fact I had learned about empresses and princesses was that they seemed to rarely, if ever, lose a conversation.

"No," Elysara said, folding her hands in her lap. "As much as we can banter about some aspects of the role, it does not change the fact that I

simply must depart. As much as I might tire of my responsibilities from time to time, they are important enough that I would never neglect them."

Neldra nodded at that as Elysara ripped open a portal that would take her back home.

Neldra and Fayeth both disappeared with her, the latter with a peck on my cheek before she left, leaving me alone with Felin, who glanced at the spot where the dead boss had been and then back at me.

"So, what now?" she asked.

"I think we should go back and check on the others. I'd be interested to see how they're doing with their own training," I told her.

"Time to snoop." Felin perked up, her ears twitching a hair higher.

"We are not snooping," I told her, and the toothy grin she gave me told me that by whatever definition I wished to use, we were most certainly going to do what she considered snooping. And, apparently, that brought her considerable excitement.

"Okay." I had a feeling whatever I tried to convince her of was ultimately going to fail. "Come, before you get me in trouble," I said and popped open a portal.

"I would never get you in trouble. I am a practiced hunter. We do not get in trouble." Felin frowned.

"Trouble finds you from time to time," I told her, teasing.

Felin wrinkled her nose. "Others bring trouble to me. Not my fault."

"Trouble," I said, pointing a finger at her. She responded with a massive grin, grabbing my hand and pulling me back through the portal.

"We're just going to go look. It's good that we go look. It means we care." She smiled.

"Uh-huh," I said, as she dragged me into the Nagato Clan estate, where she cupped a hand around her mouth.

"Oh, Charlotte! Ken's here to see you!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, which only made me glare more.

"She's with your grandfather in the dojo!" Akari shouted from somewhere else.

"Thank you," I called loudly, though not quite shouting, before turning to Felin. "Fine, we'll go see them."

A victorious smile spread across her face. "This way?" she asked and spun us around, very clearly already knowing the way.

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Chapter 3

I stepped into the main hall to see Charlotte's green hair whipping behind her as she crashed into Grandfather, a wooden staff in her hand clacking against his blade. Then the two exploded away from each other. She landed on her back foot and charged right back in.

"You got it, Charlotte!" I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted.

She puffed herself up momentarily, only for Grandfather to catch her in that moment of distraction, flipping her with the back of his sword before kicking her in the rear and sending her flying while she clutched at it in pain.

"Hey, you weren't supposed to do that. I was distracted," Charlotte said, only for Grandpa to shake his head in disappointment.

"I do not accept your excuse," he said, crossing his arms. "Don't be a sore loser."

Charlotte puffed out her cheeks and glared at him but didn't fight him on it any further. I had been on the receiving end of Grandpa’s training enough to understand exactly what she was going through.

I crossed my arms and stared at Grandpa. "Are you bullying her?"

"It's called training, Ken." He mirrored me by crossing his arms, only he stuck his nose in the air.

"Is that what it's called now?" I said in mock disappointment.

"Charlotte, tell Ken the truth of it," Grandpa said.

Charlotte turned to me, cute as could be, her eyes wide with pure innocence. "He bullied me so much," she told me.

Grandpa's jaw dropped to the floor.

I used [Shadow Ambush], immediately crossing the distance between us and swinging at Grandfather's back. He swayed deftly to the side, our blades crossing for a brief moment before he darted away.

In that moment, I felt that if I'd really pressed him, I could have broken his stance. Huh, I was strong enough to overwhelm him now.

"You would believe her over your own grandfather?" he asked.

I deadpanned, holding the blade down and meeting his eyes. "Yes." Somehow, being stronger made clashing with him less fun.

Grandpa gasped. "How? How could you?" he accused, pointing a finger at me. "After all I've done to raise you."

"Maybe I just want to test my blade against yours," I answered and was on him again.

It was two blades against one, as I dual-wielded, but Grandpa had very little issue defending himself. His insane reaction speed let him slip to the side when I went in lightly with one blade. When I went in with two, he met my blade with his one, and we clashed for a moment as he struggled before purple lightning began to course down my arm, and suddenly, I was picking up enough speed that Grandpa was struggling to keep up, as well as avoiding direct confrontation with my blades.

"Is this how you treat the elderly, Ken? I would think we raised you better," he told me.

I crossed my arms. "Really, you're going to use that?"

"If I don't, who knows what you'll do to me?" He clutched at his arms and shivered as he darted away. I decided the brief moment of conflict, and what little taste I'd had for picking a fight with Grandfather, was gone.

"Anyways, I didn't come in here to see you." Instead, my eyes turned to Charlotte. "It looks like you are doing well."

"The training is going fantastically." Charlotte beamed. "Even if my trainer can be a little bit of a troublemaker." Charlotte shifted her eyes to Grandpa, who awkwardly looked over his shoulder, only to turn back a second later.

"You don't mean me, do you? I would never be trouble. In fact, I resent the whole idea that you would even suggest it," he told her.

I shared a look with Charlotte, and she gave me a pained expression as if to say, let me show you what I'm dealing with. I could only watch in complete understanding.

"He really is nothing but trouble," I agreed. "I think you're ready for the Crystal Whale," I told her, and she held the staff out like a sword.

"It feels impossible to strike down something so large with something so small," she said, then grinned. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

I could only smile at her determination. "Well, good luck. Perhaps after you pass our final exam, we should have a celebration." The resulting smile was so glaringly beautiful I nearly lost my composure, though I managed to recover with what I hoped was a gentle one. "I can't wait for you to absolutely blow away the rest of the class. So yes, I'll have to figure out where we're going to eat to celebrate."

"Yes, you are," Charlotte said with enough confidence that I felt fairly hopeful in her success as well.

"What are you two cuties doing?" Grandpa slipped up behind us silently and wrapped his arms around our shoulders, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Ah, right, you're still here," I said, causing him to drop his jaw.

"How did my grandson become so rude? I have to get Sakura over here to teach you a lesson," he told me.

"And whose side do you really think she's going to take?" Charlotte goaded him, and he suddenly found anything and everything else in the room more interesting, which was an answer in itself.

I kissed Charlotte's cheek. "Attagirl. Don't let him take advantage of you." I paused. "I also need to look for Des… Any idea where I might be able to dig her up from? I assume Sakura has at least bonked her into the ground for all her horny comments."

"I don't think that's the best idea." My beautiful green-haired druid looked up at me. "Last I heard, Sakura was making her avoid you as a way of motivation."

I wasn't exactly sure how that would motivate someone like Des, but I left it alone. If that was their wish, so be it. I'd find her later once she was done. Or she’d find me. The more I thought about it, the more that seemed the most likely outcome.

We were all going to need to start power-leveling as quickly as we could. Between everything we seemed to be up against lately, we needed all the

power we could get. Threats were becoming bigger and starting to risk humanity itself.

The orkai were monitoring the threadspawn, but we'd need to be able to defend ourselves.

I pushed the weight of that responsibility aside, focusing on what I could change in front of me. "If you're done, do you want to farm levels?" I asked.

Charlotte shook her head. "Right now, I need to focus on stats and training. The higher level I get, the harder the Crystal Whale."

I nodded in complete understanding. She and many others in the class were all still working to get their trial abilities; I'd already done that, which put me ahead of the class in a slightly awkward fashion. What I really needed to do was grind levels as best I could while using other activities to supplement my stats. While it might sound like a rather easy job, it would require substantial focus, not only from myself but the rest of my party, in order to get there in a reasonable amount of time. And, perhaps most importantly, it would require enough participating members. Though that didn't seem to be a problem in the slightest.

After this first wave of growing stats, I would just have to reinvest them and continue the process as quickly as I could. There were far too many people who needed me to get stronger. The threadspawn were out there, and though the orkai and I were tracking them, they were bound to cause more issues in the near future. They didn't seem like the type to leave well enough alone.

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I slid the classroom door open in Star City only to find the class full, Crimson standing with her arms crossed and her bright red high heels rocking back and forth as she tapped her foot impatiently.

"Now, Ken, you might be my favorite student; however, that does not grant you permission to arrive late." She glared at me, and I had to swallow a groan to keep from making whatever she was planning even worse. I knew that because of our relationship, she felt she needed to be extra harsh with me, and in this moment, I could feel it meant making an example of me.

"My apologies, Crimson." I threw her my most charming smile. Unfortunately, that only earned me a scowl. It seemed I wasn't going to be

able to weasel my way out of this quite so easily.

The rest of the class had been snickering since she called me her favorite student, and that wasn't making the situation better for anyone involved. So instead, I put my hands in my lap and bowed slightly to her, then to the rest of the class.

"I apologize for being disruptive to everyone's education. After all, we are here to learn," I intoned.

Crimson, at least, seemed marginally satisfied by the display. A touch of humility often worked well on her in these situations.

Harley stuck her hand in the air. "Crimson, teacher, I really do appreciate Ken's willingness to take accountability for his tardiness. However, shouldn't he make it up to all of us in some way?"

I glared at Harley, hoping I was communicating ‘what are you doing’ with my eyes. In response, a giant grin spread across her face. That's when I knew I was going to regret whatever came next.

Harley turned to Crimson. "Really, Ken should make this up by taking on some of the gravity training exercises for all of us. I think that's the best way he could prove he understands there are consequences for disturbing your class."

"Oh, an interesting idea." Crimson pretended to think about Harley’s idea, though I had no doubt Harley's suggestion was not going to go as well as she thought. "That is a very interesting suggestion, Harley," Crimson said, still feigning consideration, before her grin turned downright devilish. "But if there's one thing I hate more than my students being late, it's my students trying to get out of work that I so carefully prepared to help them survive in the future."

"Me? What? No!" Harley waved her hands in front of her. "Crimson, you mustn’t misunderstand. I would never, *ever* try to get out of work." She made her eyes big and round, the picture of innocence.

"Quiet." Crimson's whip slashed out, hitting her desk with a thunderous boom, as if there were lightning right there in the classroom. Yet despite the noise and apparent destruction, the desk remained spotless and unharmed.

She must have upgraded those.

Harley chuckled nervously and leaned back, her hair disheveled from the sudden and powerful gust that had filled the room.

Des picked at her own windswept hair and glared at Harley. "Don't piss Crimson off. We all suffer when you do." Other classmates murmured in

instant agreement.

"It's not that I meant to upset her. She just gets upset easily," Harley tried to argue, but Crimson cleared her throat, leaning against the lectern and smiling sweetly at her.

"Well, in that case, I'll give you a chance to make it up. Everyone in class did the reading I assigned last night, correct?" Crimson knew that Harley rarely, if ever, did the readings.

"Of course," Harley lied through her teeth.

"Good. Then you'll have no problem summarizing it, I assume." Crimson watched Harley.

Harley's eyes went wide. "But you gave us actual research documents to read."

"I thought you read them all," Crimson responded.

"I did, but I think my understanding of those documents might not be up to the task of explaining it to the rest of the class. Really, I'm sure Candice is dying to share her insights with everyone." Harley nodded.

"I would be happy to." The blonde, perfect student of the class began to stand, only for Crimson to glare.

"Sit your ass back down, or so help me," Crimson said, and Candice slowly lowered herself back into her seat, folding her hands in her lap as though she hadn't just been horribly scolded.

"Sorry, Harley," Candice said. "I don't think I'm going to be able to help with this one."

Harley groaned, looking at Crimson with big, wide eyes. "Maybe a little private time with Ken might cheer you up," she tried.

Crimson strode across the room, each click of her heel like the ominous toll of a bell promising Harley's death, before she stood before the pink-haired bard's desk and handed her a piece of chalk.

"Do your best," she said, though somehow it sounded like a curse. It had that same sharp edge.

"Well, I think of most things in a diagram format." Harley chuckled, stepping up to the chalkboard with the chalk as if it were a lead weight in her hand. "So," Harley began, drawing a picture of a ‘drow’ slowly. A five-year-old would be proud of her level of detail.

"Oh good, you at least know what the subject was about," Crimson said dryly.

"Of course I do. Drow are all the rage, and you can tell it's a drow because it has fangs and pointy ears." Harley drew a line from each and wrote out the word ‘poison’ next to the fangs, and next to the ears, she wrote ‘great hearing’.

"Is that all you've got?" Crimson asked, looking at the diagram and then back at Harley in disappointment.

"No, no, I have more," Harley said quickly. "They have green blood." She said the fact as if it were the discovery of the century. "And they see very well in the dark."

Crimson stood, arms crossed, in unimpressed disappointment. "It seems your method of thinking through these could use a little work."

"Alright, the paper was confusing. It used a bunch of big words that made my eyes glaze over," Harley admitted.

Crimson sighed and shook her head. "Fine. I'm sure someone can do better. Candice, would you be willing to build on Harley's diagram? Perhaps make it more valuable for the class."

Candice had no problem stepping up to the board as Harley deposited the chalk in her hand like she was escaping a death sentence and scurried back to her desk.

Harley should have known she would not get off that easily. She got about halfway to her desk before Crimson's whip found her ankle and uprooted her, pulling her back to the front, where Crimson stood her by the chalkboard.

"Well, Harley, since you missed the question on your first go, it'd be best for you to stay close and learn from Candice." Crimson smiled devilishly, as Harley's face paled.

"What do you mean?" Harley asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

"If you could please position yourself in a squat and hold it." Crimson began pulling out one of the portable gravity tools, assembling it oh so clearly for Harley's displeasure.

"But I read it! I just didn't understand it!" Harley whined, but Crimson paid her no heed.

Harley looked around the class with a pitiful expression, looking for anyone who might help her overcome Crimson's ire. Of course, her gaze landed on me, and I found myself looking away. It was probably best that Harley continue learning her lessons in an environment that wouldn't punish

her too much, like the classroom. It was a far better place for her to suffer mistakes than the dungeon.

While this was all going on, Candice, in the blink of an eye, finished her diagram. She'd even gone so far as to upgrade Harley's drawing and even shaded everything with hatching, so that it looked like a piece of art rather than a simple diagram.

"Fuck me," Harley muttered once she saw how badly she was outclassed.

"From the corpses that the UG has recovered and researchers have gone through, we have a solid understanding of the drow. Well, we at least have a better understanding than we had before, by a large margin." The diagram now had a dozen points as Candice began going over the physiological differences between humans and drow.

Unlike Harley, I had read the paper, so none of this was particularly new to me, but it was still quite interesting. The main points, beyond the already obvious, were the toxins in their mouths, their green blood, and other traits that made them great nocturnal predators.

Several of their joints worked differently from ours, and a few of the muscles around their jaw didn't have tendons. Instead, they had bony spurs the muscles attached to, meaning their bite was likely far more powerful than the size of their jaw might otherwise suggest. Their organs were also vastly different; besides the lungs and heart, the rest of their gut was arranged in an alien order. Finally, there were small glands along the sides of their throats that stored their venom.

Candice went on to explain several thoughts the researchers had on where potential critical weak points might be. Because they had a different organ structure, they also had different weak points. Candice finished her explanation and paused, staring out at the rest of the classroom, who all looked particularly dazed. I began clapping.

"Well done, Candice," I spoke up before someone like Harley could say something stupid.

"Yeah, great job," Charlotte picked up my praise, as did Des, though she shot a strange look in my direction. Des looked particularly rabid, like she was about to jump on me and devour me.

"Thank you." Candice bowed to the front of the class. "I am just doing my best, especially considering how much some of my classmates contributed to this valuable research. I thought it was important that we all took the time to read and benefit from the knowledge." Candice smiled, and

from where she'd dipped her head, a strand of hair fell forward; she used a finger to gracefully tuck it back behind her ear.

"Well said." Crimson began clapping excitedly. I saw the moment Harley was about to say something and shook my head, glaring at her. We did not need her to cause more trouble.

Harley decided her comment was perhaps not her best idea and instead clammed up. I let out a breath.

After that, class continued without too much further issue. We were going through rather advanced material as we closed out our third year. Crimson's methods were unorthodox, to say the least, but the reality was she was doing a damn good job as a teacher. She wasn't sticking to the simple scripts she'd been offered. Instead, she went out of her way to do things like assign the latest research on drow, given they were now a legitimate concern for the class while diving the dungeon. While the information was downright terrifying, it was not meant to make us comfortable. It was meant to keep us alive.

"Well then, we can close our books for today." The way Crimson closed hers with a boom caused many of us, me included, to wince. She chuckled slightly and covered it with a cough. "Ken, if you can stay after, I have something for you. Otherwise, everyone…class is dismissed. We have training in the gravity chambers in an hour," she called out.

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Chapter 4

Harley, on her way out, couldn't help herself, pausing at the door to wiggle her fingers at me in a flirtatious wave. "Good luck, favorite student," she added with mocking emphasis.

"Thanks for reminding me, Harley!" Crimson shouted after her as she disappeared out the door. "There's considerable opportunity for your own growth. In the coming days, I look forward to seeing your progress."

Harley looked like she was about to die from that ‘praise’, turning to me with big, wide eyes.

"Oh, don't even. You're the one who got yourself in trouble," I told her. She loved to push things right up to the line and then tiptoe over it to see what she could get away with.

"I can't help myself. It's not my fault," she insisted, only for me to give her a look of utter disbelief. "If you took just a little more responsibility for your actions…" I started, and she ran off with her fingers stuffed in her ears.

Crimson sighed and turned back to me, now that everyone else had left. "Well, now that everyone's going to go work on their stats, isn't it about time you gave me my premium stat treatment?" she said, bobbing her brows.

I could do little more than stare at her in disbelief. "That's why you told me to hang back?"

Crimson gave me the kind of smile that said it absolutely was, and she didn't regret it for a second. That fact was only reinforced as she slid the door closed and turned the lock with a click.

"Crimson," I said sharply in reprimand.

"Scold me again," she cooed and cupped her cheeks, wiggling herself back and forth.

I looked at her, then around the empty classroom. "Make this quick," I said, and she bobbed her head. "I want agility," she said quickly, and I raised an eyebrow in question. "Because it's best for both you and me." Crimson waved a hand. "Later, when you're already bloated with stats, we can work on magic and mana and things I'm not patient enough to work through right now. Agility is best for both of us."

I grabbed her by the collar I'd put around her neck a while ago and let it tell her exactly what I wanted, sinking her down to her knees. I couldn't help but smile as I grabbed her by the base of her long braid and pulled her head back, her mouth falling open, her tongue hanging out.

I often wondered what the rest of the world would say if they knew the real Crimson. But those thoughts stopped as her mouth closed over me, and sensation pulsed through my body.

***

"Oh, there you are," Penny said as I entered the gravity chamber after the rest of the class. Des stood nearby and drew in a long breath through her nose before staring at me, wide-eyed, the eye often hidden by her purple lock of hair thrumming with whatever she'd smelled.

"Did you and Crimson have fun?" she asked with a knowing smirk.

"Let's not pretend we don't know," Crimson said with a wink.

"Don't tease a woman like that. We're delicate creatures, you know." Des pouted, and I shook my head at her mischief.

"I guess we can continue to pretend you are, can't we?"

"It's not pretending if it's true.” She huffed and spun. “Alright, Harley, you're with me." Des grabbed the pink-haired bard by the wrist and began dragging her through the course.

"What did I do wrong?!" Harley shouted, swept up in Des's sudden urgency for exercise.

"Well, I'm glad to see those two have some spirit," Crimson said, stepping up with considerable swagger in her hips and a massive grin on her face.

Penny turned to me and lifted an eyebrow. "Crimson seems happy," she said with about as much tact as one could manage, given the subject.

"I think that's a good thing. A happy Crimson does lead to at least a marginally better life for the rest of us," I offered.

Penny seemed to think about that for a split second before nodding in agreement. "You're right. I didn't mean to imply anything else." She blushed.

"Alright, everyone, cut the chitchat." Crimson clapped her hands. "We'll begin with some running. Des and Harley have the right idea." She said the words in the sort of casual way someone might describe a normal workout. Meanwhile, Des and Harley were sprinting under the effects of the gravity chamber. "And then after you're completely and utterly exhausted, we'll move on to strength training."

Crimson walked over to the keypad by the entrance, and suddenly, gravity slammed all of us down as she cranked it up higher. I absorbed the initial shock of the change by bending my legs and sinking a few inches before standing back up in a more stable stance. Everyone else in class did much the same. We were all used to the gravity chambers after all the time we'd spent in them. More than a few of us had our own personal gravity chambers—an incredibly convenient item we used often while traveling.

As the running began, I fell in with my classmates. Though my agility stat was high, and I easily overtook a number of them, it wasn't so high that I could completely smoke them. They were all training incredibly hard, even without a trial ability boost, though over half the class had one now.

My stats were high, but I was still with the main pack as we pushed forward, sweat beading down our faces, our muscles burning with lactic acid. The only difference between a normal person exercising and us was that a normal person in this situation would simply end up as a flattened pancake on the ground.

"I want to see you all run till you drop," Crimson cheered, her whip cracking behind us.

Those in the back of the pack had their ankles nipped, while those in front would eventually cycle back as the ones behind pushed hard enough to get ahead, if only for a few seconds.

Crimson cheered and chased after us like a maniac. "When you think you're finally too tired, that's when the real training begins!"

We took her statement for the threat it truly was. Crimson would absolutely work us to the bone before dialing up the weights and beginning

strength training. I would question her methodology if it hadn't already proven itself, time and time again, to be incredibly effective.

We finished our run, and everybody collapsed to the ground, sweat pouring down them as Crimson knelt beside us.

"Alright, everyone, push-up position." She prodded.

The entire class groaned, which only seemed to make Crimson happier. I knew better than to give her that satisfaction, at least in that regard, so I got right to work pumping out push-up after push-up while the rest of the class groaned and struggled to get into position.

"See, Harley? This is why Ken is my favorite," Crimson said, and I winced.

"I could do that if I wanted to!" Harley snapped.

"Oh, you could! So, what you mean to tell me is that it's not a matter of being unable to perform; it’s simply a lack of desire?"

Harley stuttered and looked around for support.

I held up my hands. "Oh no, you just threw yourself right into that one. I wish you the best," I said, bowing to her.

She glared at me with the kind of fierce determination I wished she'd put into her actual training. "You will pay gravely for this, Ken Nagato," she spat.

"No, you will pay for that," Crimson reassured her. "Back to work, everyone. Don't worry, Harley will make up for all the extra work by going double-time herself," Crimson announced, and the entire class groaned as Harley became enemy number one.

"Don't look at me like it's my fault!" she shouted, completely failing to convince anyone.

"Harley, one of these days you're just going to learn to keep your mouth shut," Des spoke slowly as she continued her push-ups with the kind of dedication I didn't normally see from her.

"This isn't fair!" Harley shouted as she pressed her face to the floor and continued her workout.

Crimson nudged me and smirked, though I gave her a small scowl. This was not going to win anyone over to her way of thinking. She pouted in turn and stomped away, and I figured I'd somehow messed up in that exchange, but it didn't really matter. We were all going to simply continue working until we dropped. That was just the way training had to be run.

I did another push-up, stalling as our CIDs all began to chirp at the same moment. Immediately after, the gravity chamber let out an alarm, and we felt the gravity release its hold on us.

"The orkai gods have taken pity on me!" Harley shouted.

"I doubt that's what's happening," Crimson said, and before she could say anything more, I had my CID up, looking to see what had pinged all of us.

Alert to all adventurers in Star City below level sixty: there are two dungeon swarms happening in the area. One on the fifty-eighth floor. There was a link, no doubt to a map. *The other is on the fifty-third floor. Please exercise caution if you wish to use this to train.*

It was a simple, concise explanation—as one would expect of the orkai.

"No," Harley gasped, looking up at Crimson, whose grin threatened to split her face.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Harley?" Crimson said, aghast.

"We’re exhausted. You're not going to make us go into that, are you?" Harley asked, wide-eyed.

Crimson smiled. "It's always wonderful to practice when you're exhausted, because if you can function while exhausted, then you can function anytime."

"That's like saying if you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball," Candice said. "It's a fallacy—" she began, only to see Crimson's expression at that analogy and decide it might be wiser to close her mouth.

I appreciated her pausing, though the damage was likely already done, judging by the massive smile on Crimson's face.

She checked the map and immediately ripped open a portal. "Everyone jump through, weapons out. Farm as many dungeon monsters as you can," she cheered. “In fact, the goal is to kill at least a hundred per person. I’ll grade you all on a bell curve, so get going!”

Although the class was clearly exhausted, they dragged themselves to their feet with the tenacity you'd expect from people who would one day be among the foremost adventurers in the world.

Even as we stepped through into the dungeon, there were a large number of orkai showing up in droves.

"Oh, look…humans," one of them said with a laugh as our group funneled out of the portal. An older orkai smacked the one who'd spoken in the back of the head.

"Do not antagonize them. Even if orkai might be stronger than them as a whole, you personally may not be." The larger orkai crossed his arms and nodded to our group. "I apologize. Some warriors are over-eager to prove themselves, lashing out more readily than the beasts they claim to be better than."

The one who'd spoken first looked clearly uncomfortable and dipped his head.

"Better," the older orkai said and clapped him on the shoulder. "Everyone must learn that learning itself is not the problem; it is those who lack the temperament to do it. Now, we all have a surge of monsters to take care of, do we not?" he boomed, and everyone in his group burst into action.

Crimson looked at us. "What are you waiting for? Chop, chop." She grinned before glancing at the older orkai. "What do we say to a friendly competition? Whoever can slay the most?" She tapped her chin.

"A bet of honor is always one worth taking. My people will happily participate. And I'm certain, even if the worst comes to pass, they're mature enough to lose gracefully!" the older orkai shouted.

The young orkai who'd called us out before blushed heavily and raised his axe, roaring as he rushed forward. At that point, the rest of us could hear a low vibration building in the dungeon. We hadn't spent much time on this particular floor. It was filled with floating ghosts, all of them with wildly long, luscious hair, like a thousand ghosts of Fabio tossing their hair as they floated through the air. They swarmed from a lower floor as they sparkled purple, trails of it flowing down from their long, luscious manes.

"What are those hideous things?" Harley spat.

"Men, Harley," I said, and she scowled at me.

"Gross."

“You know, Ken—" Penny started, and I held up a hand. The parties were breaking off into their own groups, not so distant that they couldn’t come to each other's aid, but far enough that we could all farm effectively.

"Oh, she knows. Everyone get ready," I said, squaring up my stance as more and more of the ghosts appeared, a veritable flood charging toward us. Des launched a green flaming meteor into the group, and it exploded, catching many of them alight with green fire just as the first tanks of our class clashed into the swarm.

It only took a moment before we learned one of their abilities. They opened their mouths in unison and let out sonic screams that rippled

through the air, ripping apart anyone caught between them. It was a fairly powerful blast, rocketing orkai and classmates alike aside in equal measure.

"Whoa," Des said in surprise, glancing back at me.

"We'll be just fine," I reassured her. "That was just a surprise. Now that we know what they can do, there won't be a problem."

I meant the words. And sure enough, a few seconds later, the tanks got back on their feet. And when the next scream came from the ghosts, they braced against the shockwave and rode it out, barely moving at all.

With that issue fixed, I prepared myself for whatever would come next. While the tanks blocked the second wave, dozens upon dozens more of the ghosts appeared from the level below.

"Can we go in on the left flank?" Penny said, taking charge of some of the tactics. As the tank, the position made sense as she determined her next moves.

"Behind you, Penny. Let’s thin these out so you can shift positions," I said, coming in hot on her heels.

Penny didn't so much as glance over her shoulder, charging forward as though she'd expected me to follow her the whole time. She clashed with one of the ghosts hard enough to rock the surrounding area, but that didn't matter for what I needed to do next.

I slipped in behind her, and my blades got to quick work. Lightning rippled down my blade as I hacked at the ghost; the blade itself didn't seem to deal nearly as much damage as the lightning coming off it, but still, my blades wove back and forth, each swing carving another chunk of life away.

Their transparent bodies wavered and rippled before tearing like cloth, leaving them more ragged than when the fight started. It made it obvious which ones had already taken damage, and my blades focused on those, each spark of lightning weakening them further. But with my focus locked on them, the ghosts began to shift their attention to me, sending shockwaves in my direction.

I used [Shadow Ambush] to dodge and appear next to Penny to pull them back to her.

Penny, beside me, was having a far easier time. Her ice wrapped around the ghosts, dragging them down and binding them to the ground. I watched with interest, avoiding those she'd already dropped and instead moving to the side to drag monsters through that space while she continued to collect

more and more frozen ghosts. The two of us quickly reached a quick, unspoken understanding.

Those frozen on the ground suddenly began to decay as Des's curses ripped through the area, one after another. Penny winked at me as I swung past her, dragging more ghosts into the frozen field she was making. Felin caught on quickly enough, too, creating a half-circle of ice walls that Penny and I could use to trap and push more ghosts into a small, isolated area.

There, between Penny and Felin, they were frozen to the ground entirely or slowed to a crawl.

Des was hard at work spamming afflictions and, occasionally, sending a shower of green fire to light them up. Meanwhile, even with [Liminal Speed] burning, my attacks didn't seem as effective as I would have liked, but spraying [Dark Blades] with a damage-over-time effect into the mass worked well enough.

Our group quickly had others mimicking our approach, trying to gather up as many as they could for crowd control and working them down. After all, there were endless waves of these monsters flooding the area.

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Chapter 5

I'd been darting around collecting more monsters, only to look up and realize there had to be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them now. A simply never-ending tide of ghosts emerged towards each group. We had all split up to some degree; otherwise, we would have been completely overwhelmed. There were simply too many of them, flooding every corner of this area of the dungeon.

"Ken, look out!" someone shouted, and I twisted at the last second to dodge an orkai spear that barely missed me and blew away a handsome ghost that had been behind me. I couldn't help but scowl at the attack, even though I'd managed to avoid it.

The orkai who'd thrown it laughed. "Drat, I missed you," he said, as if it were pure amusement.

I shook off the swell of anger and pulled more of the ghosts into my party's trap. It wasn't going to be a perfect solution, but it got even worse when an orkai jumped in amidst them, swinging a large battle axe and stealing a number of kills.

"I thought this was supposed to be a friendly competition!" I shouted, only for the orkai in question to shrug.

"Friendly does not mean easy," one of them laughed, while I couldn't help but groan.

"Ignore them!" Penny shouted. "They're just jealous they can't win without foul play!"

She yelled loud enough for the orkai in question to hear, and he grew red in the face.

"So helpful, Penny," I teased as I kept focusing on the fight in front of us rather than starting something new with the orkai.

Our little field of frozen monsters continued to expand as Penny and I stayed hard at work, a constant supply of ghosts pouring in, with Des and Felin taking up the main roles of dealing damage.

The orkai stayed nearby, continuing to make our progress more difficult. Occasionally, one of their party members would whirl into our space, using a powerful AoE attack to farm the ghosts we had been collecting.

"Damn it," I growled, and Penny looked at me with a large smile on her face.

"Well, you know what they say. Turnabout is fair play," she told me.

I scowled at her. "I don't need to kill steal," I said sharply.

"Not saying you do." Penny held her hands up. "But you'd be better at it than them."

"I would be." I squinted at her.

"Exactly my point. You don't need to, but it would make some of this"—she trailed off as I growled—"far easier."

I took my frustration out on one of the frozen handsome ghosts, pounding my blades away at it as purple lightning raced up and down my arm, and my [Liminal Speed] stacks continued to increase rapidly. Then I blazed away from our group, sliding in between one of the orkai groups. My blades made quick work of several handsome ghosts before I disappeared once again.

Almost instantly, I was back over with my group. I glanced over, smiling that where I had just attacked there were a dozen spells landing uselessly into the empty space.

Penny looked at me with a smirk on her face.

I focused back on the ghosts in front of me, working to take down the frozen monsters. As [Liminal Speed] stacks increased, I was able to break away from my party, reappearing at the same group of orkai who had stolen our kills earlier, and hopefully making them regret messing with us in the first place.

Though by the looks on their faces, I suspected there was less regret and more simple-minded anger at being the ones to lose in this particular exchange.

Then again, that so often seemed to be the nature of people. Losing was so often simply an unacceptable outcome for themselves, but not for others.

I joined my group once again, tearing through the remaining monsters, and it became apparent that the wave of monsters was waning. The stream of ghosts that had been filling the area was lighter now, and the pool of monsters seemed to largely be those already in the space.

With so many adventurers around, it began to thin and clear completely. As the last ghost died, quiet passed over the area.

With the fight done, our class began to regroup together, sitting nearby and knowing Crimson would watch over us while we recovered.

I glanced over at her, taking in her crossed arms and knowing what was coming before she spoke.

"Are you all just going to lie there?" she asked.

"Well, now that you mention it, that does seem like a good idea." I rubbed the back of my head.

"You should never be so relaxed in the dungeon," Crimson scolded, not only me but the rest of the class.

"Well, the fight is done. We kicked ass!" Harley shouted back at Crimson.

"You like to talk back?" Crimson asked, with the kind of smile that sent shivers down my back.

"No, ma'am," Harley said swiftly, shaking her head hard enough that I was worried she was going to give herself a concussion.

"Good." Crimson smiled. "Now, besides Harley, does anyone else have a question as to why you shouldn't let your guard down?"

"Because we shouldn't trust anyone," Des said, saying what we were all thinking.

"But we had the great, the wonderful, and so incredibly powerful and most awesomest teacher Mistress Crimson watching our backs," Harley said, sucking up enough to make me cringe.

Crimson squinted at her and then smiled. "I'll give you a B," Crimson said, and Harley pumped her fist.

"A B's not bad," I said for Harley's benefit.

"Are you kidding me? A B is fantastic!" Harley squealed. "I'm not Candice, who needs to have A-pluses on everything."

"Well, if it's good enough for you, then I am happy for you," I told her.

"Come now, my people would never take such cheap tactics as to attack a resting adventurer." The man who seemed to be in charge of the orkai

around us took offense at our words. "Though there may have been some contention during the fight, if there would have been a death, I would have intervened myself," he reassured.

"You'll forgive me if I'm not keen on relying on goodwill as a survival tactic." Crimson turned to the orkai, all of us getting removed from her crosshairs for the moment. "But no, if one of your people had resorted to killing my students, I would have simply killed all of you present."

"I would very much like to see you try." The orkai leader puffed himself up, only for Crimson to arrive in front of him in a crackling blur of red that caused his eyes to go wide. The orkai fumbled back a step, much to Crimson's smug satisfaction.

"As you can all see"—Crimson smiled in a way I was pretty sure was supposed to be sweet but looked more like a shark’s smile—"while they certainly have powerful people amongst their number, not every orkai is something to be feared."

The leader of the orkai, taken aback, was adult enough to take a full step back and give Crimson the floor.

"I was unaware we had such a prestigious adventurer before us," he said with a quick bow. "Had I knowledge of your strength—"

"Your best behavior shouldn't be contingent on my strength!" she snapped. "However, I will forgive you because you let me put on a good show for my students and remind them of a valuable life lesson."

I squinted at Crimson. It was very unlike her to give up that quickly. But in the same breath, I also realized that the strength differential between her and her opponents wasn't as prolific as it had been in the past. Sure, she could cave this orkai's teeth in, but it didn't necessarily mean she could do so while protecting all of us nearly as well as she could have in the past.

"Well, now that we've fought together, we ought to introduce ourselves. I am Marius, a teacher of an orkai adventuring school, Green Wisdom. And these are a number of our students." He gestured.

I reassessed him for a moment. Being a teacher gave him at least some level of credibility in my eyes, even if his students were shitheads.

Crimson looked him up and down for just a second before she sniffed in derision. "You ought to teach better manners to your students," she stated as she spun away.

In that moment, I watched Marius look completely and utterly smitten by her. His eyes traced over Crimson’s red leather outfit with a trace of hunger.

Crimson was hot as hell, and I could appreciate her being attractive. She was naturally going to turn heads. That was fine, but there was something in his gaze that crossed the line.

“Nope,” I whispered to myself. But no one heard me, for which I was thankful.

"Please allow your students to rest," Marius said and moved with her. "And perhaps, teacher to teacher, we could discuss many of the necessities and the pitfalls of the profession."

Crimson looked at him like a weirdo, which, in my opinion, he absolutely deserved.

"Teaching, and thus learning, is an eternal profession. Perhaps we could spend some time together to continue our own learning," Marius waxed on, holding a hand to his chest.

Crimson turned to me as if wondering if I could answer his question. She wanted me to stand up for her, that much was clear.

I bowed to Marius. "Thank you for the offer, but we have more we must go do and learn. I'm afraid we won't have time."

The orkai frowned as he glanced at me, turning his attention back to Crimson. "This student speaks for you?"

“Yep.” Crimson popped the ‘p’ of the word while she shrugged. "After all, he is my man."

The orkai frowned. "He's a demon that you've claimed? I was unaware humans had that practice."

His words caused Crimson to scowl. "I know orkai are more intelligent than that. He is my lover."

"You—" The orkai rubbed his chin. "Well, that seems unfortunate. For a teacher and a student to share a bed is a significant degree of authority difference. That kind of relationship would cause a great deal of problems. I'm disappointed to hear that you participate in such an egregious relationship. Perhaps we could take some time and discuss it, teacher to teacher." The orkai sniffed, and Crimson shrugged.

"Thank you for your unasked opinions on my life." Crimson raised an eyebrow in defiance.

The orkai scoffed but took another step back. "It is every individual's job in life to speak out against wrongs." He held his chin high in the air, clearly actually believing that he was in some way doing the right thing by speaking up.

"Where we come from, there is a phrase called 'agree to disagree,'" I offered.

The orkai tilted his head ever so slightly at that term. "And that is the position you wish to take now? This 'agree to disagree'?"

"If we can move on, then I think that works for the moment," I told him.

"I see why humanity that you spend much time with is considered such a lesser race. You have much to learn. I'd heard your people have recently been doing much when it comes to the threadspawn problem and the latest drow incursion. I had hoped your people would be more capable allies."

The smile I gave him could only be described as insultingly fake. I had no idea what to do with him. That was, until Crimson leaned on my shoulder.

"Everyone, as you can see, there are some adventurers in this world who just choose to cause problems over solving the numerous ones that already exist in the world." She projected her voice loudly across the space.

"I beg your pardon," the orkai said, puffing himself up to his full towering height.

"Oh, you have hearing issues, too? Dear me." Crimson shook her head.

"Enough," I said to Crimson before she caused too much trouble.

"I see why he's in charge," the orkai said pointedly, and I couldn't help but wince at the way Crimson planted a foot and slowly turned back around. There was a fire in her eyes that told me this guy was in for a bad day.

"Shouldn't have done that," I muttered, but my words were lost on him as the orkai squared up against Crimson, ready for a fight but woefully unprepared for this one.

Crimson was at his side in a second, grabbing the orkai by the side of his head and slamming him directly into the ground with enough force to drive him through the dungeon floor.

"Careful," Crimson said, as if the statement were an afterthought.

I couldn't help but stand up and stare at her, prepared to jump in if she needed any backup. Even if she was still stronger, she was my woman. "Really? Was that necessary?"

Crimson blinked and nodded. "It was absolutely necessary. What else was I supposed to do when he's busy insulting you?"

"You could have found a way to deal with it using less violent means, like just about everybody else in the world."

"Where's the fun in that?" Crimson crossed her arms and then smiled at all the orkai watching us. "Don't be like your boss. And remember to stay humble; otherwise, one day you'll piss off someone strong, and it won't go well."

"A lesson in humility? From you?" I asked, taking the opportunity to tease Crimson.

"Well, I suppose since we won, it might be correct that you owe us a grand apology." Crimson leaned over the orkai.

The orkai leader was busy prying his face out of the ground—and trying to pick up his dignity with it. "When in other people's territory, you should behave better. But I suppose we've been poor hosts." He bowed to our class as his eye threatened to swell shut and blood dribbled from his lips. "I apologize for any offense we might have committed."

That was perhaps one of the worst apologies I'd ever heard, but Crimson looked to me to see if it was good enough.

I nodded. "Honestly, I just want to be done with this. Good job clearing all the monsters," I said to the orkai students who had actually done the work. "And sorry, all of you. It seems we're in the same situation of having a teacher who solves all of their problems in a singular way."

Some of the orkai began laughing, only to straighten up when their teacher glared at them.

One of the orkai who had jumped in our group to steal some of our kills stepped up to me and held a fist out. "I hear this is the greeting of brotherhood amongst the humans you keep."

I stared at the fist and then back at him before grinning. "Something like that." I bumped his fist. "Now, I'm just interested in why there were so many monsters. Anybody have a theory on why there were two different breakouts of monsters on the same day?"

Another orkai lifted his head at the question. "The arbiters will give us an answer. Events like this rarely, if ever, go unanswered."

I smiled. I could call out the orkai on many things, but their love for the arbiters was not something I'd ever challenge. In the grand scheme of the dungeon, the arbiters weren't terrible, although they were still flawed. And that meant following them blindly had its own flaws.

"Well, I'm sure we'll see you all around," I said, feeling ready to depart.

Crimson, on the other hand, crossed her arms and looked half ready to pick another fight. I shot her a look that told her to stand down. They had

apologized, and at the moment, the situation had de-escalated.

"They're not worth it," she said, more to herself than anyone else.

"Yeah, I'm sure when we get back we can do plenty of better things with our time. Right, Crimson?" I offered, and her eyes went wide before a massive grin stretched across her face. Don’t let anyone ever tell you I didn’t know how to manage Crimson.

"Of course. Bye-bye!" She ripped open a portal and started shoving our class through, one by one, back to the classroom.

However, as we left, I couldn't help but feel the glare that practically seared itself into my back.

"You should stop making so many enemies, Crimson," I told her the second we were clear of the orkai.

Crimson tilted her head in confusion. "Where would be the fun in that?"

The glare I had for that was enough to melt even Crimson's legendary stoicism. Her confidence faltered into a look with far less surety.

"So what now?" she said, oh so obviously trying to change the subject.

"Well, now I go make sure that you're not causing any more trouble. Unless, of course, we're about to go back to training." I paused at the end, leaving it open as more of a question and hoping her answer would be the one I wanted to hear.

Crimson shook her head. "We're done for the day, especially since you promised me a date."

"I did?" I asked with surprise.

"Bye, Ken," Harley called out, waving as she hurried away. "Thanks for distracting Crimson for us!"

Crimson turned, clearly considering if she should do something about Harley. But clearly her decision fell in Harley’s favor because she turned to me with hunger in her eyes, grabbing me and pulling me along.

"You don't have to pull me," I said, digging in my heels enough that I could regain control of the interaction.

Crimson gave me a big pout, with wide eyes, as I resisted. "You don't want to come with me?"

I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her close for a quick kiss. "I like it better when you don't pretend to be quite so innocent."

"Who's innocent?" Crimson asked, ripping off the mask for one far fiercer.

I smirked. "Much better." I gave her a small kiss on her nose.

Crimson batted her lashes at me in a way that made it impossible to ignore her bright blue eyes. "What does a girl have to do to get a little of your agility pumped into her?"

I laughed. Sometimes, Crimson’s directness still got me. “Haven’t we already done that?” I teased.

“Worth trying again.” Crimson grinned.

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Chapter 6

The rest of class hadn't paid us much attention and simply left while Crimson had begun teasing me. So we were now alone in the classroom. I stepped forward and locked the door, happy to engage with what she had in mind.

"Well, I suppose it would just be rude of me to refuse at this point," I told her.

"It would be." Crimson bobbed her head a mile a minute. "And the Ken I know isn't rude." She nodded to herself.

"No, I'm not." I grabbed her chin with my thumb and pulled her lips to mine, kissing her softly and letting myself smile as her lips gave way hungrily to mine. Our tongues intertwined as we tasted each other anew. We'd done this plenty of times, but there was something different, a new edge of hunger to Crimson that I hadn't seen before.

As I finished the kiss and she looked up at me with wide blue eyes that were practically begging for more, I couldn't help but let a small smirk slide across my features. There was nothing more intoxicating than an eager beauty.

Crimson tugged at her bodysuit, pouting at me enough that I was certain where this was going. Especially the way she batted her eyelashes and gave me the smirk of a woman who knew she had substantial charm. Which she absolutely did. And she damn well knew it.

I kissed her again, and this time, I pushed her backwards until the back of her knees touched a desk.

She let herself fall back, sitting on the desk while I bent over her, our tongues twisting and tangling in a competition of whose was more flexible.

Her hands pressed against my chest, appreciating it for a moment, before switching and wrapping her arms around my shoulders like she was ensuring I wouldn't go anywhere. I nearly rolled my eyes at her, happy to indulge her.

My own hands wandered down to her leather-clad hips and squeezed her ass, which only gave Crimson an excuse to moan. She lifted her lips from mine and exposed her neck, making herself vulnerable as she offered it to me. I needed no encouragement.

"You really are trouble," I whispered into her ear as I finished kissing my way along her soft neck and giving her a playful nibble, all while my hands squeezed her ass. It was a firm one, with enough muscle to bounce back into a perfect bubble butt the second I let up pressure with each finger.

"I'm so bad. So much trouble," she agreed eagerly, enough that I could do little more than smile and shake my head.

"Thank you," Crimson moaned and pulled at me with her hips, trying to get me to stay in the mood.

I kissed her again, finding her lips impossibly delicious as the two of us lost each other in a twisting tangle of kisses that promised not to end anytime soon.

"Remember, I wanted agility." Crimson stopped, smirked, and went right back to our handsy making out.

"I'll remember," I hummed happily as her hands wandered lower and began to pull at the hem of my pants.

"Now you've gotten the new ability, I think it's important that we test out just what counts," she said, sliding off the desk and in between my legs in a quick, yet subtle motion that left her on her knees.

I stared at her massive grin with a small look of disbelief. I didn't notice what she was doing until the zipper of my pants came down. It sounded loud enough to my ears that I was worried that people outside the classroom could hear, and Crimson would not care in the least if they heard.

She fished me out with gleaming eyes, her eyes lifting up to meet mine, letting me see her hunger as she opened her mouth, pointing me right down her throat.

I had to work to keep myself under control and not thrust into her. But damn those hungry blue eyes on her beautiful face, not to mention the direct

view down her cleavage squeezed together by that red leather drove me wild.

Crimson was mine, and I loved every bit of her crazy ass.

Slowly leaning forward, Crimson took me in the same way someone might savor the most delicious treat—one they had been denying themselves for months while they watched their figure.

I leaned back, letting out a sigh that dragged my soul with it when her tongue touched me. It felt better than leveling. I ran my fingers through her hair, holding onto her and telling her just how much I wanted this.

Crimson moaned and rolled her tongue along the tip. A slightly intoxicated glaze overtook her eyes while she licked at it and looked up at me to ensure her performance was satisfactory.

I stared down with what I was sure was a satisfied grin.

The long make-out session had made me impossibly hard, and I found myself incredibly sensitive. She looked at me knowingly, a brilliant smile extending across her face as she dove back in to drive me crazy.

"You shouldn't make me wait so long," Crimson mumbled around me, pulling off and gathering her hair before she threw herself forward, swallowing me all the way to the hilt until her throat bulged with my girth lodged in it.

I groaned, holding on to the base of her braid as she began to gently stroke me through her tight, wet throat.

Crimson's eyes rolled up, and she hummed as she added her own delicious twist that put me right over the edge far too quickly.

I squeezed her braid, thrusting myself deeper as my ass clenched, and my balls released everything I had into her.

Crimson hummed in delight as she pulled off with a wet, sloppy pop.

"Oh, that was wonderful." She wiped at her lips, and then paused, looking down at her fingers and then licking them clean.

"You are a lot of trouble. We finished without using the skill, again." I wagged a finger at her and put a hand on her shoulder to stop her from rising.

Crimson frowned at the action. "What are you doing?"

"We have to do it again," I told her.

Crimson frowned at me like I was an idiot. "Ken, there is so much more testing that must be done. Really, I'm disappointed in you as a student. You must thoroughly assess all possible avenues so that you know the

boundaries of your abilities." Her hand came up and began pumping me at the base as I rose back to attention.

I squinted at her, wondering if she had done it on purpose.

Crimson hummed to herself as she ran a finger along my length and pushed it down, only to make it bounce back up as she caught it with a kiss. "Now just hold still while we test a few theories."

***

"Where have you been?" Des asked accusingly as Crimson and I stepped back into my bedroom.

"You know. Things," Crimson said with a shrug before running her hand along her toned stomach, settling where she now had a mark where I'd implanted my stats. I was a little slower for it now, but I couldn't find myself to be upset at all.

"Things," Des said, sounding less than impressed.

"Oh, you don't get to say anything." Crimson stuck a finger at Des. "Just because you're taking a break for 'reasons' doesn't mean the rest of us have to stop."

"No, it does not," Des admitted, though she seemed none too happy to have to agree. My purple-haired lover's expression flashed through several emotions: hunger, desire, frustration, and finally, determination. She'd be okay. Perhaps Sakura's plan to have her abstain until she finished was actually working.

"Crimson needed to take some agility stats," I said, deciding not to beat around the bush anymore. We were all adults and understood what was happening. I'll be damned if I was going to continue to dodge around the words like they weren't something I could say.

"Oh." Des came up short. "Well, good for you two. Really. Ken needs to knock us all up more," Des said, looking at Crimson expectantly.

I choked on her words and was hammering my chest at her particular phrasing. Kids?! I couldn't even imagine; I wasn't ready for that.

"Oh, he did plenty," Crimson said and then gave an exaggerated wink for effect.

"And there we go," I said, clearing my throat. "Anything I can get you two?" I said, stepping away.

"Oh, there's plenty you can get me," Des said, leaning off the back of the couch, batting her lashes, and licking her plump pink lips.

For a moment, I was tempted to jump her. There was a promise in her eyes that made me beyond curious. I blinked away the sudden need that swelled in me.

"Water, please. I'm parched," Crimson said, only making Des roll her eyes.

"Now you're just trying to make me jealous." Des leaned back and stretched her arms over her head, the motion making her chest pop up and stretch out of her blue blazer. The lacy garments underneath made themselves known and caught my eye long enough that by the time I glanced up to meet her eyes, she was beaming.

That motion had definitely been deliberate.

"Succubus," I teased her, and Des grinned back. We both knew it was a compliment.

"Not yet. But soon, and I'll"—she paused as she drummed her fingers on the table—"need your help for that. Sakura's almost done vetting my work. At which point, she will not kill me. So there's that."

"She wouldn't anyway," I promised.

Des tipped her head back from side to side. "I would not be so sure about that. That woman was pretty upset when she figured out what exactly it was I was doing and that I needed to involve you. So, for my sake, we're going to be careful."

"For you, of course," I said with a smirk, halfway to the kitchen for Crimson’s water. "Okay. Well, I'll ensure that we can preserve your life. After all, you are fairly important to me."

"Oh, well, I'm glad to hear it. Even if a girl knows it, it never hurts to hear it." She raised her voice so I’d hear her from the kitchen.

I handed Crimson her water and walked around to where Des had plopped herself down on the couch and wrapped my arms around her. She shifted such that I didn't catch her underneath the chest but right on her perfect breasts. She smirked as if she'd won with that particular maneuver, and I enjoyed squeezing them in my hands, knowing it would make her happy.

Des suddenly let out an egregiously sexual moan that made me unclasp her chest like I'd stuck my hand on a pan fresh from the oven.

"No!" Des shouted before recovering and letting out a deep sigh. “Thanks, I guess.”

I stared at her. "You could've... not made it sexual," I said.

She gave me a blank look, clearly not comprehending what I was saying.

"Anyway," I said to Des, "let me know when you need my protection from my grandmother, and I will be happy to participate."

"Soon," Des whispered it like a promise. "Oh, so very soon. How's everyone else?"

"Good, I think," I answered with some small amount of hesitation as I joined them both on the couch. "Charlotte's gearing up to take on the whale. I think she's about ready. Felin's still staying involved with her people. As you can see, Crimson's doing just fine." I hooked a thumb. "And Penny... well." I squinted. “She’s the least trouble of all of you. She’s got her own stuff well in hand.”

“Trouble? Me?” Des put a hand on her chest.

“Who’s taking a family grimoire of taboo spells and trying to take it even a step further?” I stared her down while Crimson giggled next to her.

"Touché," Des said with a grin.

"Wasn't trying to win that one." I held a finger up. "But if you're going to give it to me, then I certainly won't turn it down. Oh, we've got a new leveling spot promised by the orkai arbiters. I just have to keep monitoring the threadspawn for them in return."

"Which you were going to do anyway," Des pointed out.

"That doesn't make it less generous of me." I smiled magnanimously.

"No, I suppose I don't get to take any credit away from you for that. But a new leveling spot will do wonders. Especially if it's anywhere near the quality of the spot the demons gave you." Des nodded along as she worked through the new information.

"It'll probably be better," I said offhandedly.

Des raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, I told them about the one the demons gave me, as part of when I asked for something from them. And while the demons can be extraordinarily generous at times, the orkai are competitive as shit," I said.

"You're incredible, Ken." Des beamed.

"Don't say that too much or it'll get to his head," Crimson cautioned.

She tilted her head as she looked at me. "Does that get bigger, too?"

I frowned for just a moment before I understood what she said. "Damn it, Des."

She laughed hard enough to make her chest nearly bound out of its constraints. "Oh, come on, that was a great one. You can't blame me if you set me up so well."

"Is that how it works?" I asked, getting an emphatic nod in response. "Well then, Desmonda Renard, I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"Well, what about you then? If there's no crisis, what are you even going to do with yourself?" Des asked, and her chin fell on her hand as she leaned forward.

"Yeah, I'm not quite sure," I began, only for Des to roll her eyes.

"That was supposed to be rhetorical. You don't have to be in a disaster every waking second," she told me.

"I don't?" I replied, slightly confused.

Des let out a humorless laugh. "No, I think we need to have you put in plenty of training." As she said that, she splayed her hands down her hips to make a little heart over them and winked at me. "And, of course, we should make sure to prepare for whatever year-end celebration we're going to have to put on."

I blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"It rotates through the four academies, and we did it freshman year." Des gave me a knowing grin, and I turned to find Crimson pointedly avoiding my gaze. She'd been uncharacteristically quiet for the last few minutes.

"What? You have to be kidding me," I said to Crimson, who shook her head.

"I only got the news recently," she said, looking accusingly at Des, "and haven't had a chance to inform the rest of the class. But Royal Academy, with their recent issues, won't be able to take their turn." Crimson tried to hold back a laugh before she continued.

"Turns out when some of your biggest donors get caught up in a corruption scandal, then so do you." There wasn't an ounce of sympathy from her. "Anyway… as a result, they dropped out of the usual rotation, leaving a massive empty gap that the headmistress is hoping we'll fill." Crimson ended with a pointed harumph that told me exactly how she felt about the request.

"Can we, I don't know, not do it?" I asked.

"I mean, we could," Crimson said slowly. "However, you know as well as I do that choosing an option like that comes with consequences."

"Like?" I asked.

"Like the headmistress sticking her nose into our business for every little choice we make. Despite her grandmotherly look, she is a spiteful bitch about… well, everything." Crimson shrugged. “I can at least respect that about her.”

"Yeah, I can see that," I said, making Crimson nearly fall out of her chair in laughter.

"Oh God, I want to tell her you said that you can see her as a petty bitch," Crimson said, looking up at the ceiling and biting her lip.

The look I gave her in turn told her exactly what I thought of her doing that.

"I won't. I won't." She quickly held her hands up. "There's a big difference between desperately wanting to and actually doing it."

"I'm glad you know the difference," I said quickly. "Here I was starting to think you didn't know how to stay out of trouble."

"I know how to stay out of trouble. It's just that I don't want to." Crimson pulled a chip bag out of her CID, popping one into her mouth with a crunch.

"Well, we could do another maid café. That was fairly popular," Des said, interjecting herself back into the conversation.

"But we just did that," Crimson shot the idea down. "Also, we can't."

"What do you mean we can't?" Des sat up straight.

"Apparently, last time we caused a few small, itsy, teensy... issues." Crimson pinched her fingers together.

"And how did we do that?" I emphasized.

"Because we are a little *too* attractive," Crimson answered and stuck her tongue out at me.

I couldn't help but close my eyes. "Of course that’s the problem. So we caught a little too much attention, and this year, we have to be less provocative?”

"Oh no, that might be what the headmistress wants. We just need to find an answer that she's not going to realize is provocative until it is too late," Crimson said, quick to cause mischief.

"I love it," Des said quickly.

"I knew you would." Crimson beamed right back at her. "But I don't have an immediate solution, so I'm open to ideas."

"It is a hard one," Des agreed, pinching her chin in thought. “We have to make something sexy without sounding sexy.”

I looked between the two of them and their antics. "This is the part where you two stop pretending and just come up with whatever it was you were going to do anyway," I said, my eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"That doesn't sound like me."

"Not at all," Crimson agreed.

They were absolutely in cahoots. This was one of the problems with a harem; they could all gang up on me when they really wanted something.

“I guess I'll just wait for the surprise, then, and get back to training. At least *that* I have some control over.” I looked exasperated at the two of them as they began giggling and whispering.

Whatever they decided to do, I could live with in the end. I loved both of them, and this made them happy. I also had no sympathy for the headmistress and whatever fresh hell the two of them could come up with to torment her.

Well, torment was perhaps too strong a word. The headmistress would certainly end up managing the fallout just fine. And really, she should know better than to get Crimson to do something that she did not want to do. Crimson was just the kind of person to push back harder in return for any attempt to control her, which is why I'd stopped long ago and simply worked within the bounds of whatever Crimson was trying to do while making it the best option for myself.

That was really the trick when it came to Crimson. She was both an unstoppable force and an immovable object. Once I could figure out which one she was for the day, I knew how to work with her as a partner.

I looked over, watching the pair giggling and whispering together and smiled, before wandering off to oil my blades. That was a far more preferable activity than wondering what the two women in my life were going to cook up next.

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Chapter 7

As the days went on, I trained my ass off, which really felt more comfortable than most activities at this point. After classes, I would work myself to the bone, and on weekends, I'd take anyone who'd join me to the leveling spot—which was blazingly fast leveling at this point of the dungeon. I'd managed to hit level 60, though our party was staggering because those who hadn't gotten their trial ability weren't leveling on purpose.

Charlotte paused next to me after class, long enough for me to look up and realize she wanted to say something.

"Yes, Charlotte?" I said, turning to her with a smile.

"I'm going to go after the Crystal Whale again today, I think. I'd love it if you'd watch." She asked me to join with the most adorable blush.

I wasn't going to turn her down. Besides, I wanted to see all of her effort in action.

"Right now?" I asked, my hand lingering in the air, ready to rip a portal open for her.

She paused, took a deep breath, and then nodded. "Yes. Now. Before I lose my nerve." She shifted back and forth on her feet.

I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "You'll be fine. Worst-case scenario, we try again later."

Charlotte made a grunt of acknowledgment, and before I could open a portal, she opened one and marched through like she owned the place.

"That works." I shrugged, following her through.

No one else in our class had moved quickly enough to be here yet.

I looked up at the whale, flying lazily in the air above without a care in the world.

Meanwhile, Charlotte stepped up with fierce determination, a light in her eyes.

"You've got this," I called out as the portal closed behind us, and Charlotte pulled her braid back over her shoulder. Bun-Bun chirped his own encouragement.

"No, I've got this," Charlotte said to whatever Bun-Bun had told her.

She put a belt around her head, tying it tight, and I couldn't help but scowl, wondering what nonsense Grandpa had put in her head for her to think that was remotely necessary.

But regardless, I was here to support Charlotte. And while the old man was wacky in many ways, he knew how to train warriors.

"Go Charlotte!" I encouraged, putting any of my own baggage aside. I was here to support a woman I loved.

With the band around her head, she let out what could only be a battle cry and charged forward. She held a staff in her hand like a baseball bat.

The Crystal Whale was a challenge of mana more than anything. It took a great deal of damage to bring the Crystal Whale even out of its first phase. Much of the difficulty was simply having the magical stamina to still be able to put up a fight by the time it was out of that first phase.

While Charlotte was a healer, she had a number of storm-based spells. Still, it was going to be an impressive feat for her to take down this trial, simply because healers had such little offensive skills in the first place. She'd been training, but I still didn't fully understand her plan.

So I was surprised when she pulled her staff back and swung it forward, shouting at the top of her lungs.

A funnel cloud appeared above the Crystal Whale, twisting down and crashing onto the whale, driving it from the sky in a sustained twister that pushed it until its crystalline belly rested right in front of Charlotte.

Her cry redoubled as she began whaling on the whale, swinging that club for all that she was worth while at least maintaining balance.

While she could have done this without training from my grandfather, it was immediately clear that the training had paid off, at least to some extent. Her blows were heavy enough to make visible damage to the whale. Her stance was solid, and she drove strength from her legs into her hips and

directly into damage on the whale. Most importantly, though, she struck correctly, and her form carried the power through into the whale far better than if she’d just come here and started hammering on it.

"And that is why even healers don't skip leg day," Crimson spoke as she appeared beside me, a portal opening and pouring her out.

"And for a minute, I thought you were going to let her do this in privacy," I told Crimson.

Crimson waggled her head. "If I could, I would."

"But you can't, so you shan't," I offered. Most likely she was using this as another chance to encourage the class. Only about half of us had our trial abilities.

"Exactly. I love it when you get me, Ken." Crimson beamed.

I shook my head at her antics and decided it was better to leave her alone than try to keep up with her in this. That, and my focus was fixed on Charlotte while she did her best in the challenge in front of her. I was nervous enough that I didn't cheer for her, worried that I might distract her and ruin her focus.

It was clear she was in the zone at least to start the challenge. This one would always be one of endurance. That spell keeping the whale within range of her attacks was costing her mana, and that was the real timer for all of this.

With the belt tied around her head, Charlotte continued to run through the Nagato Clan form with rigid accuracy while the entire class watched, having filed in behind Crimson. The entire time, Charlotte's focus didn't waver a hair. I doubt she even realized the class had shown up.

Meanwhile, the swirling wind that held down the whale continued. I was fairly certain that I finally understood exactly what Charlotte had been aiming to do with the move. While she had a number of spells she could cast, like lightning or swirling balls of wind, they were fairly inefficient at best. But with this skill, she could likely keep her mana relatively high while she hammered away with the staff.

She had built a smart strategy, using her mana to ground her opponent and then, in a very uncaster-like way, going at it with a club. It was crude and a little silly—both of which had my grandfather written all over it. However, it was also proving very effective.

I watched as Harley squeezed her fist and bit her lip while watching Charlotte, clearly wanting to cheer but knowing better. It was good to know

that Harley could at times have restraint. Either that or she was fearful of what Crimson would do if she ruined the moment for Charlotte.

I turned my eyes back to the druid, who, for fifteen minutes, pounded at the whale, sweat beading down her head. She worked with an intensity that anyone could respect. Fifteen minutes might not sound like much, but it was an eternity in what was essentially her sprinting through the forms with absolute focus.

The monsters for the trial abilities were supposed to be incredibly difficult. I wondered if there was a counter to this built in.

Charlotte continued her fight while the class watched, so singularly entertained that many of us didn't even sit down. We stood with rapt attention as the whale continued to crack until the exterior shattered as we'd all come to expect. It followed the same pattern as how this fight had gone before when Felin had completed the trial.

What was revealed underneath was a crystal shark that began enjoying its freedom by swirling around, circling Charlotte, and coming at her with a mouthful of razorsharp teeth.

To my surprise, she didn't put away the staff and instead squared up again to the second phase. I frowned, only for Crimson to make a noise of understanding.

"She's really going to go all out on this, isn't she?" Crimson said with a hint of appreciation.

The shark swam by her, and Charlotte smacked it hard in the side of the head as she rolled out of the way, getting nicked by the jagged crystalline skin of the shark and throwing a healing spell on herself. Then she squared right back up and stared at the monster.

I wanted to cheer for her but dreaded breaking her focus. Through all of this she hadn't looked over her shoulder at me—and now the rest of the class—even once. She ducked and dodged the shark as much as she could while continuing to club it, slowly but surely, to death.

Every now and then, it would swim away, squaring up and then charging her again.

But Charlotte had an answer to that move as well. She would pause and throw a stormy bolt at the monster, as if punishing it for creating distance. Each and every one of her attacks was a calculated maneuver.

She had been fighting for at least an hour by that point, and Charlotte's green hair had turned dark with sweat. Her clothes were torn and dribbled

blood from hundreds of shallow cuts that she'd sustained through all of the attacks.

I was so damn proud of her.

For everything I'd witnessed, the shark itself was beginning to crack under her efforts. And not only myself but many others in class were barely holding back their own excitement.

All of us had experienced these fights dozens of times, and even if the shadow panther I had spent so much time fighting was different, it didn't change how much I understood the difficulty of what Charlotte was undertaking.

So when the shark lost a fin as it cracked off—a major sign of her continued success—I cheered with everyone else.

Our excitement startled Charlotte, and she jerked back at the wrong moment, the shark catching her shoulder and tossing her to the ground hard enough to drive the air from her lungs.

I wanted to run in and protect her, but I couldn't. Intervening would waste all the hard work she had already done.

Charlotte rolled to her feet. She let out a shout and swung her club with all her power, catching the shark on its nose as it came for her again. Her form was sloppy, ruined from being knocked to the ground, but she made the best of the strike and actually managed to ride the monster's own force and push herself out of the way of that attack.

The tail swished as it pivoted and slapped her hard enough to break skin, but she kept her feet as it came around again.

Charlotte let out a small whoop of excitement. The next second, I saw her gaze shift, and she focused on what came next. The shark was wounded, and she was a little scattered from being knocked down, but I could tell that she was very determined to get the fight back under her control.

The shark threw itself at her again, and this time, she threw herself far into a tumbling roll to miss that attack, only to come back to her feet, a spell already churning in her hand before she hurled it at the monster.

It twisted away, trying to swim up for the first time, squaring down on her. Most adventurers up against this level of opponent would show at least some hesitation, but instead, Charlotte summoned the same twisting wind that she had used to push the first form down. And this time, the ability hit the shark as it dove. Its nose went too far, landing early, while Charlotte

pounced on it, club in hand, her form breaking as she attacked it with a new and more violent frenzy than before.

I was sure all of us watching were thinking about how low her mana must be at that point. She was going so hard that she had to be at the end of her rope. Her eyes drooped with exhaustion, both physically and no doubt due to her low mana.

This would be a critical point that she didn’t lose at the end.

Charlotte cried out, swinging like a madwoman, and the crystal shark finally shattered to pieces, falling apart as the crowd let out an audible sigh of relief.

"That was terrifying." I chuckled. The rest of the class seemed to be of much the same opinion.

Harley rushed forward, crying, and grabbed Charlotte. "I knew you could do it!" She threw herself over the druid with an obnoxious number of tears streaming down her face.

"Thank you," Charlotte said, finally looking up and realizing just how many people were watching. "Thanks for coming and joining me for the fight. Now, if you don't mind me—"

Charlotte immediately flopped down on her back, arms spread out in every direction like a starfish, and she let out a squeal of joy as she began to kick her legs in the air.

"You did it!" I rushed up and scooped Charlotte off the ground, cradling her in my arms and twirling around with her.

"I did it!" Charlotte said with a giant grin as blue lightning crackled over her briefly. She let out a squeal of excitement in response.

"Of course you did. There was never a doubt in my mind," I told her.

"Maybe a little in mine. That thing is tough!" Des said, coming over and smirking at Charlotte. The two of them shared a moment, looking in each other's eyes.

"As long as it was only a little," Charlotte said, and it was clear nothing could ruin her mood right now, as she seemed content to relax in my arms. I don't think I had any issue with giving her my full attention.

"What now?" Des asked.

I shrugged in response. "I'm sure if we try hard enough, we can find something. But I also don't know if I'm that interested in trying that hard," I emphasized with a giant smirk on my face.

"Well then, let's go back and celebrate." Des smushed her face to Charlotte's and then skipped away, leaving me with a beautiful druid in my arms.

"For some reason, she seems more excited than me," Charlotte stated, sounding at least moderately confused.

"I would actually agree," I said, observing Des with some of my own confusion.

Crimson, who'd been watching all of this from nearby, smiled, stepping up and patting Charlotte on the shoulder. "Congratulations. You've worked hard."

"Thank you." Charlotte dipped her head.

"As for Des, I'm fairly certain that she was waiting for you to finish before she went to finish her own project," Crimson told us.

Charlotte beamed. "Well, that's very kind of her. But I don't know if I need that much consideration," Charlotte said with a blush.

"I think it's Des's own way of being supportive," I told Charlotte. "I think we can at least give her this one. And besides, I wonder how much you can squeeze out of her in the name of a celebration."

As I spoke, my CID chimed several times. Though I was far more interested in the conversation here, I did need to give whoever it was my attention, apparently.

"One second," I apologized to Charlotte, putting her down and turning my wrist over to see who it was that had decided to interrupt.

Only then did I see it was the president of the UG. And, of course, the only appropriate response was a heavy sigh.

Crimson frowned. "Who is that?" she asked as she leaned around me to read along with me on my CID. "Scaredy cat," she said, with a frown. "Just ignore him. I'm sure whatever he wants, we can deal with later."

"Apparently, he's got someone new working for him and wants to make them our official liaison," I told her.

“I’m going to take a shower and relax for a bit before we celebrate,” Charlotte said, giving me an excuse to go.

"That's the kind of service the UG should be giving adventurers," Crimson said with a nod.

"So I should meet him?" I asked.

"Oh no, make him sweat," Crimson said.

"If he'd heard half the things you said about him, he would pitch a fit," Charlotte said.

"I dare him," Crimson said with absolute confidence. "And even then, I don't think he would."

I knew she was right, but it always felt so disrespectful, and some part of me simply balked at that alone.

"Well, if this is the kind of service the UG should give all adventurers, then Ken should probably show them that it's worth something, right?" Charlotte, ever the heart of the party, said.

I enjoyed the scowl that passed over Crimson's face as she battled with Charlotte's words and her own guidance. Personally, I felt that I should at least make things easier for the president of the UG. He was a valuable… employee. Strange to think of him that way, but now that we had control of the UG, that's exactly what he was. Somehow, flipping the roles of authority between the two of us made me want to go and be a good boss.

"I don't know," Crimson said, knowing what Charlotte said was true and being absolutely unwilling to admit it. So, I stared her down for a moment longer, and she cracked. "Fine," she said. "Where are they?"

"Apparently, at Haylon Academy, because they didn't know where we were," I told her.

"Ha, we're never there." Crimson crossed her arms.

"No, we're always at Star City, which is likely too high-level for any secretary that he could hire," I told her.

It was perfectly clear how Crimson felt about my logic, based on the scowl on her face. "Fine. I'll go see who it is then, so that I'm better able to ignore them in the future." Crimson wasn't quite willing to give in.

"That is not nice," Charlotte said, wagging a finger at Crimson.

The scolding was particularly effective from the cute druid, as Crimson snapped her mouth closed, glared at Charlotte for a long second, and then finally admitted defeat in the most Crimson way possible, which was looking away and refusing to acknowledge anything.

And while I loved Crimson, I decided I was going to ignore this rather than deal with it head-on. So I ripped open a portal back to Haylon College and carried Charlotte through.

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Chapter 8

We arrived back at Haylon, and I took a deep breath. The views and smell of the area filled me with a sense of nostalgia. The buildings were much the same. However, I was very different. The same could be said for Crimson and Charlotte, who had decided to come along with me.

I hoped this would be a fun trip for all of us. We'd already gained control of the UG, and this was them creating a nice, neat direct line back to us. In a way, it was them managing their manager, but I wasn't going to be too upset.

"There you are," the president of the UG said, as if we were old friends. "It was only yesterday you started here, right?"

I gave him a cursory nod. However, my eyes fell on the woman next to him while he prattled on.

"You know, the headmistress of Haylon is putting a little too much effort into sequestering you. Even after telling her we were here to meet with you, she was very difficult about letting us in," the president stated with an overwide smile.

"She's just a very difficult person in general," Crimson added.

"Don't be mean," Charlotte scolded Crimson, though the druid looked like she was ready for a nap. Bun-Bun was already asleep atop her head.

I rolled my eyes and instead stepped forward to get the purpose of the meeting going.

"Hello, I'm Ken," I said to the woman whom the president of the UG had brought with him. Her face was sharp, with a major resting bitch face, but it

worked for her, and she was very attractive for it. She couldn't have been more than five years older than me, with curly blonde hair and a chest that would even give Des a run for her money. She fit into that suit with a pencil skirt like it was made for her and managed to look professional with her sex appeal barely constrained. I had a feeling that was the point.

"By the way," the president of the UG said, smirking at me taking notice of her, "this is our newest recruit, Sandra. She is straight out of a law firm that didn't quite respect her abilities." He puffed his chest up as if he'd pulled a diamond from the rough. "And because you are now large-scale owners of the UG, I thought it best to offer you her services. She can help you with any matters, legal or otherwise," he said.

Meanwhile, the blonde stuck her hand out, and her severe face split into a wide smile. "Ken, I've heard nothing but fantastic things about you."

"Well, don't listen to them. I'm fairly sure they're mostly lies," I told her.

She grinned ever so slightly.

Meanwhile, Crimson went around her handshake, right up to the woman, and stabbed a finger into her large and barely constrained chest. "So, you're our bitch. Perfect. I can think of many ways to put you to work. If you have a law background, then you are fantastic at paperwork." Crimson smiled in victory.

"If that's what Ken wishes, then certainly," Sandra said.

Crimson's grin grew brittle. "So you're only Ken's liaison?"

"It's my understanding that he is the key member of this group. It is important to focus where I'll be most effective," she answered with a hint of a smirk.

I knew that statement would drive Crimson absolutely crazy, and my suspicions were confirmed by the pressure Crimson suddenly applied with the single finger on the woman's chest.

"Take note that you report to all of us. We are shared owners," Crimson practically growled.

Charlotte glanced at me as if asking if I was going to save the new woman. But I didn't think she needed any saving. From where I stood, they'd given us someone who'd stand up to Crimson on purpose.

"I don't think that's pertinent," the new liaison said. "However, if you wish to include it, then that is simply all I can do."

She really gave Crimson no way out of this. Crimson herself turned to me, an expression asking if I was going to put up with this behavior. The

answer was most certainly yes.

"Thank you, Sandra," I said, pointedly using her name. "Crimson is unaccustomed to much, if anything, in the way of challenges."

"I take on plenty of challenges." Crimson took offense.

"Yes, you do," I confirmed and patted her on the side, only making Sandra's grin grow a mile wider.

"It makes perfect sense why I was assigned to Ken specifically. Though I hope the rest of you understand that if you need my services at all, I am happy to provide," Sandra confirmed, even though it was already somewhat clear she wasn't willing to do Crimson's busy work. The tension between the two of them became incredibly thick. I had to give her credit. Sandra was doing a remarkable job of ignoring Crimson's glare.

"Well, thank you," I said. "And if you're going to be helpful, I think perhaps the first person you should get in touch with is Bellaire." I tapped away at my CID and shared the contact with her. "If you need me in any PR-related capacity, it's best to run it through her first."

"Thank you. This meeting with you has already borne significant fruit." She smiled. If Sandra didn't cower to Crimson, she might actually be a significant boon to our group.

"As for you"—I shifted my focus back to Scaredy Cat, who was grinning from ear to ear—"how's your transition going?"

His face fell, and he cleared his throat to buy time for the abrupt topic shift. "Oh. That. Amatto has much to get up to speed on before she can take over the role."

I frowned and glanced at Sandra. "Please do help Amatto with her transition. It seems you report directly to the president of the UG, and that position is changing."

"I was unaware of that," Sandra said professionally to me before shooting a glare at Scaredy Cat. "It will be done. I'll make sure to get Director Amatto a bottle of champagne with your congratulations."

Scaredy Cat's face fell, like his gambit had just backfired on him. I even wondered if Sandra had been installed with the idea of creating a direct funnel between him and us so that we didn't realize Amatto had been delayed.

It didn't matter how much I was upset by this; Crimson's eyes practically glowed with the chance to go after Scaredy Cat. The two of them always

seemed to have some unresolved history. “Oh, she’s been delayed?” Crimson grinned and shifted to using her CID.

"While I have you here," Sandra drew the words out, and I felt myself scowl before I could hide it. There was something in that tone that told me I wasn’t going to like what was next. That, and this was the real purpose she was here.

"Yes," I said with a sigh.

"We do have several items we would like to bring up for your attention, both with the UG's latest stances as well as action items that must be taken care of." She pulled an overstuffed accordion folder out.

"Of course," I lied, my own smile becoming as brittle as Crimson's.

Meanwhile, Crimson herself was a bundle of snickers, as she enjoyed my reaction far more than was necessary. I turned to her with a look that could only say ‘careful what you say next’. Crimson mimed zipping her lips and laced her fingers in front of her as if she were the epitome of a good girl.

“I’ll be right back.” Crimson ripped open a portal and jumped through before I could say anything. Of course she was escaping this.

Scaredy Cat glanced at the portal longingly while Sandra seemed to take note of it. “Are there limits to where you can portal?” she asked.

“Just needs to be somewhere I’ve been before. I can do it inside the dungeon and out,” I explained.

Sandra’s eyes lit up at that, and I felt I was going to regret it. “We’ll have to make sure you have access to my office.”

***

Two hours later, we were freed.

Charlotte smiled after the whole affair. "Well, she was fairly helpful."

"She was not helpful," Crimson insisted.

Charlotte squinted and gave Crimson the kind of look that few people got away with. "She was pretty helpful, and she seemed very knowledgeable about all the topics she brought forward. Besides, you skipped out on most of it, only coming back for the last little bit and eating enough chips that I could barely hear her."

"I wanted to check back in on you two. Ken was gone a long time. I can assure you she was heavily coached," Crimson argued, as if it were a bad thing.

It definitely felt like she'd done her research. I was Team Charlotte on this one. And based on that scowl from Crimson, she was unlikely to change her team. “Sandra was fine. While we had a lot of decisions to make, she’s still going to be the one to do most of the work. Really, I think this is just about the UG trying to stabilize from the change of leadership. If they funnel it all through a single source, then it’ll make this all much smoother.” Corporate bureaucracy. I shuddered.

"Well, it's fine as long as she minds her business. It doesn't matter to me." Crimson crossed her arms.

"It wasn't that bad," Charlotte tried. However, before she began, I knew it was a losing cause. When Crimson put her foot down, she rarely left room for negotiation.

Meanwhile, Crimson's gaze shifted to me, waiting for what I would say.

"She was good," I said quickly. "Though it felt like the president of the UG found the most attractive woman he could for the job."

"A-ha!" Crimson stopped and pointed an accusatory finger at me. "You do find her attractive."

"Yes, Crimson," I said slowly. "I don't think there's much point in debating the fact that she is very attractive. If I were a betting man, I’d say attractiveness was on Scaredy Cat’s list of requirements for his last gambit."

Crimson chuckled. “It will fail.”

"Ken does need more partners," Charlotte said. But by the way Crimson looked at her, she suddenly squashed her opinion.

Charlotte quickly pivoted. "But someone provided by the UG? What do they think? That you just throw an attractive woman at Ken and he's suddenly up for grabs again?" Charlotte huffed twice before checking with Crimson to make sure she was doing it right.

"Crimson is a horrible influence on you," I said with a shake of my head.

"I resent that accusation," Crimson said pointedly.

"Of course you do, but it doesn't make it any less true."

Crimson seemed to pause, deciding if she was going to pick a fight. She watched me before sighing.

"Well, now that the UG has you wrapped around their fingers, what is it you're planning on doing?" Crimson asked.

"Training, training, and if I'm lucky, more training. With perhaps the occasional aside to check in with the orkai and the demons to make sure they're still hunting the threadspawn. Oh, and of course, we have to prepare

for whatever it is you and Des have determined to sign our class up to do,” I said, and Crimson put a hand to her chest.

"It's not that bad," she said quickly.

I turned to Charlotte for her opinion.

"It could be worse," the druid offered. Which pretty much proved that they had something already planned out. That she hadn’t come forward with it yet was a little worrisome, but then again, I had leveling to do.

"Well, that's a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one. Do I get to know what I'm being roped into yet?" I asked.

"We'll get the details squared away soon, I'm sure," Crimson said quickly, with a look that told me to not ask more questions. And Charlotte mimed zipping her lips.

"Great. I'm going to go make sure that everyone else has what they need," I told them, "so I can do some undisturbed leveling."

"Make sure you find Bellaire," Crimson said. "Giving her stats would help her quite a bit," she said to my look.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "I'll manage," I said.

“Do we know how long it takes for the incubation to complete?” Charlotte asked.

“Fifteen days is my guess,” Crimson said before I could get it out. “At least the rate that Selene’s stats are changing seems to be consistent. So, in fifteen days, the stat growth that Ken put into her will be complete, though it does seem that her experience from grinding the dungeon is slightly hampered.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Charlotte said, tapping at her lip in thought. “We don’t want to rush leveling too much.”

I’d already done the math in my head. “It’ll take four incubations per level for my stats to keep up with leveling, at least for 60 to 70.”

Crimson tilted her head, doing the math. “That doesn’t account for gear, but then again, if you can manage without it, that’ll only make you stronger in the long run.”

Charlotte, however, was having another thought. “If you’re getting twice the benefit, then we’ll all start falling behind.” Her brows pressed down at that. “Not to mention you’re managing to do it with a large group.”

“You’ll all need to keep training hard,” Crimson said. “Ken will probably start hitting a training wall if his stats outscale his level.”

“That’s a thing?” I asked.

“Think of each level coming with a new soft cap in stats. Sure you’ve pushed maybe ten percent over it in the past, but that takes a ton of effort.” Crimson drummed her fingers on her arm.

“I think at least it is still good practice,” I said, seeing that she was at least a little upset at the idea of me slowing or stopping my training.

“Right.” She cheered up. “Either way, you have a solid runway to start grinding levels. If you use Stat Incubation to its fullest with your current harem, you’re close to a level a week. Not to mention you could take a break and catch back up.”

“Fast,” Charlotte said under her breath.

For every adventurer, leveling began slowing down considerably the further you went in the dungeon. The time needed to raise your stats was a large part of that. The use of the orkai gravity chambers had been very helpful for speeding our class back up. We’d still managed to gain multiple stat points a day of training. But [Stat Incubation] just catapulted my training speed to new heights.

“Well, you just got your trial ability, Charlotte. Who knows what kind of training you can do now!” I added as much pep into my voice as I could, glancing at Crimson to add in.

“Of course. Limit Break absolutely helped me increase my training speed, too. It’s one of the reasons I’ve leveled as quickly as I have. I should think about new training programs for each of the abilities and then I can tort— I mean train my students even better!” Crimson began laughing maniacally.

“Well, let’s get showered and ready for dinner.” I held a hand out to Charlotte, who blushed and took it, pulling herself off the couch. “Where did you want to celebrate tonight?”

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Chapter 9

I gave Charlotte the option of where to celebrate, and she chose a familiar bar. It did not take long before I was recognized as a blue-haired whalewyrn bounced out of her seat, waving and flagging us down.

"Ken!" Misha squealed. She was so excited that her fin-like ears flapped as she rushed up to us, her expression adorable, staring at us with open hope.

"Welcome," I said, not upset at her presence but also not sure if Charlotte had invited her. But regardless of whether she'd given an invitation, Charlotte would never make the woman feel unwanted.

"Misha, lovely to see you." Charlotte wrapped the other woman in a hug that made her whale tail slap the ground.

"Thank you. You guys haven't been around much lately," she said, hesitation slipping into her tone.

"Blame Ken," Des offered, sticking a thumb over her shoulder at me.

"Of course, I figured it was his fault," Misha said swiftly, fitting right into the group.

"I knew I liked you." Des hooked an arm over Misha's shoulder, causing the whalewyrn to blush furiously, though she didn't pull away from the contact. If anything, she leaned into the touch, much to Des' amusement. Des clung tightly to the blue-haired woman and pulled her along to the table.

"It really is mostly Ken's fault," Des said. "He got mixed up in all this threadspawn business, and if he's involved, you know the rest of us are in it

with him. We went deep, even had some cleaning up to do back home."

Misha blushed. "I must say, you guys are all so very close."

Des grinned. "Oh, you have no idea," she said playfully, and I flicked her before she could cause more trouble.

“Down,” I scolded her.

"What?" Des asked, not so much defensive as insistent, crossing her arms and daring me to challenge her.

"Nothing. We're out here to celebrate," I told her before Des and I could get into a lovers' spat; I wanted to make it clear why we were here tonight. "Charlotte just got her trial ability." I grinned, like the proud partner I was.

Misha had the appropriate response as she squealed, clapping her hands before she pounced on Charlotte. "No way, that's a huge deal! I'm so excited for you. Which one?"

"Boundless Mana," Charlotte answered quickly, and Misha's excitement only grew.

"But that's far too difficult for a healer," she said, pulling Charlotte back to look her in the face. "Unless you've reclassed on me?"

"I would never," Charlotte said quickly. "I'm Ken's healer through and through. He'll have to fight me to get rid of me, and even then, I think it's either me or death as his only options." I was slightly uncomfortable with how reasonable all of them seemed to find that statement, but I also knew it was true.

"Of those two, I would always choose you." I hugged my lovable druid.

Des rolled her eyes at me as if disappointed. "Death is rather unfortunate."

"Way to take the romance out of it, Des," I said, not giving up so easily, which only seemed to encourage the demonic mage further.

Des leaned into Misha and whispered, "See that? All that and more can be yours for the small, small price of—" She snapped her mouth shut when she noticed my scowl. "Well, think about it," she said quickly, then shot me a beaming smile before turning to pointedly check Misha out head to toe with a lascivious grin.

Misha was very attractive, with an athletic body and an alien cuteness to her. I blamed the ears. Yet I knew there was a deep sexual hunger underneath it all.

She didn't have to say anything more. I knew what was going through her mind. More people would, of course, speed up our stat situation. Des and I

had a silent conversation through looks alone, a subtle tugging of wills in which I simply refused to lose out of sheer stubbornness.

Des eventually held her hands up before leaning over conspiratorially to Misha. "We'll try again later. Ken recently got some new incubus-related skills, and for now, we'll just have to agree to disagree on how they should best be put to use."

Those words caused Misha's eyes to shift to me, excitement plain on her face.

"Des is a bit of a troublemaker, isn't she?" I said, forcing a small chuckle. I didn't want to give the woman false hope, not when my time was already split well enough.

"Well, it's good that you guys have been helping with the threadspawn issue. I'm sure we should all breathe easier for that," Misha offered.

"I wish it were that simple," I replied.

"Oh, I'm sure," Misha said quickly. "But you've done so well with so many other challenges. I doubt this will be any different."

"I appreciate your confidence." I took a quick bow. "But we're not here to talk about me." I pointedly looked at Des. "We're here to celebrate Charlotte."

"Oh yes! The healer who went and got Boundless Mana," Misha emphasized. "How very exciting. How did you manage it?" She turned her focus on Charlotte, who beamed, ducked her head, and launched into a detailed retelling of her training with Grandpa, while sparing a few of the racier details of the adventure.

"That was the training with the old man?" Misha leaned forward, chin on her palms, nodding excitedly with every detail. The rest of us had heard this story a few times ourselves, but no one was rude enough to interrupt Charlotte's clear excitement. It brought me great joy to see her beaming smile as she proudly recounted every bit of it.

"To Charlotte," I said, raising my glass, as much of our class had finally joined us.

"To Charlotte!" Everybody cheered in response, particularly Harley, who slid up next to me suspiciously, looking like a used car salesman angling for a sale.

"What do you want?" I asked the pink-haired bard. She was a former member of our group, even if she’d moved on to another party. I would help her if I could—and if it wasn’t just nonsense.

Harley put a hand on her chest. "What makes you think I want something?"

“I know you.” I paused and kept staring.

Harley let out a long, put-upon sigh and shook her head, making the bell she still had tied in her hair jingle. "Fine, maybe I want something. Is that the worst thing in the world?"

"No. But it wouldn't hurt you to admit it from the start. Otherwise, it just comes off as sketchy."

"Fine, fine." Harley waved a hand. "What I really want… no, what I need," she emphasized, "is for you to help me find the trial for the White Quail."

"And what do I get out of it?" I asked, leaning back and crossing my arms. It would be bad to give in to Harley so easily. I needed to make her work for it at least a little.

"My eternal gratitude. Is that not enough?" She made her eyes extra wide as she stared up at me. I waited, staring back until her eyes narrowed instead. "But because I know your time is very important, I'll give you at least some help when it comes to Des's latest plan."

That had my full attention. "Des's latest plan?"

"See? You didn't know about that one, now did you? I mean, you've got new sex skills, right?" Harley asked.

I squinted at her. My new skill really wasn't something that should have been talked about outside my party. Then again, Harley had once been a member of the party and perhaps could be trusted with this information. I paused. Trust and Harley was a strange combination to reconcile. She had a considerable streak of being terrible with secrets.

"Fine, I'll promise to assist you," I said after a moment of thought.

"Great. Well, since you're the kind of person who keeps his word, I suppose I can give you my half of the deal right now," she told me, seemingly in a rush to get it off her chest. She likely wanted to lock the deal in before I could reconsider.

"You see," she began, "I knew you had new sex skills because Des seems half ready to make Seventy-Four Wives a reality. You lucky dog, you," Harley said, nudging me in the side.

"How?" I said.

"Oh, I have no idea on that," Harley said in a hurry. "Do you think she'd trust me with that level of detail?"

That statement made me scowl further. What an empty bucket of bull. She had no real information.

"No take-backsies." Harley pointed a finger. "Just because I didn't have all the information, it doesn't mean I won't be able to get it in the future. I gave you what I have for now, and the deal is in place."

"That's fine," I said. I wasn't actually too mad at her. To be honest, I would have helped her regardless. Still, I couldn't let Harley get away with this entirely for free.

"Harley," I said, in mock exasperation. "Finding the trial might be harder than you think. Not to mention you'll have to go through the dungeon for it."

"Not if you teleport me there." She grinned and winked. Any attempt to make her understand how I felt on this topic was completely and utterly defeated by her enthusiasm.

"Well, I'm not sure Crimson would agree with you," I said, and Harley froze.

"You wouldn't." She slapped the table, her mouth falling open. Crimson really was her biggest weakness. Mostly because our teacher loved to torment the otherwise lazy bard.

"Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. Are you prepared to find out?" I asked.

Harley narrowed her eyes and searched my face with a level of scrutiny that made me uncomfortable. "Fine," she spat, after a long moment of consideration, and got up before we could say more.

"And you owe me. Not the other way around!" I shouted after her as she darted away and returned to the group.

Des had been watching the interaction closely. "Just give me the word, and I can make Harley disappear," she said, and I chuckled, shaking my head.

"You won't believe it, Des," I told her. "Harley says you have some master plan to recreate Penny's erotic fantasy?" I asked, watching Des closely.

The way she paused mid-bite and cautiously looked at me from the corner of her eye told me everything I needed to know.

"Damn it, Des." I put my drink down.

"What, can you blame me?" She held her hands up.

"Yes. That would be exactly what I’m doing right now," I deadpanned.

"Well, that wasn't the answer I was expecting. You're supposed to say ‘no’, for the record. Then you would talk about how beautiful I am, and how you'd never blame me. Then hopefully, you’d ruin me and leave me waddling for a week." She flipped her hair. "But I suppose we're past that now." She drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "You think I could fix this with an orgy? I bet I could fix this with an orgy," she said to herself, nibbling on her thumb and clearly losing herself in whatever thoughts were accompanying that concept.

"No, Des, you can't fix it with an orgy," I told her, bringing her back to the moment.

She squinted and tilted her head, as if asking whether I was sure that was my final answer.

"No," I scolded, wagging a finger at her. She looked at me with big, wide eyes that I refused to stare into. "Now we're done with this bit. Can we get back to celebrating Charlotte?"

"To Charlotte." Des grinned and lifted her drink. "The best healer there ever was," she added, making Charlotte blush furiously into her drink.

"Thank you," Charlotte said quickly. "I couldn't begin to do this without the rest of my party."

"Hear, hear," Des cheered as she beamed and got the whole class drinking again, even Helen—whose eyes tracked me as I moved.

I shook my head at Des’ antics, but the giant smile on Charlotte's face made the moment worth it. "You get some props for that," I told Des, who only pumped a fist in the air. "But no seventy-four wives."

"Just a few more," she asked, pinching her fingers together, her gaze shifting to Misha. "Even if you don't want to go all the way, I do think it'd be good if you at least brought her along to level. Her pod, or whatever they're called, has already left Star City, and she's kind of isolated. Just give her the chance. Let us be her pod."

I stared at Des, and she batted her lashes. I stared harder, and they just continued to flutter. Des was very hard to say no to. "Fine, I suppose if she's staying here, it would be rude of me not to help her out some."

"Yes, exactly that." Des latched onto my words. I tried to glare at her, but she tucked her arms behind her back and swayed from side to side until I relented with a sigh.

"One of these days, it's not going to be so easy for you to get out of trouble," I told her.

"Sure," she said, not sounding convinced. Des was incredibly attractive, and I loved her enough that I wanted to spoil her rotten. The problem was she had started to enjoy getting her way a bit too much.

"Do me a favor and let's focus on Charlotte for the rest of the night," I asked, and her eyes went wide.

"For the whole night?" Her tone was laced with sultry surprise.

I facepalmed. "Head out of the gutter," I said quickly, only to hear her laughing as she dodged away, leaving me hoping to make someone else question their life choices. Though, while I was being dramatic, I wouldn't trade any of them for the world.

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"Really?" Misha said later that night, wide-eyed, after I floated the idea that she could join us on a leveling excursion.

"Of course," I said quickly. "We would be absolutely thrilled to have you join us. Besides, several of my party are taking things slower right now." She squinted slightly at that wording. "Nothing bad. They are just working through all their trial abilities before we continue to level."

Misha nodded. "That makes sense. After all, trial abilities are incredibly valuable and only get harder the longer you take."

"I knew you'd understand," I said.

She smiled back, flushing slightly, her fin-like ears doing that cute flapping that seemed to convey all manner of emotion.

"But you already have your trial ability," she said, "so I suppose the number of you left to work with is smaller than usual."

I hummed in agreement. "Charlotte's back on board. I'm unsure if the elves will have time for anything. They're trying to grow, but like so many things, they have too much occupying their attention. One of them is an empress," I told her.

"I can imagine it being incredibly difficult for her to find time for something like leveling."

"You'd be surprised," I said. "It's hard to rule a race without sufficient strength backing you. My understanding is it's pretty much impossible to keep everyone's respect if you can't prove yourself as an adventurer."

"Wouldn't know much about that." Misha shrugged. "My people aren't very hierarchical like that." She paused, tilting her head. "Though I suppose

others would see it differently, given the de facto leader of our people is simply the strongest." She considered her words again. "Well, maybe it's more accurate to say my people have chosen not to have leadership, and it's only natural for other races to place respect on our strongest individual."

"We can go with that." I chuckled. "It doesn't particularly matter to me how it works, just that it does."

"I think many people would agree with that sentiment," she acknowledged.

"Including yourself?" I asked.

"Very much so. What's anything worth if it doesn't work?" she said. "So, when are we going to go level, then?" she asked.

"Tomorrow?" I suggested.

Misha's eyes widened once more. "I suppose you aren't the type to put things off, are you?"

"No. In fact, I'm the type who wants to get things done as quickly as possible," I told her.

Misha gave me a sharp nod of acknowledgment. "Tomorrow, then. I'll be at your place in, say, twelve hours." She said the last part with a touch of hesitation.

"Okay," I said, giving it a moment of thought. We still operated off a twenty-four-hour clock on our CIDs, but she'd needed something a little more relative. "That works."

She smiled, bounded up to me, and pecked me on the cheek before blushing and darting away. I turned to find Des in her place, wearing far too wide a grin.

"Trouble," I said, wagging a finger at her.

"She'll be a wonderful addition," Des replied without an ounce of guilt.

"Okay. Tomorrow," I said. "You're up bright and early, and we're taking her leveling."

"Oh yes, we should definitely try out the goods first." Des nodded.

"That isn't—" I started and stopped. "You know that isn't what I mean."

"But it got you thinking," Des countered, and I avoided her gaze. She knew she was right, even if I was completely unwilling to admit those words out loud.

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Chapter 10

It hadn't been nearly the twelve hours we'd committed to before Ambrosia knocked on my door. "Sir, there is a whalewyrn here to see you," the gothic angel said, her arms folded in front of her.

I blinked, then nodded, jumping out of bed as my brain registered the words belatedly and threw on my clothes. "I'll be right out!" I shouted, checking my CID and seeing it truly wasn't yet time. I doubted that mattered to the eager Misha waiting outside. I hurried out, my pants nearly falling off in my rush, only to find Crimson leaning back on the couch, talking with Misha casually while sipping coffee.

"Oh, there you are, Ken," Crimson said, setting her coffee down with a small clack on the table.

"You say it like I'm interrupting something." I straightened my clothes, suddenly feeling like I shouldn’t have been in a rush.

Crimson looked at me. “Maybe you are," she challenged, cocking an eyebrow with a massive smirk.

"Alright, well, then I'll just head back," I said, hooking a thumb over my shoulder and stepping backward.

"Cut it out and come here," Crimson said, cracking a grin and patting the couch seat next to her.

"Well, if I have your invitation, then." I bowed exaggeratedly and stepped forward.

Crimson was all pouts, and I had to admit I enjoyed getting the better of her in situations like this. "Misha was just telling me all sorts of information

about her people. They're very interesting."

"What questions were interesting?" Misha said hurriedly, a little grin slipping onto her face as she tried and failed not to steal glances at me.

"There are a lot of aspects of whalewyrn I hadn't thought about," Crimson said. "Your people don't have much in the way of governance."

I tilted my head at that, then decided I was invested enough in the answer to sit down. "Well, now you've got my attention. You must have someone who makes the laws and rules. Otherwise, it would be complete anarchy."

Misha shrugged. "I guess it might be complete anarchy, then, because even now, there are fewer rules and more general understanding."

"But you have to have organized living… cities, towns?" I pressed. There would always be laws if there was a society.

"Nope," Misha said. "Besides, the dungeon provides most things we need to survive."

I frowned. "You have a homeworld, though, correct?"

"We do, but it's almost entirely water," she explained. "Until the dungeon, there was no way we could make much in the way of structures. To get to the ocean floor would crush most materials—well, until we were able to get things from the dungeon."

"You've built cities now?" I asked, and she waffled a hand.

"Some wealthy adventurers more or less did it, to mimic the other races in the dungeon more than out of any real desire for a city. And even then, surviving at the depths required to build anything substantial means you need to be an adventurer to survive. So really, it's just a few exclusive structures on the bottom of the ocean."

I leaned back, blinking, thinking about that setup. Of course, if there weren't cities, the need to organize laws would be far lower. But it almost made me uncomfortable to consider that level of anarchy.

"So the whole pod structure really is how whalewyrn survived on your homeworld," I said, genuinely just excited to talk with her about it.

"And now we're here." She gestured around, indicating Star City. "A few have found places to settle down, but I don't think many whalewyrn care much for it. After all, why would we want to stay put here when there are much better things we could be doing with our time?"

"Huh," I said, considering her words and understanding where she was coming from far better now. "So your interest in joining us is quite the oddity," I said, only for Crimson to glare at me.

"'Oddity' is probably not the word Ken meant to use," Crimson stated.

I opened my mouth to correct myself before snapping it shut. Sometimes an apology was just easier. "Crimson's right. I meant no offense."

"Oh, none taken," Misha said in a hurry. "I am an oddball amongst my people. I mentioned it previously," she said, with a blush. I recalled that her people weren't very sexually active, save for a few times a year at most, and it sounded like she'd found herself in a far different position as a result, having trouble connecting with the males of her species romantically.

"Right," I said, remembering what she'd told me before.

"Yes… which is why I think it'd be wonderful for her to spend some time with your party, Ken," Crimson told me with a knowing look, leaning her head down to peer at me through her lashes.

"Of course we'd be happy to have her, and I think the whole reason she's here, Crimson, is because I invited her to go leveling with us." I brought Crimson up to speed.

"Oh, well, in that case, don't let me hold you up." Crimson waved us both away, a giant smile plastered on her face, as if she'd done her good deed for the day.

"Come on, before Crimson changes her mind," I said.

Only for Crimson to shout, "I heard that!"

I met Crimson's gaze. "You were supposed to."

Crimson let out a heavy, put-upon sigh. "What happened to my adorable Ken, who did what I said without arguing? Once upon a time."

"He realized you're actually a bit of a pushover," I answered, enjoying the look Crimson gave me in return. I didn't dare give her another win and actually take it back, so instead, I grabbed Misha's hand as if we were making an escape, causing the whalewyrn to laugh, her ears flapping behind her.

"Your party is so much fun," she said, and I shook my head. "I'm happy you think so, but Des is still asleep, and trying to wake her up right now would be disastrous for all of us." Misha's eyes went wide, and I grinned. "Nothing really worse than an angry Des. We're bringing her, Charlotte, myself”—I tapped my chin—"and perhaps Penny for what comes next."

"Then I'd prefer Des be in a better mood." Misha gave that very serious consideration. "Of course, the last thing I'd want to do is upset Des."

"Oh, no, it's fine. You can upset her all you want. Come, maybe while we're waiting we can get some training in, too," I offered.

The whalewyrn glanced at me curiously at the offer, as if not entirely sure what that meant, and I couldn't help but wonder what she normally did for training.

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I sat down on the workout bench, watching Misha work with fascination. Her thin body was clearly used to hard work, as shown by the seriousness she brought to every movement, but she also had the strength and energy to perform each with delicate ease.

"Am I doing this right?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder while doing overhead presses.

"Perfectly," I said, shaking my head.

"Is that bad?" she asked, turning to regard me.

"No, it's fine," I said, though it came out more like a question than I'd intended. She paused, uncertainty clouding her features, before I clapped my hands. "Alright, we're going to switch it up and do a combo exercise."

"These are all very fun," she said with genuine excitement that I knew Des would be baffled if she had heard.

"Well, I'm glad you can enjoy exercising. Our group does quite a bit of it," I told her.

Misha flexed for a moment. Though she didn't look it, she was plenty strong. Then again, she was an adventurer above level fifty.

"We're going to do a squat, then a deadlift," I told her.

"So we're mixing the two?" she asked, picking up the five-hundred-pound bar with ease.

"Yes, though perhaps we'll have to move you to one of the gravity platforms if you're going to get any actual workout out of this. You said you haven't done any lifting before?" I pressed.

"Nope," she said, placing the bar back down. "But exercise is important to any whalewyrn. Though admittedly most of that is just swimming, or swimming in the depths under pressure. The orkai have even made a few chambers to help mimic deep-sea conditions."

"Well, whatever you're doing, it's certainly working. When you said you hadn't done much exercise, I was thinking we'd have to do a lot more to catch you up to the rest of the party."

My words must have summoned my beautiful almost succubus, because Des came into the gym, blinking bleary eyes and wearing some barely-there nightgown, without anything on underneath.

"Huh?" Des asked, yawning, looking around for the guest. Meanwhile, Misha's eyes were fixed on Des's body with wide-eyed attention.

Des blinked, spotted Misha, and grinned. "We've got a guest?"

"Misha is a temporary party member, and we should treat her as such," I said.

Misha was all blushes, before pulling herself together, realizing we were both watching her, swallowing, and facing us with a small amount of shame still dusting her cheeks. "I didn't realize you were so open with your dress code."

"The less the better, really," Des told her. "If you'd like, you can take a look through my closet."

"I don't think that's necessary," I said, a touch too sharply even to my own ears. "She's here to be an adventurer, not pick up a modeling gig."

Though, by the way the whalewyrn's eyes tracked Des's clothing, I was almost certain the two of them would be swapping outfits before the end of the day.

"Right, right," Des said, distracted. "We'll just focus on leveling for today," she said, and even though I barely believed her, I was more than happy to accept it.

"Well, Des is going to get dressed," I said pointedly, looking at the demonic mage who tapped at her CID. Thankfully, her usual adventuring gear appeared on her form, and she'd removed the latency on her outfit changes, so she wasn't distractingly nude for a moment every time.

Des pouted at the small sigh of relief I gave. "Such a dungeon-head," she said, turning to Misha. "When he's got diving on his mind, he doesn't see the most important bits right in front of him." Des pinched her fingers together in emphasis, and Misha nodded along with her like it was the most common-sense statement she'd ever heard. "It's so much easier when everyone understands," Des said, turning to Misha.

"Stop corrupting her," I hissed.

"Corruption would imply she wasn't already there to begin with," Des said with a pointed look, daring me to refute the statement. Which, of course, was quite hard, given everything else the whalewyrn had told me about her people.

"Dungeon, now," I said and ripped open a portal before Des could get up to any more nonsense.

"I love it when he gets bossy," Des said and bit her lip so hard I worried it might bleed.

Misha looked at her, then at me, before coming to some decision with a quick bow. "Yes, I can imagine all the trouble she causes you. Thankfully, she has far more of your attention than I think she understands."

I squinted at that but let it be. I had a portal open and was ready to move on to farming, rather than the near-constant banter Des seemed more than capable of pulling me into.

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It took a little bit after that to pull the rest of the group into the dungeon, but by getting my feet in there, it hurried everyone up.

"Not just to put you through the wringer," Des said, hand on hip, "but would you do us a favor and show us what you can do?" She watched Misha for her reaction.

"Oh, yeah, of course." Misha straightened up, eyes fixed ahead at the boss in front of us. "We're farming, though, right?"

"Yes." I nodded toward the boss ahead. "We don't actually kill that. We just need to clear as many adds as it summons."

"Do you want them crowd-controlled, or—" She paused, suddenly uncertain of her role in it all.

"You can kill the adds yourself, right?" I asked.

"Of course." She puffed herself up, unwilling to admit defeat just yet.

"Then I'll kick us off," Des said and threw a bolt of green fire that lanced the air before splashing on the octopus-like boss, which gurgled as the dozens of eggs around it began to wiggle and hatch, more pumping out of tubes on the side of its head.

Misha braced herself as the adds began swarming our group. I'd sparred with her in the past, so I understood a little of how she fought. She darted forward, her fist slamming into the first add and turning it to stone, before pivoting to another, stomping, and creating slick ground that did little for the floating octopuses. She frowned, twisted, and dropped an axe kick on the one she'd petrified, shattering it, then spun and sent shards of stone flying in every direction.

"Not looking great." Des clicked her tongue beside me.

I'd known incorporating her into a party was going to be, at the very least, different. The whalewyrn fought with a very different party structure than us. Rather than tanks, damage dealers, and healers, they had an anchor and pillars. The anchor was one or two members who swung a literal anchor at high speeds, creating a constant area of heavy AoE damage while the rest of the party fought within the swinging anchor's reach. They either redirected the anchor for sharp, powerful attacks as they hit the chain and changed its direction or acted to keep opponents from reaching the anchor itself. This meant Misha's actual strengths leaned toward crowd control, with perhaps a touch of self-sustainability.

"Well, we shouldn't leave her entirely to her own devices," I said to Des, stepping forward and activating [Sprint]. I rushed to Misha’s side, my blade finding two of the adds and cleaving them both before I pivoted on one foot and put another blade between Misha and one of the spinning octopi trying to come up behind her.

"Thanks," she said, blushing, and her ears drooped low in a way that reminded me of a sad dog.

"It wasn't going to work the first time," I said, putting my back to hers. "Your party fought very differently than ours. Perhaps what I'm looking for most isn't perfection on this first run but the intent to improve."

That statement lit a fire in her eyes.

"You already have the support, so what you need is perhaps a little more damage," I told her.

She spun like a top, sending shards of earth in every direction, drawing the attention of all the adds floating about.

"Careful!" Penny shouted as a wave of frost poured over us, pulling the aggro back onto her as she stepped back and kited the adds still pouring from the boss. Misha shifted, stomping her feet as a pillar of stone jutted into the pack, exploding and knocking a few high into the air, then spun in a roundhouse that caught and kicked several large stones right into the ones knocked airborne. It exploded, and she landed back on her feet with a smile.

"Better," Des encouraged. "Perhaps we'll need to get you a few new skills!" she shouted around cupped hands.

"I promise I'm worth it." Misha flexed, then pivoted to go after more of the monsters. Rather than her previous attempts to lock them down, she instead used every ability to simply put out as much damage as possible.

I did my best to split my attention between watching her and keeping my head up for the rest of the fight, lest a moment of inattention cost the party. While this was a place for us to grind experience, it was still a boss fight well above our level.

Des was paying close attention, too. I turned to shoot her a wink of encouragement.

"See? She's already doing much better," I offered.

"I never doubted her for a second!" Des shouted, raising her hand and casting a field of falling green fire, small meteors raining down on the adds, damaging and setting them alight.

Misha, having seen Des's attack, shifted to her own. She spun with a kick that sliced the air, only for her whale tail to come up behind her to send another slicing strike. She moved with kicks followed by tail hits that cleaved through the group Penny had trailing after her. It was simple but highly effective as she quickly cut through the burning mobs.

"Careful, Des, I think you have some competition," I said, much to the chagrin of the demonic mage, sparking a friendly feud as it became readily apparent both of them were now going to do their absolute damnedest to stay ahead of the other.

"Could be worse," Charlotte said, following my attention.

I grinned in turn. "Oh, I think it's perfectly fine. After all, Des has needed some more competition in her life, if you ask me. She's been getting away with too much as it is right now."

"Take that back!" Des shouted, punctuating it with a burst of green flames.

"You're going to have to make me!" I shouted back.

Misha just laughed, her head thrown back—perhaps the most joyful expression I'd seen out of her to date.

"What has you so happy?" I asked.

"You are all so incredibly kind to each other. This is a much better party than my people; they are all so stiff." Then, with a little more consideration, she added, "Though I am getting a bit dizzy," she admitted, from her rapid spinning kicks.

"You're welcome to stop!" Des shouted, though it was clearly more taunt than actual advice.

"And potentially lose?" Misha gasped. "I think not. After all, you may have started as a human, but you're a demon now. They always say you

can't trust a demon."

"Well then, can you trust Ken?" Des shot back, before a wave of darkness swept through the monsters, killing several already low from our earlier efforts. Des's words caused Misha to pause slightly and lose out on those particular kills.

"Don't mess each other up," I warned both of them. "You're welcome to bicker over who's better, but if you cause the other to make a mistake and get hurt, I will not be kind."

"Temporary truce?" Des offered. "I'd prefer an alliance, if you know what I mean. You and me, against Ken."

"Oh, that I could get behind." Misha let out a throaty laugh.

"Veto!" I shouted.

"You can't veto an alliance amongst the harem," Des shot back.

I passed by, switching between groups of adds, and I couldn't help but see the giant smile on Misha's face. Des had already counted her among our group. To be honest, I was warming up to the idea. She was beautiful and clearly talented in the dungeon, but I also knew a good portion of Des's motivation involved her ability to grow all our stats to a higher level. I wanted to be careful and make sure there was more to it than simply using Misha as an incubator for our party's stats.

"Misha, when we're done here for the day, why don't you come with me? We'll go back to Earth, and I'll take you out somewhere to eat," I offered.

"All of us?" Des asked, perking up at the mention of food.

"No, you've been bad," I said playfully, and Des gasped.

"He withholds food. Misha, do you see that? This is why we have to gang up on him, or he'll starve us into compliance," Des intoned.

"Des, that sounds absolutely horrible. You can't say things like that out loud," I sputtered. I only needed to check back over my shoulder to see the devilish grin on her face.

"I believe she was joking," Misha said. "Either way, we're leaving her behind tonight, that's for certain."

"No, I'll be good, I swear!" Des shouted.

"She won't be," I said conspiratorially to Misha as I flowed behind the whalewyrn and cut down more monsters.

"No, I will be. Misha, you believe me, right? We have an alliance against Ken," she hissed, not nearly as quietly as she might have thought.

Misha hummed and rubbed her chin in thought. "This puts me in quite the predicament. I do want to spend some time alone with Ken, but it's not a good start to betray a fellow harem sister."

"You can betray Des this once," Charlotte said, causing Des to gasp and clutch at her chest.

"What have I done to earn such animosity?" she asked dramatically.

“Well, it will be hard for Ken to focus on Misha with you there,” Penny added in her two cents.

"She's being quite dramatic about this," Misha observed.

"Don't consider it a betrayal," I said, pausing for the right word. "Consider it a... learning experience for her."

Misha nodded slowly and turned to Des with a weak smile. "Unfortunately, it seems Ken is asking me to punish you. I can't be too mad about that."

"Not fair," Des said, crossing her arms and pausing her attacks for a second, at least until I turned and gave her a sharp glare.

"You're not actually that upset, are you?" I pressed, staring at her hands that weren’t filled with magic.

"No," she said quickly, lest there be any misconceptions, and began attacking again. "That's what you have to watch out for, Misha. You can play around all you want, but the second you disrupt the dive, our man gets downright frosty," Des told her.

"As much as I like giving Des crap, she's absolutely right," I said. "The second you mess with the dive, I'm bound to be very unhappy about it, because when we're in here, we need to be serious. Much of this can be a matter of life and death, even if we've done this a dozen times."

So I reminded Des, who responded with a quick salute, and I felt comfortable that she knew she'd touched the line and would back off. I loved Des, but she was absolutely a bundle of trouble. Perhaps she'd picked up more than just skills when she transformed herself into a demon. I knew there were times I'd felt my own behavior, particularly my libido, altered. Perhaps she had something like that herself, whether she was aware of it or not. But that was a question for another time.

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Chapter 11

"Wow," Misha said, twirling in her dress as she stepped out of the portal in awe of the city beyond. Her face was lit up under the evening sun. The blue hair that flowed down her back rippled with the light as if it were made of ocean waves, which only highlighted just how bright blue her eyes were as they turned to me, the awe still in them, though focused on me.

"It gets better," I said, grabbing her hand and pulling her along. I'd dressed for the date in a button-down shirt and slacks.

Meanwhile, it seemed Des and Charlotte had kidnapped Misha and seen fit to get her ready. She wore a pair of sheer leggings, which was good, because otherwise her dress would have been scandalously short, not to mention her tail threatened to lift the skirt too high when it moved. Des had stuffed her into a little black number I recognized well enough to make me squint at what she was trying to accomplish.

"Do I look good?" Misha asked, doing a small twirl for me.

"You look fantastic." I thought they might have done a little too good a job, but perhaps the canvas was just stunning from the start.

Her ears fluttered, her tail swished behind her, and it wasn't long before more people paused to pay attention. There'd already been some, simply because she looked so good in the dress, but after her tail moved, she got far more attention. Noticing the looks, she paused, and her tail went still.

"Don't you dare feel self-conscious about a thing," I said, offering my arm.

"Right, yes, I won't feel self-conscious," she assured me, running her hands down her dress and squaring her shoulders. "Okay. So where are we going?" she asked, excitement filling her face as she spun around, looking up at the towering buildings.

Given the way her eyes traced the skyline, I had a feeling I'd picked a good place for our first date.

I held my arm out for her. "We can just walk for now. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It really is. Though, how do you get anywhere?" she asked, with wide, serious eyes, taking in just how large the city was. I suppose for someone who had no cities on her world and had only seen the dungeon cities, this was on an entirely different level.

I stifled a chuckle. "We'll end up walking a fair bit."

"I imagined so. All of this is beyond me," she said. The streets were crowded, and as we moved, fewer people were staring at her. Instead, I got a fair few moments of attention. They recognized me—then again, I'd been on TV plenty.

"People are staring at you," she said.

"Yeah, that's going to take some getting used to," I admitted.

"They should. You are Ken Nagato. A very big deal." Her tail smacked the ground hard enough that the concrete cracked.

"Not so sure I'm worth that kind of reception, but I'll take what I can get. Right now, they're paying attention to me. I think there was a recent news segment on me." Bellaire always seemed to want some sort of video done.

"News?" she asked, with a cute tilt of her head.

"Maybe we should get you a little more exposure than I'd planned." I rubbed my chin, wondering how best to show Earth to someone who didn't even have cities.

"As long as it's with you, I don't particularly care what we end up doing," she stated plainly.

"Well, then, how about this?" I pointed ahead to a mall. "I planned a little time before we got to the restaurant. What better way to teach you about Earth than rampant consumerism?"

She tilted her head in confusion, and I shook mine. That wasn't a good one.

"A joke. Perhaps you'll understand a little later."

"I understood the words you said, just not why it was so funny."

When she mentioned understanding the words, I turned to her with a frown. "People here aren't speaking a universal language. Are you certain you're okay?"

"Well then, just don't lose me." She clung tightly to my arm. "Otherwise, I'm going to get lost in this big world with people I don’t understand."

"If you did, someone from the UG would most certainly be contacted, and as soon as they realized who you were, someone would find you and help you back to my family," I told her, not wanting her to feel entirely tied to me.

"Reassuring, but unnecessary. You won't lose me," she said the last with a certain conviction, as if there was no other possible answer.

"Of course not. I'm just trying to reassure you, in case that was a fear of yours."

"No fear," she reassured me with a smile but held on tightly anyway.

We walked past a bar replaying some late-night comedian; given how much everyone was laughing, it must be a good bit.

Misha paused at the window and stared inside. "That looks fun.”

“They're all watching a video of someone making jokes," I explained. "If you want, we could watch it ourselves later, though you might not have the context for some of the jokes." I could tell she was hooked; simply the sight of so many people enjoying something was proof enough that it must be worth looking at. While our societies might differ, it seemed some things transcended race well enough.

"We're going to go up there," I told her, pointing to a building whose front was made entirely of glass with a strange opening at the top that made it look a bit like a bottle opener.

"What's up there?" she asked.

"The floor up there is made of glass. It's a restaurant, and from there, you have a view of the whole city." I panned my hand out across the city.

Misha's eyes went wide with excitement, understanding well enough what that would mean. "Yes, I want to go up there." Her ears flapped.

"Okay." I smiled at her enthusiasm. "I promise you, you won't regret it."

"Oh yes, I think it's safe to say there's little chance of this night ending in regret," she said, then quickly shot a glance out of the corner of her eye to check my reaction. “But I may not know everything I am supposed to do.” She looked over at me.

“That’s easy. Just ask for ‘what does the chef recommend’ if you are unsure,” I told her with a smile.

She practiced the English phrase a few times as we walked.

"Come." I held up my arm again, and she latched on without needing any encouragement, happily pulling me along so we could get there sooner. It seemed my plan to bring her to the mall wasn't going to happen after all, not that I was disappointed. We could always explore more of the city afterward; in fact, it might even be more fun that way.

We reached the building's lobby, where men in suits with earpieces checked those coming and going. I assumed most of the building was offices. One of them immediately pegged us as customers and stepped over.

"Could I see your reservation?" he asked, and I pulled out my CID.

"Under Nagato," I told him. The earpiece man's eyes went wide enough that I could see them around his sunglasses as he checked my CID to confirm.

"Right this way, Mr. Nagato. It is a pleasure to have you here. The restaurant insisted I let them know the second you arrived." He spoke in a professional, hurried manner.

"They didn't need to make a big deal of it," I said, though his attention shifted to the woman beside me. I was certain he'd realized she wasn't human when his eyes went wider than when he'd realized who I was, or rather, when he realized what Misha was.

"And your guest's name?" he asked politely. "The restaurant would love to make sure any and all requests you might have can be fulfilled. Apologies for my ignorance, but are there any dietary needs or restrictions?"

I gestured for Misha to answer that herself after a quick translation. "I’m Misha. I don't think so," she said, turning to me for assistance. "This is my first time eating on Earth." I translated that for her.

"We're honored that we're your first stop." The man walked us to the elevator and held it open, tapping an RFID card against a fob and hitting the button for floor sixty-eight. "I hope you both have a wonderful evening," he said. As the doors slid closed, I saw him press a button on the cord from his ear, rapidly talking into it.

"He was nice," Misha said.

"I think he was a little overwhelmed." I grinned, and she just stood, bobbing from side to side as elevator music played, and we climbed up, up,

up. The first few floors were wrapped in concrete, so there wasn’t much to do until we came out of that to a glass tube that let us see out.

We rose along the side of the structure, watching the city as we climbed high above it. Misha's face was pressed against the glass in an instant, taking a deep breath, her eyes sparkling as she looked out.

"There are so many people." She gasped, pointing down. "Look! It's like an ant hive spilling over. How does one world have so many people? This puts Star City to shame many times over."

"This is just one city, Misha." I put a hand on her shoulder. "The world has many such cities."

Her eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open. I was fairly certain I'd broken her. It was only the ding of the elevator and the doors sliding open that roused her enough to look away, which was good, given we were about to receive quite the reception.

"Mr. Nagato." A thin, older man raised his arms and greeted me like an old friend. "If we had known you were bringing someone for their first meal on Earth, we would have had someone meet you downstairs, perhaps given you a tour of the area. How has the city been treating you?" he asked Misha and of course I translated.

"So far it's been nice, though we haven't spent that much time in it yet. I'm excited to see more later, though." She shrugged in full honesty.

"You must let us give you some recommendations." He looked at me as if I might object.

"Oh, please, recommendations are welcome," I reassured him.

"Good, good. Then please follow me to your table." He led us through, making several gestures to people as we passed, a small group falling in behind us. "Now, madame, sir," he said as chairs were pulled out for us, and Misha sat down with a smile that told me she was enjoying this novel experience, "before we begin, do we have a preference on napkin color?" A server stepped up with a tray of navy blue, white, and black napkins, all laid out in an immaculate display.

"Navy blue, I guess," I said. It was the most neutral color, and I didn't know the right answer. I turned to Misha to explain what was happening.

"What would the chef recommend?" Misha asked before I had a chance to say anything, and I had to work to cover a smile.

"I think the navy blue would go lovely on you, and match your date for this evening," the man said smoothly. I was honestly impressed with his

handling of the question.

"Perfect." Misha turned to me with a smile, proud she'd remembered to ask the chef.

"Well then, now that you're situated, we'd like to offer you a complimentary bottle of wine." Another assistant displayed the bottle to us, letting me read the label as if I'd know anything beyond the color. There wasn't wine made in the dungeon.

"Looks lovely," I said, and they opened it with a flourish that could only come from far too much practice, pouring me the barest glass. I hid my disappointment as he paused, clearly waiting for me to taste it. I took a sip, realizing that I had missed the subtle cue. "Wonderful," I said quickly. Everyone loved compliments.

"Fantastic," he said with a placid smile that made me realize I'd done something slightly incorrect, though I wasn't going to let that bother me. At least he poured me more wine.

As he was pouring, I realized that was probably supposed to be some sort of taste test. I really should learn how to do fancy dinners one day.

"Everyone here is so nice," Misha said once they'd walked away.

"Yes, well, I will say you're getting the best experience." I suddenly wondered if every other meal would be a letdown now.

Misha nodded in understanding. "Of course, with your strength, no one's going to be rude to you here." That wasn't quite what I meant, but it was close enough.

"Something like that," I said noncommittally, and she looked away, staring down through the glass at the whole city. "Better than the elevator?" I asked jokingly.

"It's easier to focus when the floor isn't moving." She nodded, causing her ears to flap, and her tail swished where it was tucked under her tail.

"I suppose it is." I laughed, only for her to look at me with a frown.

"What, am I wrong?" she asked.

"No, it's just not how most people would put it." I put my hand on the table.

"That's good. If I were most people, I think I'd be boring for you." She eyed my hand but restrained herself from making a move.

"I don't think that's one of my requirements. Besides, let's not talk about what we might or might not do otherwise and focus on the present." I slid my hand back.

"Yes, so what do we order?" she asked, picking up the menu and staring at it blankly.

"You can just order off the menu or ask what the chef recommends again. Or you could say, 'I'll have what he's having.'"

She slowly spoke the words in English under her breath, practicing them for a moment.

"Do you two know which you'll be ordering?" the man asked, and I double-checked the name. "Metamorphosis."

"Yes, that is our special for the season." He took my menu, then turned to Misha.

"I'll have what he's having," she stated with an abundance of pride and a slow drawl.

"It is best to have the same meal," he agreed. "It does enhance one's experience to be able to discuss it together."

Misha smiled and nodded, blinking at the man, likely unaware she couldn't understand him. Either way, he seemed perfectly content to go fetch us a meal.

The first course arrived even faster than I expected, two servers moving as if they'd been waiting just around the corner, placing several dishes I could only describe as small pillars in front of us. They certainly weren't anything that I'd ever had in a cupboard.

"Today we have a treat for you," he said, then launched into a string of words and phrases that meant absolutely nothing to me, introducing several morsels of food in English I didn't understand. Still, Misha clapped her hands together. "That sounds lovely," she said as he walked away.

"You couldn't understand him," I said, with an accusing squint.

"Doesn't mean I can't appreciate his excitement to serve us this." She gestured at the plate. "If I know nothing else, I know that someone excited to show off their food is going to give us good stuff." She chuckled, and I could only shake my head.

"Des has been a bad influence on you," I told her.

"She's been a fine influence," Misha refuted, picking up one of the morsels off the center pillar and nibbling on it after glancing around to see how others were eating.

"Eat how you want," I said, nodding at everyone around us. "A privilege of being big, bad adventurers is that we don't have to care what anyone else thinks."

I watched as she took a few bites, tilting her head and then devouring a bit more. You could only take so many bites when each pillar only had a single morsel no bigger than a quarter.

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Chapter 12

"So, what do you think?" I asked, leaning back with what I wished I could call a full stomach, though the portions had been tiny.

"It was lovely," she said, in the kind of way that made it sound like she was trying not to offend me.

"How about we finish these drinks and then go snag some ice cream? Pretty sure I spotted one of the popular chains down there," I offered.

"Oh yes, please," she said in a rush. "Humanity might have some flaws, but ice cream is not one of them." I squinted at her, wondering where she'd had it before, then closed my eyes in sudden understanding.

"Felin?" I asked.

She paused and gave me a guilty smile. "Yes. To be honest, it was pretty fantastic. Even the orkai don't make food that good." She nodded.

"Oh well, if we beat the orkai in this particular instance, then color me impressed." I tried to hold back my sarcasm. Orkai took very little pleasure in their food, other than its nutritional balance. I hadn’t much cared for it.

"Orkai food is nutritious," she said, unsure if that was a good or bad thing. “But this was great.”

"Well, regardless, I hope it’s even better where we are going.”

"It will be," Misha said, with more certainty than I felt. Strange how the tables had turned.

"Well then, Misha… I guess, in the last vestiges of our drinks, the best questions are the most awkward." I grinned, and she cocked an eyebrow.

"Careful now, don't oversell it," she teased.

"Well, what I wanted to ask is… why here? Why my party and me?" I pressed.

She paused, seeming to genuinely consider the question rather than snap out a rehearsed answer, which I appreciated.

"I don't know. Once I realized I didn't fit in with my people, I wanted to find a place I did belong. It sounds a little cheesy," she said, suddenly self-conscious, cradling her drink.

"How does that even begin to sound cheesy?" I said, much to her surprise, as she looked up, meeting my gaze.

"You don't think it's weird? Like I'm betraying whalewyrn? Or like I have some weird, I don't know, human fetish?" she said, finding her drink far too interesting.

"I mean, I didn't even consider the human-fetish thing until you just said it," I teased.

Her face turned bright red. "I told you I don't have one."

"Sometimes denials are just admissions in disguise," I said, earning a deep scowl.

"It's not like that. You don't think it's like that, do you?" she asked a second time, needing that to be the right answer.

Though now that she brought it up, I was curious. I mean… it wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing.

"Completely gone from my mind," I lied through my teeth, and she let out a relieved sigh. Though the idea of someone having a fetish for me was actually more flattering than I'd expected. I'd have to consider the implications of that at a later point.

"Well, good, as long as you don't think that," she repeated urgently. "Then yeah, it's just me trying to find a place to fit in, being an oddball amongst my people. Though the idea that you're an incubus without some of the normal demon baggage is admittedly interesting."

"I like to think I don't come with too much baggage. Besides the multiple relationships," I added the last.

"Oh yeah, not a big deal." Misha waved that aside, then paused. "Right, I didn't mean to make light of it. It’s just that I've already accepted that bit, and we don't need to dwell on it." It was admittedly awkward to discuss on a first date, but it kind of needed to be put out there from the beginning, even if it should have been obvious from her time with the rest of my party and me.

"You know what they say about making assumptions… they make an ass out of you, me, and quite possibly everyone involved," I offered.

"Well then, yeah, good, let's just get it out of the way," Misha said. "In fact, it's a little interesting"—she lifted a brow—"you know." She was not being specific at all.

"Please believe me, sometimes I really am that much of an idiot," I told her.

"Yeah, okay," Misha said, as if my being an idiot was explanation enough, which was frankly a tad insulting. "My differences from whalewyrn, that my libido completely outstrips the males of my race… it makes the fact that you have multiple partners and keep up with them interesting. It is a little exciting, having others. You know, in case we ever want to spice things up."

I lifted a brow. "I have no idea what you're referring to."

"I mean, Des hasn't said anything," she started to ramble, "but some of the things she's implied—"

I held up a hand. "There's a human phrase. We don't kiss and tell. It's a little weird, but humans really don't like talking about sex," I said to save her from saying all the particulars; I understood well enough at this point.

"Oh, that makes the innuendos make a little more sense. But you do have to talk about it sometimes," she said plainly. "If no one wants to talk about it directly, I suppose the next best thing is to pretend you're not talking about it by using other words."

"Yes," I said, after a moment of hesitation. "You're probably right on that, on all accounts."

Misha nodded with a small smile and a nod of acknowledgment that we had come to an understanding. "So, ice cream?" she asked, breaking the awkwardness.

"Yes, please." I put my napkin down quickly and rose to my feet.

Apparently, I had moved a touch too fast. One of the servers practically jumped. "Sir? Madame? Is everything alright? Won't you stay for dessert?"

"Quite alright, thank you. I think we'll walk off the meal while seeing the city," I told him.

"Of course, and we'll use the card on the reservation," he said, and I smiled, appreciating someone who knew when to make things easy.

"That would be greatly appreciated."

"Of course. And please do return when the mood strikes you again." The waiter fussed a bit longer as the manager rushed up.

Apparently, they were all watching us closely. "I hope everything is okay?" the manager asked in a hurry.

"Everything has been lovely," I promised the man, who was clearly finding our departure abrupt.

"If you say so," he said. " Please know that it was our absolute pleasure to host you, and anytime the fancy strikes you for another meal, please do come by. We will always make room for Ken Nagato." He said my name as if it held particular importance.

Misha took all the attention in stride. "It was lovely," she said. "Please thank you to the chef for us". She'd remembered some of the phrases I'd taught her beforehand, even if it was a little butchered.

The man puffed himself up and followed us all the way to the elevator with a beaming smile.

As the doors closed, Misha turned to me. "Would it have been rude if I told him we were getting ice cream somewhere else? Because he thinks he can provide us better desserts? The food was good, don't get me wrong," Misha said, then hesitated.

"But it wasn't actually that delicious," I added with a nod as we rode the elevator down, and she hesitated before nodding in agreement.

"You're not wrong. I think places like that are so ‘nice’" I air-quoted, "because they're an experience alongside a meal. You're sort of paying for that view as much as the food."

Misha's eyes lit with understanding. "That makes sense.”

“It's probably a fairly expensive spot, and the food is apparently high-brow, but between you and me, something absolutely filled with butter and sugar just tastes ten times better,” I tried to explain, but she still looked confused.

Misha cocked her head. "Like junk food?"

"That's food that's not very nutritious but sort of engineered to be almost addictive. So, yeah.” I guess it was the same thing from two different perspectives.

"Like drugs, in the form of food?" Misha asked.

I squinted at that particular phrasing, but she wasn't wrong. "Yes. But don't tell Crimson I agreed with you on that."

"Does Crimson like junk food?" she asked.

"No, she loves junk food. Thankfully, as adventurers, we're not at much risk of putting on extra pounds for it, but it's still not good for us," I told her.

"Like potato chips?" she asked.

"Crimson's chips are the quintessential example of junk food," I confirmed. I couldn't imagine a world where Crimson gave up potato chips.

"She said as much," Misha said as the doors slid open, and I could tell the words ‘potato chips’ hadn't gone unheard. One of the men managing the elevator gave us a strange look, as if we'd insulted them and started to say something to one of the others.

"Don't mind them," I said, as Misha watched them closely, a hint of a frown on her face, before I grabbed her arm and pulled her along, making her forget whatever they'd said.

"So, ice cream," I said to get her focused back on the date, and it worked.

She practically dragged me forward. "So, was my reason for wanting to stick around good enough?" she asked, with a small amount of trepidation in her tone.

"It wasn't really a matter of being good enough," I said, bending down and giving her a peck on the cheek. "One reason is as valid as the next." Though that was admittedly better phrased than I expected to come out; apparently, my women were coaching me well.

"Some of Des's suggestions were a little crude," Misha said, waffling a hand, and I squinted at her.

"Des's ideas probably wouldn't be much more than a quick fix." I had a pretty good idea what Des would have suggested.

Misha blushed and nodded. "But I bet they'd have been at least decently effective," she said, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye, "for tonight."

"Probably," I admitted. "But I don't think you want anything just for tonight, do you?"

"No." Misha shook her head hard enough that her fin-like ears flapped against the side of her head. "It's like food," she said. "It's far preferable to have something healthy and long-lasting than something short and sweet. I'm not looking for a junk-food relationship." She blushed. "A kiss or two tonight wouldn't be bad, though."

"I think we can manage that." I grinned at her. "But after ice cream. We've talked about it too much. If we delay any longer, I'm afraid my stomach is going to throw a fit about the lack of ice cream."

Misha smiled and nodded, and I hooked her arm through mine, pulling her towards the nearest ice cream store with a nice little area to sit and watch the world go by.

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"So, how was the date?" Des asked, squeezing a pillow to her chest as she watched Misha lay out a bunch of clothes.

"Good. Maybe great," Misha added the last bit with a smile to herself.

"Oh, I completely get it." Des grinned at her. "Though it seems Ken didn't do the best part." She crossed her arms in annoyance.

"Well, I kind of told him I didn't want it to be like a junk-food relationship." Misha fidgeted under Des's gaze, and Des leaned forward.

"Explain."

"Well, it was a wonderful evening. We talked about junk food, and we had ice cream, which was good." Misha blushed. "The kiss after was even better."

Des grinned, rubbing her hands together. "Now we're talking. Okay, okay, at least he didn't completely botch the date."

"Oh no." Misha's eyes went wide. "Ken was wonderful. It was a great date. I just didn't feel like, if I took your advice, it would really last that long."

Des squinted at her. "I suppose you're not entirely wrong with such assumptions. But I'd really hoped Ken would blaze past that. Really, Ken is decently possessive if he gets his hands on a woman." She sighed. "But then again, who am I kidding? Ken took forever with a number of us. Of course he was going to be slow on this one, too."

"Which is fine. Slow, I mean," Misha said quickly, turning away from holding up one of Des’s dresses against herself and running a hand over it to press it flat to her body.

"It isn't, but I appreciate the consideration," Des said and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll get something out of Ken."

"I wasn't worried," Misha began, but then she realized the futility of it as Des continued nodding to herself. It felt strange to be discussing all this with one of Ken's harem, but it wasn't like she was going against his wishes. If anything, it should be a good thing that she was already communicating with them.

"Well, now that we've got the first date out of the way, we'll have to get you a second," Des said with confidence, a hand on Misha's shoulder as she looked at her in the mirror. "Because Ken really needs to increase his available party members, and I think, although today was a little rough, that you are perfect." Her words spread a giant smile across Misha's face.

"If you think it will work, then I'm all for it." Misha nodded.

"Yeah, it's not like I'm doing anything Ken doesn't want. He just needs little nudges," Des explained, already thinking through ways to assist.

Misha continued nodding and held out another dress, though this one was so short that she could see her underclothes.

“That one you don’t wear in public.” Des chuckled. “Here, let's try on a few of these, and once we figure out what you like, we can go shopping another day. We’ll find something that Ken just rips off of you.”

Misha tilted her head. “Because he doesn’t like them? This is a very strange courting ritual.”

Des threw her head back in laughter. “No, because he needs to rip off the clothes to get to you underneath them.”

Misha’s ears fluttered, and blood rushed to her face. “Oh. Yes. We need to find clothes that Ken will rip off of me. Good thing he’s a strong adventurer so we don’t have to get anything too flimsy.” Just the idea sent a tingle from her head to her tail that quivered ever so slightly. She could feel herself begin to dampen her underclothes as her sex drive spun up.

Damned thing was such a nuisance. All the other whalewyrn didn’t have it muddling their thoughts. Hopefully, once she found someone able to satisfy her often, she wouldn’t feel so pent up and ready to explode at the slightest stimulation.

“Trouble?” Des seemed to sense something.

“Just… It’s been a while.” Misha sighed. “Got a little lost in my head.”

“Don’t worry.” Des beamed at her. “Ken will be worth it. That, and we could use the reinforcements. One of these days, we’re going to wear Ken out!”

“You mean, all of you together don’t?” Misha’s eyes were giant in the reflection as her ears and tail went completely limp.

“Sometimes if we can get three or four of us together, we stand a chance,” Des said with a sad shake of her head. “But the stupid dungeon-head causes a little trouble with timing. You let him have even a moment of spare time, and he’s back in training.”

“He is very dedicated,” Misha said. “This is a good thing, right?”

“Well…” Des waffled her head. “He wouldn’t be the superstar that he is, nor would he likely have gone full incubus or even garnered the attention from the demons, orkai, and everyone if he wasn’t as outstanding as he was.” She nibbled on her lip. “His dedication is hot as fuck. So… this probably wouldn’t all work if he wasn’t such a dungeon-head.”

“But it takes a lot of time.” Misha thought she understood.

“Yes. Exactly.” Des began nodding very vigorously. “See, you understand. They also say you don’t appreciate things that come easily. So, it’s for the best, but I’m still going to want more of him. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. We aim to complain without really wanting a solution.” Misha stared back at her.

Des squinted at her. “By the way, have you read Seventy-Four Wives?” She pulled it up on her CID and hit a little program that they used for Universal Language.

“What’s this?” Misha pulled her wrist to see the floating screen.

“Oh, just a taste of what it might be like with Ken.” Des beamed.

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Chapter 13

Another week went by like sand through an hourglass. Before I knew it, we'd all gained another level, and the weekend hit, which meant a break from classes. But despite no classes, we never quite seemed to get away from school itself. After all, our teacher was always nearby. And Crimson did not believe much in breaks.

"Well now, speak of the devil, and she shall appear," I said as Crimson appeared. "Crimson, how are you?" I said without looking up from my current project.

"Good. A little lonely, though," she said, and I knew she wanted something, so I glanced up from my task, unimpressed.

"No," I told her.

She scowled at even the possibility of that being the reason she'd shown up.

"Well, if you were bored…" I hedged.

"Not bored," she said a touch too quickly. "I'm here to make sure my A student stays my A student."

"I've already got the finals in the bag, don't I?" I glanced up.

"Don't get too cocky. It's a bad look." Crimson frowned.

"Kettle, meet pot," I said, holding out both hands, earning a lovely eye roll from Crimson.

"Funny."

"Honestly, I thought it was hilarious." I chuckled. "But if you're not here for my humor, then I have to ask… what are you doing here, Crimson?"

"Alright, fine." She flopped down on the couch. "I'm bored."

I schooled my expression to nothing but absolute patience as I regarded her. "Well, if you're that bored," I said, leaning forward, "there are some of my classmates who need assistance."

Crimson tilted her head and frowned. "The final is kind of a solo activity, Ken. I know you weaseled your way around having to do it with the rest of the class, but it doesn't change how trial abilities work."

I stared at her, and she stared back for a long moment, the two of us locked in an invisible tug-of-war.

"Fine. As long as it's not Harley we're helping."

I grew very quiet.

Crimson leaned forward, lacing her fingers together, with all the patience she could muster, which, quite frankly, didn't seem to be much. "Ken. It's not that I don't want to help her, but I can't."

"It's that you don't want to help her."

"I said it's because I can't." Crimson splayed her hands out. "The headmistress tied my hands. If I help one student, everyone would expect help, and that would be too much." She leaned back. "As you can see, the headmistress has made it impossible."

"Huh. I didn't think you, Mistress Crimson, would ever let the headmistress get the best of you," I pressed.

"Well… no, I don't think she has." Crimson reacted just as I thought she would to that phrasing. She started squirming under that comment.

"She's preventing you from even doing something to help your students. It does seem like she's exerting significant control over you," I prodded.

Crimson set her jaw, her blue eyes boring into me. "This won't work, Ken."

"Of course not. Besides, what won't work? Me just having a calm, rational conversation with my teacher?" I asked.

"No. Manipulation," Crimson clarified.

"Is that what you're going to call my attempt to help one of my classmates?" I said, knowing I was getting the better of her and enjoying it perhaps a touch too much. "Or is it that you haven't been able to find the trial yourself?" I offered, and apparently, that pushed Crimson over whatever control she'd had in place. Her attention snapped to me with a dangerous smile.

"You know what? The headmistress was rather upset that you didn't have anything to do for this final. She accused me several times of rampant favoritism," Crimson said. "However, I'm sure if I were to give you something like finding trial abilities for others, she couldn't complain about that."

"So we've gone from 'don't help Harley' to 'help her or else'?" I clarified.

"If that's the way you want to look at it, Ken, yes," she told me.

I smiled, because I was going to help Harley anyway. Crimson had just made it a little more fun. "Fine, I'll do it."

"Perfect." Crimson clapped her hands together and moved in a blur. "And I guess I should kick you out and make you get to work."

"Wait, kick me out?" I said, only to find myself thrown through a portal, landing on my rear, quickly joined by Felin and Misha.

Felin growled back the way we'd come. "What did I do? I was just sleeping on the couch!" she shouted. Poor Felin had likely just been an opportune grab.

"Ask Ken!" Crimson yelled, and now I had a nekorian with her arms crossed and a whalewyrn looking very hopeful.

"Sorry, both of you. It seems she's in a bit of a mood today." I scratched the back of my head.

"I don't mind," Misha said in a hurry. "Though Des is probably going to be mad. I know she was hoping to look for you soon. Something about the ritual being finished, and now it's about timing. But… why exactly are we here again?" Misha asked.

"Honestly, because I sent Crimson on a rampage," I said, not daring to hide the fact. This was absolutely my fault.

"Oh, so it is your fault," Felin let out a put-upon sigh. "Honestly, I should have known. What are we doing?"

"We're going to go find Harley's trial ability," I said, and Felin did a double-take.

"Crimson sending us to go help Harley? Ken, what are you doing? That's obviously fake. There's no way that's the real Crimson. Quick, let's go back. She must be a clone that's captured the real Crimson." Felin nodded emphatically.

Misha stared with wide eyes and gasped.

"No, that's the real Crimson," I said with certainty. "It's not like a clone would be able to use a portal. And second…have you been watching a lot of

TV, Felin?”

“Sometimes Crimson leaves it on in the living room, and I sleep on the couch. It’s just there, and then I end up watching whatever horror movie she got bored of." Felin crossed her arms, determined to assert that in no way, shape, or form was it her fault that she was watching TV.

"Well, either way, we're here now. Crimson isn’t some fake, and we were going to help Harley anyway,” I said.

"Right," Misha said. "Is this one of those situations where we should be worried, or—?"

"No. Technically, I did already promise Harley I'd help her, so I don't think it's that big a deal for us to carry on. I'm just sorry I'm dragging both of you into this with me," I told them.

"Oh, please don't be sorry," Misha said in a hurry.

"I appreciate it, but this is less than professional of Crimson, and also largely my fault." I bowed to both of them.

"Then I guess the only answer is to fix it," Felin said. "We just have to go find this White Quail."

"Right." I agreed. “The White Quail is supposedly both the easiest and hardest of the trials. Easiest in that there is no combat; hardest because finding it is like a needle in a haystack.”

Misha tilted her head one way, Felin the other. "What's a needle?" Felin asked.

"What's a haystack?" Misha asked.

I opened my mouth, then closed my eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "You know what? Let's just go with the fact that it'll be difficult to find."

"But you have [Eyes of Wisdom]." Felin pointed at her own blue eyes. I thought they were beautiful the way they matched the blue stripes in her hair and face.

"Of course, which is why it's even possible to ask for my help. But I have no idea how this is going to go. I just wanted to warn you before we got anywhere and expectations cause issues."

"No expectations here." Misha saluted. "Just a whalewyrn ready to put in the work."

"You could learn something from her," I said to Felin, only to find the nekorian checking her nails.

"Yes, yes, she seems lovely," Felin said, pretending not to pay attention to Misha, though I could tell she was watching her the entire time out of the

corner of her eye. I wasn't entirely sure what that was about.

With nothing better to do, we simply got to work, moving through the dungeon as quickly as we could, following the signals from [Eyes of Wisdom]. Misha matched my pace.

"So, after talking to Des, I made some improvements. Look! I got a weapon." She held up a pair of spiked gauntlets. "Des said something like this might be the most familiar."

"You know what? I take back anything bad I've ever said about Des." I smiled.

"Well, you don't have to do that," Felin said quickly, "because I doubt you've ever said anything bad about Des," she finished, leaning into her words.

"Right, of course not." I chuckled, meeting Felin's eyes. The two of us came to an immediate, and dare I say perfect, understanding of each other in that moment—the kind that only two people on the same wavelength could ever share.

Misha laughed. "Well, regardless of Des's eccentricities, I think it's worth giving these a shot." She put the gauntlets on as we ran, sidestepping off the path only to give a passing group of monsters a test that sent them flying into the distance. She charged them, and I could tell she flinched away from her initial reaction before leaning into trying something different. Rather than using an ability, she doubled up on her prior attack and began a beatdown on the monsters the likes of which they were unlikely to recover from.

"Good work," I said as both of them puffed into black smoke, and she pivoted, activating an ability to fly forward and catch back up with me.

"Why haven't you used weapons before?" I asked.

"Because I really wasn't supposed to be the one dealing damage?" she said, though the words came off like a question. "It's strange to me to do it, as much as it is to you for me not to."

"Fair enough." I held my hands up before I caused any more trouble. "Well, as long as you're working hard at it, I suppose there's not much I should say."

"It's fine. Sorry for being a little prickly," Misha was quick to apologize as we rushed through the dungeon together.

"You're still getting used to this," I offered, pointing between the two of us.

"If anything, the date the other day has only made me more nervous," she grumbled.

"Well, then, that's a bit of a failure of the date," I said, and she hurried to correct me, waving her hands.

"No! Don't say that. It wasn't a failure. A lot of this is just new and different…in a good way, but also a way I need to adjust to."

I tilted my head slightly, confused, but decided to take her at face value. "Well, then, shall we continue? At least while we're here, we should get plenty of experience with your new weapon."

"Yes." Misha nodded sharply.

"We can kind of make a party," Felin said, and I turned to her, waiting for more. "Well, you know. She's not exactly a tank, but she's decently tough. And in the worst-case scenario, she can just hold them off with some crowd control. At least that way she won't take that much damage," Felin explained.

I could at least admit the logic. "Well, if we did that, we could probably take on a few sets of monsters while we're at it. Definitely wouldn't hurt to try a few bosses if we see them," I said, checking with the two of them, and both nodded along.

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Des stretched, blinking her eyes open, hoping to see Ken after she'd fallen asleep on the couch. Instead, it was just Crimson, sipping coffee and making whatever it was she counted as food with five different pans, most likely filling up her CID.

"Where's Ken?" Des asked, getting up and heading over to enjoy some juice while she waited for Crimson to finish her total takeover of the kitchen.

Crimson, however, froze mid-flip of the food, pausing and glancing at Des. "He's somewhere," she answered suspiciously.

"'Somewhere,'" Des repeated, in disbelief. "Why do I have the sudden feeling that this particular 'somewhere' has something to do with you?"

"Because it probably does," Crimson said, wincing.

Des ran a palm down her face. "What did you do?"

"I might have… you know… kicked him out for a little bit. To get some fresh air." Crimson was obviously lying.

Des placed her head in her hands. "Am I going to get him back anytime soon?" she asked, her tone sharper than she'd meant, given the plans she'd had that were now ruined.

"Maybe," Crimson said, sounding unsure.

"I hope that is a pretty solid maybe," Des insisted. Her plans were almost ready, and she could finally have Ken inside her again.

"Moderate, I'd say." Crimson waffled a hand. "But the good news is that he's with Misha," she added, and Des paused. That was actually fairly decent news, if she was honest.

"Did he choose to go with her?"

"No," Crimson said, realizing as she said it that it was unlikely to be the right answer, "but Misha was pretty happy to go with him."

"Of course she was happy. The woman is smitten. But I guess that doesn't matter right now, just that they're at least somewhere and getting along," Des said, leaning back. "I mean, really, how hard do we have to try to get Ken to expand his harem? The power he could get if he made Seventy-Four Wives a reality," Des said, leaning forward, a sparkle in her eyes. "He'd become so incredibly powerful." She hugged herself. "Think about it, Crimson."

"Oh, I'm certain few people have thought about it as much as you, Des," Crimson said, "but if Ken really does add a bunch of people to the harem, our time will become so much more limited." She pointed between the two of them, and Des opened her mouth to refute it, only to clack it closed.

“I'd be able to keep Ken's attention,” Des said after a moment.

“Sure, from a few," Crimson said, "but if there were seventy-four, well, Ken would almost certainly be trying his best to split his attention evenly. He might be able to love seventy-four women at the same time, but do you really think he could maintain a relationship with that many?"

Des winced. "Maybe we could find some dumb bimbos who he could just incubate for stats?" she said hopefully, and Crimson shook her head.

"I think perhaps you need to slow down your plans for world domination, and recognize that while there's definitely potential within Ken, there's also the very real possibility that it could be too much," Crimson told her.

Des paused, genuinely considering those words, glancing up at Crimson out of the corner of her eye. "Fine. You might be a little right," Des conceded, pinching her fingers together. Still, she wanted Ken back so she could have him again. Oh, and finish her transformation.

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Chapter 14

I settled in, making camp, while Misha watched us closely. The whalewyrn was doing her best to be helpful, while actually having no idea what to do. So she was mimicking my every step carefully.

"We could just go back, you know," Felin stated quickly, staring down at her bedroll with a scowl as if it had offended her.

"And risk Crimson's wrath?" I smiled right back. "I don't think so.”

“But then we'd have a warm, fluffy couch, covered in wonderful scents." Felin kicked at the bedroll to unfurl it. Unlike mine, which was a slick plastic something that was supposed to be for all climates, hers was made of fur and leather.

Misha looked between the two of us. "Yeah, that does sound incredible, Felin," she said, clearly feeling required to agree with her.

"I knew I liked you.” Felin grinned. “So what about it, Ken? Head back?"

"Sorry, Felin, you know as well as I do that we aren't going back. Besides, it's been a while since we've had time alone to bond," I offered. Camping in the dungeon was part of the experience; it was the essence of being an adventurer.

Those words caused Felin's ears to perk up as her tail curled playfully around her.

"On second thought, you're right, Ken." She did a full one-eighty on her earlier feelings.

"What?" I said, turning to her, blinking, then turning back to Misha. "I don't know if I heard right. I think something might be wrong with my

ears."

"Don't make me say it again," Felin warned.

"Say what again?" I teased, sticking a finger in and pretending to pull out some wax.

"That you were right," Felin answered immediately before she practically choked on her tongue. "Damn it," she cursed under her breath.

I only laughed at her struggle a polite amount. "I promise it won't be bad at all, Felin. Besides, you want this almost as much as I do."

"You have no proof of that," she said quickly.

I looked at her tail flitting back and forth excitedly. "Yeah, darn, absolutely zero proof. If only there was some way to ensure that a nekorian favored me. Perhaps we should camp out at night and see if she crawls into bed."

"Fat chance," Felin said. "You're going to be the one crawling into my bed and begging for a tail job." She stabbed her finger into my chest.

I shrugged. "Okay."

She grinned like a loon, as if she'd won.

"But why do you set up all of this?" Misha asked, pointing around at our work. I'd been stringing cans filled with washers up. The simplest solutions rarely ever malfunctioned, and that was critical in the dungeon.

"Because we don't want anyone to sneak up on us while we're sleeping," I told her.

"We'd just kill them," Misha said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I mean, yeah. But it's about making sure we get a warning when they ambush us."

"Oh"—Misha nodded sagely—"I suppose I didn't have to worry too much about that when there was a big scary whalewyrn out there."

"Something like that," I offered, remembering that people were very kind to whalewyrns. Though they traveled in small pods, most didn't make trouble for them because the strongest adventurer in the dungeon was a whalewyrn.

That made me wonder, if the succubus queen had such skills to increase her stats like me, just how had this whalewyrn trained?

"Our ancestor would simply walk into a place like Star City and kill half of the occupants. He's known for having quite the temper," she said as if it wasn't a big deal.

I looked at her funny. "That goes a little beyond temper, if you ask me. But then again, I'm not a whalewyrn."

"It helps that our people are known as quite peaceful otherwise," she added.

"Yes, peaceful," I chuckled. "That's what we call people who go on murderous rampages."

"It's not like it's a constant thing," Misha said. "Just a few times is really all it took."

I shook my head. A few times was plenty to be considered a mass murderer. It was a long way from peaceful. "It's fine. I won't treat you any differently, as long as you don't ever sic this terrifying ancestor of yours on me."

"I would never," Misha said quickly, sounding insulted that it had even been spoken of as a possibility.

"Okay. Well, now that we've got some old-fashioned traps set, we can set up our tent," I said.

"Oh, a tent," Misha said. "Des has told me all about these." Her eyes practically glowed, and I wondered what nonsense Des had filled her head with about tents. Though, to be fair to Des, it seemed Misha had come with plenty of nonsense built in already.

"Okay, well, we're going to sleep," I said slowly, watching her reaction.

"Beds are for sleeping?" Misha said, sounding like I had just taken something precious from her.

"Usually. Unless you're Des. And even then, we do need to sleep. It can't all be fun and games," I told her.

"We could play some games?" Misha asked, her eyes sparkling with hope.

"Look, Misha"—I paused—"I'm not stupid. I understand what you want. However, you have to understand that because of my abilities, and out of respect for my other women, it's not something to take casually."

Misha bit her lip and nodded. "I understand." I held her gaze for a long moment, unsure if she truly did, but when she didn't push any further, I left it alone.

"It's just that being here with the three of us is dangerously close to some of my goals," she told me.

"I understand. But if we can't pursue those goals together, then I don't think they're right for either of us," I told her.

My words seemed to cause her a great deal of anxiety, judging by how much she began fidgeting. "I'll behave tonight. If we're putting up traps, then I assume someone also has to stand watch?" she asked.

"Preferably," I agreed. She nodded.

"Go rest in your tent then. I'll stay awake for the first watch."

I glanced at her, wondering if she was really going to be okay, only for Felin to steal my attention. "Over here." The nekorian grinned and hooked a thumb at me.

"Be fair to Misha," I warned her.

Felin stuck her tongue out. "No way. Trust me, if the roles were reversed, she would definitely want me to do this."

“To sleep?" I tried.

"Well, you know… a kitty's got to get her cream; otherwise, she won't stay well." Felin’s tail flicked back and forth.

"Is that how it works?" I asked, teasingly.

"It is," she insisted. "Just ask anyone. Kittens need their cream, especially when the cream comes with a stat boost." She licked her lips and let out a playful growl before she suddenly froze, her ears twisting to the side. "Oh, poor whalewyrn," Felin said.

I tilted my head toward her in question. She was hearing something I couldn’t.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure she has plenty of practice," Felin let out a needy growl.

I couldn't help but squint at her before she was on me, and I grabbed her by the hips. "Since you're being so good, why don't you tell me what stat you want?"

Felin paused as if considering it, and the pause went on a touch longer than I expected. I waited, lifting a brow in question when it continued to drag.

"Well, you probably want agility," she said, putting a finger on my chest. "And while agility isn't bad, really, I'm too rounded, and I should probably shoot for mana or magic."

"Your wish is my command," I said and pushed her down onto the bedroll.

"I like that," Felin said quickly.

"I thought you might," I said as her tail curled around my thigh.

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The next several days, I continued through the dungeon with Felin and Misha, keeping much the same pace and learning to travel even better together. The three of us were coming to a rather quick understanding of each other's capabilities. Felin and Misha were working increasingly well together, and Misha had started to create a small list of abilities she was going to look for when we got back. It seemed all of this experience with the two of us was giving her better guidance on how to work within the tank, DPS, and support party system we normally fought in.

My CID chimed before I could admire our improvement any longer.

"What's that?" Felin asked, her head snapping in my direction as she came to a skidding stop beside me.

"Oh, I'm gonna need to head back and see the orkai," I said, only for her to scowl at me.

"Wait, wait? We didn't even go back to sleep on a nice cushy couch, but you're gonna go back to see a wrinkly, old man?" The nekorian pulled at her white hair.

I stared at her for a long moment. "Yeah, pretty much." She was clearly hamming this up, probably to angle for a portal back tonight.

She clutched at her chest and let out a ragged gasp of pain. "This is what you have to watch out for," she told Misha. I got the distinct feeling she enjoyed being the more knowledgeable one, at least in this situation.

Misha nodded along. "But is it really so wrong?" she asked.

"Yes. Wrong, terribly wrong. He should portal back so that his lovely nekorian woman can get much-needed beauty sleep, not to go talk to a wrinkly, old green man."

That ‘wrinkly, old green man’ was a judge and one of the highest authorities of a race well established within the dungeon. Her priorities were completely skewed.

Misha, however, seemed to think about that for a second before coming to the determination that she agreed. “You’re right, sister.”

"Bad kitty, stop corrupting her," I said and wagged a finger. "Felin, I have to keep my promises, which is why I am going back. And then we're coming right back here to keep chasing after the trial for Harley." I paused

and glanced at Misha. "You know, if you want, we can definitely find one for you, too."

"Thank you, but I wouldn't dare ask for anything that precious," she said, holding her hands out in front of her, waving me off as if it might keep my gratitude away.

"You would owe us nothing for it," I said plainly, to which she blushed.

"I'll think about it," she said, though it came out more like a question than an answer.

"Sure. And again, zero pressure. Not even from this one," I said, stabbing a finger at Felin, who seemed aghast.

"I would never," she said. I lowered my gaze and stared at her. "Well, never is a strong word," she slowly corrected, and I glared at her further. "I wouldn't be mean about it," she clarified even further.

Misha laughed and broke the standoff between us. "It's all right, Felin. Trial abilities are quite valuable. You should help Ken get something valuable in return."

"See? She agrees," Felin said, before frowning, as if Misha agreeing had somehow taken the fun out of the argument.

"Either way," I said, while both of them seemed caught up in their own thoughts, "we'll continue this later." I ripped open a portal back to Star City.

Both of them came back to attention as the portal rippled.

"Right, stinky old men," Felin scowled.

"Please remember to be polite, Felin. You cannot call them that to their face," I reminded her, hoping her words hadn't carried through the portal.

The nekorian started to baulk before she grinned. "You know, I could act like that's actually what you call them."

I patiently stared her down. "If you think that's best," I said slowly, and she lost the mischief in her eyes.

"Dammit, why are you so good at that?" She wrung her tail with her hands.

"Because I spent so much time with Crimson and Des." I smirked at her. "With companions like that, one has to learn to adapt."

"It's wonderful to see that you all make each other grow," Misha stated, and I almost did a double-take, wondering if she was being sarcastic. She was not.

I did not want to keep the portal lingering open much longer, so I stepped through it to Star City, where the arbiters would be.

Immediately, the receptionist motioned for me to head on back. "I was informed to let you back as soon as your portal appeared," she said, which gave me at least a little smug satisfaction that I was recognized and quickly prioritized.

"Thank you." I did a quick bow and headed through the door, only to find the old judge meeting me, glancing at the other two with a warm smile.

"You don't normally bring guests," he said, taking them both in. "A whalewyrn and a nekorian." He paused a moment in thought. "You do keep surprising me. It's so rare to see a varied party. The new elves, too. No orkai, though?" he asked me, though it didn't seem there was a particularly correct answer. I never quite liked feeling like it was a quiz.

"The orkai seem to be well situated in their own groups," I said, by way of excuse.

"That makes sense, that makes sense," the old judge muttered under his breath. "Regardless, you're not here to humor an old man. I suppose I ought to get your tasks done for the day, if you wouldn't mind."

I gestured for him to lead, and, of course, the old orkai had no issue with that, walking along with his hands behind his back, holding it like it bothered him. Though I somehow doubted it. The man's stats had to be absolutely through the roof; I doubted even old age would slow him down.

"Since you've last been here, we've decided to get some of our analysts involved," he told me, making me perk up and want to know more. The orkai were crazy advanced; his analysts could probably answer many questions for himself and all of humanity.

"Analysts?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. There are always plenty of ways to look at information. I'm not so naive as to think my eyes can provide all of the insights that might otherwise be gleaned by those trained to do so," he stated.

It made sense; I just genuinely didn't expect that level of humility from the orkai. Those on top often were deluded into thinking they were better at everything.

"When situations go well, they go well. When they don't, it's best to get those with the kind of insight that would be far more helpful involved. I, for one, am certain they would improve the outcome of many conversations. But I digress," he said and gestured into his room, where two orkai sat with their gaze stuck in the middle distance, no doubt working through their implants on some analysis I couldn't see.

It was still kind of comical to see two jacked orkai nerds. Rarely were there orkai that weren’t absolutely shredded, though both of these gave off classic nerd energy. I realized as I walked around to the desk that both were women.

"If you would, please." The judge gestured at a map he brought up, and the two analysts looked up from their task, watching closely enough that it actually made me a little nervous.

"The ones we have been tracking are right here and here." I pointed to two different sections of the map, using my ability.

One of the analysts raised a hand. "And yesterday… where were they?" she asked. It was a different question than I normally answered, but I supposed it was still easy enough. I pointed out two different spots after using [Eyes of Wisdom].

"And thirteen days ago?" she asked.

I invoked [Eyes of Wisdom] and found yet another spot to point to on the map.

“Now where was I yesterday?” one of them asked.

I pointed to another spot as they went off topic for a minute and asked me a number of odd questions, most likely testing [Eyes of Wisdom].

The two analysts conversed quietly amongst themselves before focusing back on us.

"We believe we have some potential understanding," one of the analysts spoke. "Now that we have the requisite evidence before us, may we ask more pointed questions?" Both analysts turned to the judge, who shrugged.

"I think you're supposed to ask him, not me," the judge said pointedly, and they looked almost uncomfortable with his answer but turned to me, nonetheless.

"Do you know of any potential limitations on your ability?" one of them asked.

I shook my head. "It's never really led me astray. But I'm sure the two of you could stress-test it far better than I could."

They conversed amongst themselves again for a second. "You are likely right," one of them said, and I flinched ever so slightly. "I don't mean to be rude, but abilities like these are often quite strange in their limitations. It would most likely be best for us to simply operate on our current understanding that you lack limitations. And if limitations do appear in the

future, we'll account for them. So, Adventurer Ken, can you identify if there was anything else present at these locations?"

I glanced at the map. "Was there anything else present?" I said aloud, as my eyes glowed blue and dots speckled the area we had been observing. "There's something," I said, "but we'd literally have to go one by one, asking various iterations, to get an exact answer as to what else was present."

Both analysts blinked at me as if they'd already considered that and hadn't considered it a problem.

"Oh," I said, feeling momentarily stupid for even suggesting there was one.

"Please, have a seat," one of them said, gesturing. Felin and Misha had already found seats of their own, along with the orkai judge, who was peeling some sort of purple fruit and talking to them comfortably.

"Well, if you're going to be so hospitable," I said and settled in for what I was certain was going to be a very long afternoon. These two felt like the type to be thorough and not understand simple limitations like human boredom.

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Chapter 15

The time with the analysts felt like I was a sponge constantly being dipped for water, only to be wrung out as firmly as possible by the two muscular orkai. They were almost done with me now, leaving me little more than a completely worn-out sponge, more wrung out than after the long nights Des and Crimson could put me through.

I had been asked and answered so many questions that my tongue and brain had begun to feel a certain dull numbness, like I was somehow getting stupider with every answer.

"Oh, what did you find?" The orkai judge had switched up snacks several times and now had what looked like crackers with a cheesy jelly. It had a bite like sharp cheddar, but with a certain sweet heat to it that was an honestly novel and delicious flavor.

"Well, our current theory is that the threadspawn have found several hives of dwarves. At least, that's what the data seems to suggest. Now, whether they're using them as easy hosts or they've taken them over entirely remains to be seen," one of the analysts stated cleanly while I wobbled in the chair.

They stared at me with a hunger in their eyes, like I could answer even more questions on top of the thousand-odd I'd already answered.

"I believe Ken needs a break. We cannot solve the dungeon’s problems in a single day, even with this little fountain of wisdom," the judge said, saving me with a chuckle. Both analysts bowed low to the powerful adventurer, who currently didn't seem like much more than a doting old man.

"Well then, it seems the next course of action is to attempt to engage the dwarves to determine their locations and whether or not they're still in control of their own faculties." The judge drummed his fingers on his armrest. "The dwarves have remained very"—he hesitated—"isolationist within the present dungeon. So that may be difficult."

"You mean they've refused to get along or even cooperate?" I offered, and the judge gave me a grin that somehow didn't answer the question, though it made his feelings on the matter perfectly clear.

"There will always be those who do not choose what is in their best interests, even when it is clearly laid out for them. And for their failure to cooperate, it will most likely mean the unfortunate loss of life amongst their people, especially now that we understand the threadspawn have decided they make ideal hosts," he stated.

I grimaced at his words. It sure sounded like a lot of dwarves were about to die. Then again, I had no reason to give them any sympathy. They had been nothing but difficult in every encounter I'd had so far.

"Either way," the judge continued, "we will clean up what is necessary and move forward. I will have to send quite a few arbiters out on this one. Ken, would you have any interest in resolving one of the locations yourself?" He tapped on the map, indicating a spot closest to Earth, as if it might be the one to catch my attention.

Honestly, that was as good a reason as any. But at the same time, I knew he was also simply looking for our cooperation. While I, as a representative of humanity, was working with him, he wanted to see more responsibility from the dungeon’s newest race to reach the lower levels.

"I'll make sure it gets handled," I said, watching the spot and etching it into my mind.

"Good." The old orkai beamed. "It is always a pleasure to work cooperatively with another race." He said those words while vaguely scowling at all the indicators of dwarven hives I had marked on the map after the barrage of questions.

"Is there any chance we might retain your information for future questions?" The two orkai who had been questioning me until I was mentally ready to break smiled, as if I might very well be willing to cut out my own brain and give it to them if they asked nicely enough.

I hesitated and glanced at the arbiter out of the corner of my eye. He didn't seem to be reacting in the slightest, so I cleared my throat. "I'm going

to take a break from answering questions. Perhaps after this we can discuss a form of compensation for another session like this." It wasn’t that I needed the mana crystals. I needed to put some value on my time, or I had a feeling unrestrained access to me would not work in my favor.

"A shame," they both said in unison.

"Well, you heard him." The old orkai sipped on his drink. "If he says no, then I expect the two of you will respect that answer. Otherwise, you will lose my respect." He stated the fact casually, taking a sip of his drink. However, the way they both froze with wide eyes made it perfectly clear there wasn't an ounce of wiggle room in that statement.

"Of course," they both said in a hurry to reassure him, though he didn't seem to notice, his attention far more on the food than anything happening in the room.

"Well then, we'll see you all later." I stood and ripped open a portal, even as one of the analysts launched herself out of her seat to examine it from as close as she could get. Felin and Misha, for as much as they had appeared to be enjoying their stay, jumped through my portal with an urgency I hadn't expected.

"Phew," Misha said, taking a deep breath as we found ourselves on the other side, and the portal closed without an orkai coming through it. I shot her a glance; she was pulling at her clothing and fanning herself. "It felt like a lot of pressure back there. I don't know how you handle that so calmly."

I could only shrug. "Perhaps I've been put under a few too many tense situations in my lifetime, because that didn't seem like much to me." I refused to let a few questions wear me down.

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It took us the better part of a week before we were able to relax after reaching the next floor of the dungeon, and I, out of sheer habit, cast [Eyes of Wisdom] to check whether we should still head down. That was when [Eyes of Wisdom] surprised me and pointed the way we had just come.

I sputtered and straightened up. Misha had been incredibly observant of me throughout the whole trip and gave me a curious glance.

"I think it's here… somewhere," I said, with more surprise than I should have shown, glancing around as if the solution might suddenly rear its head.

The path this time, instead of going along the floor's edge, dove straight into the center.

"It's here?" Misha asked, sounding even more eager than I was.

"Well, it's not down on the next floor," I said, turning to her with eyes I knew were still glowing blue.

"Well then, we just have to find it, right?" She looked at both of us as if suddenly lost for what to do next.

"Yeah, we came here this entire time for it," I said and then paused, squinting, because while we'd been looking for it on behalf of the bratty bard, for a moment I thought about not giving it to her and instead handing it to Misha. "Misha, would you want this one?"

"What? Oh, no, I couldn't. Harley's already paid for it," she answered.

Those words caused Felin and me to start laughing, and Misha turned to us, confused. "What's wrong?"

"Harley's not paying for this," I said. The idea of her doing so was, frankly, hilarious.

"You're giving her a trial ability out of the kindness of your heart?" Misha asked, with a look of awe I didn't want to ruin. But still, I shook my head.

"No. She used to be a member of our party, and we're simply helping her out. I don't think I'd go this far for just anyone. But a former party member?" I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm more than happy to help."

"Oh, yes, that makes absolute sense," Misha exclaimed, louder than she needed to, with a flushed face and a deep expression.

"Harley's kind of the one we all love to hate, but we still love her?" I said, sounding a little confused myself.

"That's about right," Felin explained, tapping at her chin. "Do you have people you're incredibly annoyed by, yet oddly fond of? Even though they drive you up the wall, and you half wish many, many painful things upon them, you still help them?"

"Kind of sounds like a sibling," Misha said, and I waffled my head back and forth.

"It's not inaccurate," I said, thinking it over. "We've just been through enough together that we aren't about to leave her behind." I hoped I was making at least a little sense.

"So then, shouldn't she be here to get her prize?" Misha asked, pointing back the way we'd come. "Especially if it's on this floor."

"Yeah, she should come do some serious work," I said with a realization, glancing at Felin to do the honors. "I think you should go pry her out of whatever she's doing and drag her here."

"Happily," Felin said, with far too much excitement for what she was about to do.

Felin ripped open a portal back to Star City, where most people had places now for when they needed to crash in between training. Unfortunately, not everyone could simply portal home at a whim like my party could.

Misha turned back to me. "What now?"

"Well, we wait until Felin drags her back here," I told her.

"Just the two of us?" Misha asked.

I turned to her with a smirk. "Unless you've got someone else hiding here with us, yes, just the two of us." The smile she gave in return was infectious, and I found myself grinning right back at her.

"So, what do you and your people do for fun? You can't all just adventure all the time," I said, before realizing it was actually quite possible that they could stick to adventuring.

"Well, mostly games," Misha said. "Sometimes we have to pass the time, just like anyone else." She produced a bunch of octagonal chips the size of her palm, made of very thin wood, each marked with a simple symbol. "Do you dare play a game with me?"

"If you promise to go easy on me," I said, to which Misha gave me a giant grin.

"Absolutely not. What would be the point if I made it easy? Playing games is about learning to lose gracefully, after all." Somehow, I doubted that was what she really felt. Based on the way she handled the chips, it was clear she knew exactly what she was doing, and I was in for being hustled.

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Felin came back with Harley what felt like ages later.

"Oh, thank God," I said quickly, "because I just lost another round. I’m fairly sure that Misha cheats," I said with absolute certainty, and the whalewyrn scoffed.

"Ken is a much worse loser than I expected," she said, running the chips back and forth between her hands, sliding them deftly between her fingers.

She moved those far too well. Even with my stats, it was hard to track them.

The nekorian turned and stared, fascinated by the motion.

"See? Do you trust hands that can move chips like that?" I said pointedly, only for Harley to mumble as she rubbed sleep out of her eyes. “Speak up.”

"Ken, I hope you didn't bring me here to talk about cards." She yawned. “A goddess like me needs lots of sleep to maintain this much charisma.”

I turned to Felin to see what she might have already told her, only for the nekorian to shrug. "You told me to get her, not explain why I was taking her. If class is any indication, getting her to understand a concept is probably a task above my pay grade."

Harley rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and turned to Felin. "Did the kitty just call me stupid?"

"No, she would never do that," I oozed sarcasm.

Harley squinted. "I definitely feel like someone's making fun of me."

"Well, if that's the way you feel, who am I to tell you what's right or wrong?" I said quickly, trying to escape any responsibility. "But regardless, you should be excited! We've found what we think is going to be your trial ability."

Sleepy Harley disappeared in an instant, her eyes growing wide as she jumped on me. "Ken, I never doubted you for a second. When the others might say crap about you, I'd say: ‘No. Ken will come through for you in the end.’ When people would say hateful things about you and your success while pointing out that you were sleeping with the teacher, I always had your back.”

“Get off.” I pried her off. “I thought you didn’t like men.”

“I'm just overwhelmed that you'd actually come through for me. So, where is it?" Her head whipped back and forth.

"It's here, on this floor. We just need to find it again," I told her.

"Again?" Harley asked incredulously. "I thought you said it was here."

"It's on this dungeon floor," I clarified with a touch of heat in my voice, "which is a much narrower target than anyone else gets when trying to find their trial ability, especially this more elusive one."

"Okay, okay," she said quickly. "That just means it's here somewhere. Old Harley just has to, you know, find it. Like… under this rock!" She grabbed a rock and flipped it over, only for there to be nothing under it. "I could have sworn that was going to work," she said dejectedly. "Now where do I look?"

"Anywhere," I said hesitantly, already having a feeling it was going to be up to me. I activated [Eyes of Wisdom], and a line shot away. I pointed. "That way."

"Thanks, Ken!" Harley was all cheer as she skipped in the direction I'd pointed. She moved for about twenty feet before she paused, turned to me, and smiled, waiting for her next set of directions.

"Keep going. That way," I said, feeling the weight of this task settle even more firmly on my shoulders.

"Right, of course," Harley said and kept moving. "So, if you were a mystical, magical quail capable of giving me immortality, where would you hide?" she asked, seemingly to no one in particular.

"I don't know if it's immortality, Harley," I told her.

"I'll become immortal, Ken," she said in a hush.

"I don't think it's like… fully immortal. You just get one revive every so often." I turned to Misha to see if she knew more.

"I think the cooldown's like a week," Misha said, and Felin snickered.

"That means Crimson can kill her once a week." Felin's words caused Harley to do a slow turn, wide-eyed, before she started laughing nervously.

"Crimson wouldn't use my life-saving cooldown to, you know, take cheap shots.” Harley paused. “Would she?"

"No, never, Harley." I knew when to lie through my teeth.

"Oh, good." Harley patted her chest. "For a second, you really spooked me," she said.

Felin then glanced at me askance, and I shook my head.

"I mean, she might, once," I said to Harley, just so she wasn't too surprised when it eventually happened. It would undoubtedly occur to Crimson, though Crimson could have always killed Harley and revived her, and she hadn't done that yet, so perhaps she wouldn't take it that far, even with the new opportunity.

"Maybe I don't want the quail anymore," Harley grumbled, stepping back away from the rest of our group and looking around as if the thing everyone had been hunting for might pop out of the bushes at her—if only she should be so lucky.

"Look, I don't think Crimson's going to use it as an excuse to repeatedly murder you," I said.

Harley's eyes just continued to widen, and I clearly wasn't doing this any justice. "Ken, you don't know her like I do," Harley said. "She would love

to repeatedly and gruesomely murder me. Especially if she won’t get in trouble for it. Heck, she’d probably call it mental tempering or something if I try and bring in the headmistress."

She was probably right, but I wasn't going to admit it.

"Crimson is just free with her affections," I said.

Harley gave me a look, asking if I thought she was an idiot. And the truth was, she probably didn't want to know my actual answer to her question.

"Look, we went all this way to get it for you, Harley. I would appreciate it if you respected my time." I pointed again to where the line was leading us.

"Maybe you can have it," she said quickly, "or you could bring someone else. Heck, you have your portal ability. You could maybe even sell it, like answers to a test. It would fetch a very good price." Harley continued stepping backward, looking around warily, only to not pay attention to where she was stepping and fumble backward, rolling over herself and into nearby bushes. As she did, a pristine white bird squawked and fluttered into the air from the bush she'd just knocked into.

"No!" Harley screamed. But it was too late. The squawking bird landed on her head, chirped, and dissolved into a waterfall of bright motes that sank into Harley.

"Maybe it didn't work," she said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"There is a way to test that," Felin offered, pulling her spear forward until it looked like she was about to skewer Harley.

"Felin, you're better than that," I scolded the nekorian, and she shrugged like she wasn’t so sure of that.

"I'm not entirely sure I am. Just think how satisfying it would be." She bit her lip and leaned ever so slightly forward with the promise of killing Harley. However, Harley pulled up her CID and held it out.

"The answer is right here, you feral cat. I'm immortal now," she said like she was weeping. "The curse of immortality. I will forever be young and beautiful while you all grow old and decrepit! How many times must I die to satisfy Crimson's depravities?" She was crying before anything had even happened.

"Harley, it won't be that bad," I told her.

She peeked out between her fingers. "Really? You promise?"

"We both know there's no way, even if I promise, that I can stop Crimson from something like this," I deadpanned. Crimson was going to turn her

into a red stain on the floor at least once. The week cooldown might work to Harley’s disadvantage because Crimson might get bored of it far slower.

"But you promised." She gasped.

"I have promised nothing, Harley, and I am not promising anything."

"So cold." Harley continued to pretend to cry.

"I will promise to talk to Crimson," I offered. "Whether or not that's successful in anything isn't up to me."

"Of course!" Harley perked up. "But just you offering means the world to me," she said, putting her hands behind her back. "Now I'm wildly curious about how this all works. Do you think there's a really painless way to die? And if it doesn't work, you will revive me, right?" Harley asked Felin.

"You trust her in this, but not everything else?" I asked.

"It's more that I trust her not to lie in front of you," Harley offered, "if that makes any sense."

"Honestly, that's pretty fair," Felin said, not at all offended. "I would definitely hate for you to think me a liar far more than I care what she thinks."

"Just like that?" I asked.

"Pretty much." Felin shrugged.

"Well, then in that case, you can consider her cooperative. But I still think we should get out of here before you try something. Besides, if you want to die with less pain, maybe go with poison?" I offered. "And not with us. I'm almost positive you could get the UG to sponsor some sort of treatment room. I mean, they would absolutely love to observe whatever trial ability you've obtained."

Harley's eyes went wide. "Do you think they'd pay me to die?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Maybe?”

"I'm gonna try it." Harley grinned. "Just think about it! All I have to do is drink some laced drink, and then I get paid millions to die. Or I could become some sort of test subject for the UG."

"It would probably be pretty painful," I said, and she stared at me like I had just killed her dog.

"Why would you say that, Ken?"

"Because it probably would be. Dying is rarely easy," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but this is my dream. Don't piss on it," she said and went back to musing.

“The dream you literally just started a few moments ago?”

"Well, if we're done, do you think we can head back?" Misha asked, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

"Harley, you're welcome to come back with us," I offered. She was clearly lost in her own delusions for the moment, only to do a quick double-take.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going? Wait for me!" she shouted and rushed to catch up.

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Chapter 16

"You completed that faster than expected," Crimson said, doing a double-take as she walked into the house to see me sprawled on the couch eating some of her potato chips.

"Lovely to see you, too, Crimson," I said, peeking out of the corner of my eye and playfully scowling at her while crunching one of the chips.

"Of course it's always lovely to see me." She laughed. "So, Harley is going to pass?"

"Yeah, she'll be fine." I waved her concern away.

"Oh, good," Crimson said in a rush. "The headmistress was beginning to threaten me, as if it's my fault if not everyone passes the ridiculous final exam that, I should remind you, she set."

I stared at Crimson and blinked. "I should have known better. There had to be a reason you actually asked me to help Harley."

"Well, duh. She's an absolute pain in my rear, but she's not worth a fight with Marlow," Crimson stated, slipping her hand into my bag of chips and claiming some for herself.

"Oh, does the headmistress actually bother you?" I teased, earning a dangerous scowl.

"Just because I can do whatever I want, it doesn't mean I should," Crimson said, in a rare moment of wisdom. "I, too, want to live a cozy life most days."

"And here I could have sworn you thrived on chaos," I teased her.

"Oh, I do." Crimson grinned, with a wistful look off into the distance. "Now, I believe Des is going to kill me if I don't let you know she's looking for you. And Heather has been looking for you as well." Crimson gave me a look of warning. "Just because you're a super stud muffin now, it doesn't mean you get a pass with the Harem Queen. Remember that." She pointed at her eyes, then back at me.

"Ew, she's like my mother's age," I said, as brattily as possible—mostly because I knew it would make Crimson very happy. Crimson was older than me but well within big-sister range. The Harem Queen was legitimately older than my mother, if only by a few years.

"Who first? Des or the Harem Queen?" I asked.

"I suspect once Des gets her claws into you, you're not going to get free for a while," Crimson said, with a thoughtful expression. "So maybe the Harem Queen first. Make sure to turn her down as brutally as possible."

"Well, Misha and Felin did great," I offered. "Just a thought, but I'd like to help Misha find one of the trial monsters as well." I posed it as a question, but that was mostly just me being polite.

"Sure," Crimson said with a shrug. "No skin off my back."

"Thank you," I said sincerely, and Crimson blushed deep enough that I wondered if I'd said something wrong.

"No need for that sort of thing between the two of us, Ken," she said, sounding at least moderately offended. "And besides, Misha's probably going to join the harem anyway, isn't she?" She asked the question so casually that I nearly choked.

"Yes," I said. "Of course, if she agrees, and all of that."

"Oh, she'll agree. Don't worry about that." Crimson waved away my comment.

If there had been anything in my mouth, it certainly would have gone flying.

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Following Crimson's advice, I messaged the Harem Queen and got a very eager and rather cryptic reply. Not really having the time or energy to deal with figuring out what she was saying, I ripped open a portal to go where she had asked me to meet her.

Apparently, the woman was in France, and thanks to that PR tour, I had a lengthy list of places I could portal to, including Paris.

Stepping out of the portal, I found myself face to face with the Harem Queen wearing sunglasses and a scarf that was very conspicuous for so late in the spring. But most of the people around the cafe were wearing all manner of clothing, I assumed in the name of fashion, so she didn't stick out nearly as badly as she might have elsewhere.

"Have you been to the Eiffel Tower?" Heather asked me as I sat down, and she motioned for the waiter to come over. "Cappuccino for my guest, please."

"Of course," the waiter replied in a tone that indicated he had a stick up his rear.

"I love the French." The Harem Queen laughed. "Even when you're famous, they still treat you like garbage. It’s refreshing, really."

"They don't treat you that badly, do they?" I asked.

"Well, not the ones who realize I can help them make a lot of money. Those ones suck up to me worse than even some of my simpier husbands." She let out a fond sigh.

"If we're here to talk about your love life, I'm afraid I'm going to need to find somewhere else to be." I shifted like I was going to stand up from my seat soon.

She wagged a finger at me. "Your grandfather told me you used to have a poster of me in your room." The Harem Queen grinned.

"I'm sure most teenage boys did," I admitted. "Fond dreams are one thing, but I know that realistically, we would never work."

The Harem Queen clutched at her chest as if I'd just stabbed her in the heart. "Alas, I understand my chance with you is likely past. However, like most mothers, I still wish to live vicariously through my child." Her voice lifted at the end in question as a small smile slid across her face. "How have you and Helen been recently?"

"Honestly, I haven't thought of your daughter much lately," I told her honestly, deadpan.

The Harem Queen paused mid-drink, and a victorious smirk slid off her face. "You mean you haven't recently gotten incubus powers that she's helping you handle?"

"No." I was unsure exactly how to answer that question in anything except blunt honesty. “I do have new demonic abilities. That part is true.”

The Harem Queen put down her drink and rubbed at her temples. She was beautiful in a way any man could admit, but she also had husbands numbering in the triple digits, and I wasn't particularly interested in that much competition. I recognized the hypocrisy of that fact, but it did not change how I felt.

The Harem Queen continued rubbing her temples for a second. "So you have new abilities, but my daughter is not helping you with them. Is there a future in which that's going to happen?"

I looked at her, and I seriously thought about lying to help Helen, but then I reminded myself she'd likely not even appreciate it. "I doubt it."

The waitress came back and placed a cappuccino in front of me.

"I feel like an idiot," the Harem Queen sat up and said, practically proclaiming it to the entire cafe. I half expected the crowd to grow quiet, but everyone seemed content in their own conversations. "So, what do I need to do to make my daughter's apparent delusions a reality?" She leaned forward, trying to place her hand on mine, only for me to slide my hand carefully out of the way.

"I think we've had this conversation before, and it's between her and me," I answered.

"Yes, but she clearly needs help," the Harem Queen said, meeting my eyes with a look that could break a lesser man’s resolve.

I gave her the kind of smile I hoped reinforced my message of ‘that's between her and me.’

"You know, I had thought this conversation was going to go much differently. I'd even prepared a gift for you," she told me.

"Sorry it didn't go how you expected."

"Obviously, that's not your fault," she emphasized, leaning back dejectedly. "I hope you know I'm going to kill her for this." The Harem Queen scowled into her coffee. "Well, now that I've made a fool of myself, I'm just going to try to treat this like any other meal, catching up with a contemporary," she said, through a pained smile. "How have things been? Are you all still chasing after your trial abilities?"

"My party's pretty much done," I said, looking out into the middle distance and thinking about everybody’s progress. Felin and Charlotte had theirs. Penny had surprised us and gone after Limit Break, and Fayeth had gone and gotten Absolute Reflect. Des had her own plan for after she finished her transformation. Now I just needed to help Misha and continue

giving the oh-so-stubborn Elysara opportunities. Selene and the rest of the class had their own opportunities. My mind flitted to adding Selene to the list as well. It seemed as my love life got busier, so, too, did many other things.

Thinking of Selene, I realized I needed to go check on her and give her some attention, not to mention I needed to see if her stats had successfully incubated. We didn't know exactly how long that would take yet, but now was as good a time as any to check.

"Is Helen going to get her trial ability soon?" I asked, realizing the conversation had lulled while I was lost in thought, and the Harem Queen was simply watching me.

"Hopefully." Heather circled the rim of her glass with her finger, absentmindedly. "Helen has her mind set on Absolute Reflect. I think it's valuable enough." She waffled her head back and forth, clearly not entirely believing her own words.

"Isn't that what you picked?" I asked.

"Yes, but that only gives me a better perspective to see its flaws. For all its hype, I will say… against other adventurers, it loses out significantly," she told me.

"Don't you typically take the front line, with your harem behind you?"

"Yes, which makes it a wonderful trial ability for me," she clarified with a big smile. "If I'm using all of their strength and buffs to tank the boss, well, then I can soak up quite a bit and reflect it back. Against monsters, it's an incredible ability," she emphasized without holding back. “But I do find, pushing myself deeper, that I'm encountering more and more conflict with other people in the dungeon."

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

"Huh?" She looked up at me. "Oh, no, I can handle myself just fine," she said quickly. "But it's only natural for a mother to worry about her daughter, especially one as boneheaded as my particular daughter."

I chuckled, only for the Harem Queen to pause and glance at me askance, as if wondering what had brought that on. There was a small twinge of hope still in her eyes.

"Nothing. Your daughter can be a little independent," I said diplomatically.

"Oh, believe me," she said, with a heavy eye roll of her own, "I am well aware of my daughter's"—she hesitated—“*untamed* nature." She made the

statement with as much diplomatic poise as she could manage, and even that barely helped.

I smiled as the waiter came back with my drink, letting the conversation lull for a moment while I sipped on my coffee.

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Before I went off to see Des, I had one more stop to make. While I was anxious to get to her, I had told the orkai we would move on the various dwarven floors that seemed to have been the threadspawn's most recent breeding grounds, and I did not want to upset the orkai.

So I found myself in front of Sandra, the new assistant the president of the UG had assigned me, in hopes that I could use her assistance, even if that meant that I was indulging in the president’s plan. Thankfully, I doubted he’d still be in his role here shortly.

"Ken." The attractive, yet strict-looking woman peeled off a pair of glasses I was fairly certain were smart glasses of some sort, rather than anything for correcting eyesight.

"Well, here I am." I gestured at myself. "Hopefully, Scaredy Cat doesn't give you too much trouble if I use your services, as he's asked."

"Oh, he won’t mind. Especially since President Amatto has taken over, and he’s been put under review. Which means, as his most recent hire, I need to prove myself." She certainly looked quite excited that I'd come to make use of her services.

"I just finished having a conversation with orkai arbiters," I started. "We've been tracking the threadspawn that recently attacked Earth."

"I was unaware of this." She watched me.

"It wasn't really something I intended to do on purpose. However, I hope you understand that cooperating with the orkai on this was a way to make it far easier than it otherwise would have been."

"Yes, and so, with their cooperation, are they asking something from the United Guilds?” She was quick to catch on.

"Yes and no. While tracking them, it seems they've stopped at multiple areas we believe contain dwarven hives.” I still wasn't entirely sure what to call their particular population centers, but hive fit. “They offered to take out all but one of the locations, leaving that one to us. They probably could, in theory, solve a large amount of the problem without fuss. However, I do

think they would be particularly disappointed in our commitment to help if we didn’t clean up at least one; it would make us poor allies.”

“And so, the expectation is that we, the UG, fund a trip to deal with at least one of these dwarven hives." Her voice went up at the end, seemingly unsure of the correct terminology.

"Hive works," I said.

She nodded and made several notes. "A request has been noted, and while I believe Scaredy Cat," she said the name with a small smirk, "will be willing to participate in this raid, if nothing else, I think he'll appreciate the opportunity to look good in front of the new president. Amatto instructed me to give you the UG’s full support. Do you know anything about this hive that we'll be launching an assault on?"

"They gave us the one closest to Earth," I told her and pulled up a map with my CID to show where. “But I haven’t done any scouting.”

She nodded thoughtfully. "That will give us substantial reason to act, and to get the rest of the guilds active. If we're taking out a potential problem for humanity, it's good press for all of them."

I paused, feeling like I should do more. "I will speak to the Harem Queen, and the Verdant Guild, as well as the Renards."

She paused and made several notes. "We will appreciate your support, then. I believe you very likely have stronger ties there than I do. Now, is there anything else I can do for you, Ken? It seems my day has just gotten far busier."

I fought back the urge to apologize for making her day harder and shook my head. "No, I think their operation will occur in six days, so we have that time to get everyone ready, and I'll make sure we have a portal available when the time comes."

"The UG will do its best to support your efforts, both as a member of humanity and as the majority owner of the UG. Though, I'm sure there will be several questions as to loot." As she said that, my expression fell, and she gave me a helpless shrug. "These are contract terms that will be brought up, even if they're distasteful. It's simply what people will expect in return."

I grimaced and stared at her, hating what I was about to ask. "What would your recommendation be?"

"The simplest would be to spread out the groups and give them looting rights for their particular area. That will help keep them in line, as well as solve most of the issues before they start," she offered.

I nodded. "Draft it up however the contract needs to be written," I said, needing to get the bad taste out of my mouth.

"And then, once I'm done with this contract, I have a few others I'd like to go over with you," she said with a smile, clearly having saved that fact for the end of the conversation. "There are a number of UG-related items I've been asked to get your opinion on before we move forward."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and nodded. "Would you be able to summarize them for me?"

"Of course," she said and pulled out a one-page summary she'd clearly prepared in advance. "Now, if you don't mind, this would probably be easier if you sat down."

The smile on her face was sweet. Yet, as far as I was concerned, lawyers were pretty much vampires, by the way they were able to drain my energy. I understood Crimson's reluctance to deal with them so much better now.

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Chapter 17

I knocked on the door. "You in here, Des?" I pushed it open, peeking around the edge, expecting to see her, but she wasn't there.

"Des?" I asked, looking around, only for the closet door to slide open as Des sashayed out, dragging her fingertips along the frame and wearing her patented sexy smirk.

"Oh, Ken, wonderful of you to join us." She smiled, leaning on the doorframe. Her purple hair fell down her shoulders like a waterfall, pulled forward to draw my attention down to her barely contained chest. It was bound in a sheer silken number that artfully trapped my eyes between them before lifting them back up to her hungry eyes that were undressing me piece by piece.

I lifted an eyebrow.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" she asked. I let my eyes rove over her form as she gave me a small smile and a twirl.

"Somehow, I think you knew I was coming," I told her.

"Yep! A little birdie told me you were coming, though you took longer than expected." She planted her hands on her hips with a pout that made me want to drop everything and comfort her.

"There was a bit of a situation… well, multiple situations that I needed to take care of, because I wanted to give you my full attention when I got here." I closed the distance.

She narrowed her eyes at my words. "That's a fairly decent excuse," she said, crossing her arms and pushing her breasts up, nearly overflowing the

nightgown she was wearing.

"I'll take a decent excuse," I said with a shrug, moving quickly to pull her against me and feel the softness of her body meld into mine as my hands ran along her silken thighs.

"Now, to what honor do I owe this?" I drank her in, looking down at my stunning woman.

Des was always a beauty, but like any sane man, I knew when to appreciate the extra details on display today. She was in a thin, black, lacy number that left nothing to the imagination and invited dangerous thoughts. Her hair was subtly different, and I knew enough to know to appreciate the work she had clearly put into the look. Rather than its typical purple, straight curtain, there was an ever-so-slight, purposeful wave to it that made it seem a touch sexier. Not to mention, she had most certainly done her makeup for me. At the edge of her eyes was a wonderful contrast with the shadowy smoke on her lids. It was subtle, because Des didn't need any makeup to be stunning, but I had to admit what she had done drew me into her.

"You look beautiful," I said, pulling back that lock of hair that so often tried to obscure one of her eyes. I liked staring into the eye that had changed with her first demonic transformation; her iris turned into a heart, glowing a pink that only grew more fiery with her affection.

She batted her lashes and plucked at the collar of my shirt. “Do you remember what I've been working on?"

"Of course. How could I forget what's been keeping you from me?" I said pointedly.

"Well, it's done. Your grandmother has given her full blessing that I can perform the ritual I've made for you." She traced a finger along my jaw, a brilliant smile on her face. This was her ritual to turn herself into a full-blown succubus, rather than just the temptress she'd become. It would change her race in the system, but it would also change her fundamentally.

I should know; I was turned into an incubus.

"All right. What do you need from me?" I asked, and she gave me a coy smirk.

"Just a little time," she answered in a sultry voice.

I was fairly certain the time she needed from me was going to be enjoyable based on the way it was starting.

"Less cryptic and more honest," I said.

She pouted. "You gave Penny her fantasy. Now let me have mine."

"Which is?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"To tempt you into bed," she answered with a brilliant smile.

"Is this a bad decision I'm about to make?"

"No." She huffed and crossed her arms once more. I smiled, blatantly looking down and enjoying the mounds, knowing she would enjoy me staring.

She huffed, her chest rising and falling. "I am fairly certain that when we're done here today, you'll think it's the best decision of your life."

"Well, good, then. Tempt away," I offered, raising my eyes back up to meet hers. She ran a delicate finger along my jaw before kissing me fiercely, her hands tangling into my hair as the space between our bodies vanished. It was like we were one. I felt her nails raking over every inch of my body, almost to the point that felt like pleasurable scratching of my soul, as the two of us made out there in the room.

“Stay with me?” Des asked, her heart-shaped pupil pulsing a bright pink with the question.

“Of course. Why would I go anywhere else?” I smiled at her, pouring my desire through my every action.

Spending time with the other demons, I had met more than a few succubi, and though they were all drop-dead gorgeous, there was always something special about Des.

Our shared experiences no doubt played into it, but it was more than that. I was helplessly and hopelessly in love with the woman, and she me, even if there was still a playful inclination between the two of us to tease each other.

So if she wanted to play out some fantasy, I was going to happily oblige her.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now, why don't you come to bed with me?” She pulled a piece of sheer cloth out from behind her back, looped it over my neck, and used it to pull me down for another sensual kiss where we savored each other's lips longer than was appropriate.

After devouring me, she pulled back to stare at me before her hand found mine, and she walked backwards, leading me towards the bed.

I followed along happily, taking in her outfit and the sway of her hips, only for her to catch me and blow me a kiss.

When we reached the bed, Des locked eyes with me as she popped her pert butt on top of the side of the bed, shifting back slightly to where she could spread her legs and pull me against her.

I stepped up to her, noticing the floor under my feet had changed slightly. Leaning back, I took in the intricate magic circle that was carved into the floor under the bed. Staring at it a moment more, I was fairly certain that it was filled with blood.

“What's that?” I asked, pointing at the circle.

Des shrugged with a playful smile. “Nothing.” She batted her lashes and reached forward, pulling me against her as she toppled backwards onto the bed.

I grinned, knowing this was her enjoying herself.

She would never do anything to harm me. She was simply having fun being mysterious.

“Is that so?” I asked. “Because it looks like...”

Des pulled me down into a kiss to stop me from asking more questions.

I went along with it, letting my body rest on top of her for a moment before pulling up and running my fingers along the seams of her clothes before ripping them off of her and exposing her body.

“Wonderful,” Des purred, kissing me and stealing my attention away as her hands deftly unclothed me.

Before I'd really even realized what had happened, I'd been stripped bare before her, and Des's hungry eyes roved over me like they were memorizing every inch. “I love you, Ken.”

She surprised me with those words. I knew she felt that way, but I had thought we were role-playing something slightly different. I had expected her to be leaning purely into lust.

“I love you, too, Des,” I told her, holding her chin firmly as I leaned down and kissed her softly, letting our lips brush with passion. “No matter what happens tonight, you will always be mine.”

She beamed up at me. “Of course. I would have been offended if you had thought anything else. You will never escape me,” she promised with the ferocity of our love that we shared.

I kissed her again and pressed her to the bed, cupping her tight ass and pressing myself against her.

She held a finger to my chest. “We love each other, but tonight, I want your raw, unfiltered lust.” Her nails dragged along my scalp, in something

that was more pleasure than pain. Then she let out a deep moan that stirred my libido and sent all of my blood rushing south.

“I need you, Ken. I need you to ruin me.” Her voice was raspy with need.

I kissed her neck like a man dying of thirst, pushing her down onto the bed and running my hands over every curve, savoring the way her body was mine to mold.

Her clothing was little more than a ragged strip that I peeled away further so that I could touch every delicious inch of her.

I spread her legs and brushed her waiting slit with a knuckle, knowing that I would find her already wet with anticipation. I enjoyed the way she curled and moaned to my touch. She was more sensitive than ever, already gasping and clinging hard to me.

“Oh. Maybe denying you for a little bit makes you that much more fun,” I teased, running a finger along her lower lips and pausing just at the precipice.

“No.” She grabbed my wrist and began to pump my fingers in and out, her fingernails becoming like claws in my shoulder as she held tight.

“Greedy.” I kissed along her neck as she opened her whole body to me.

“Yes,” she moaned before grabbing my wrist and pulling my hand up as she sucked her own juices off my fingers while her eyes rolled back up into her head. “Rail me, Ken. I need your lust.” She dragged the word out, kissing me hungrily, even as her wet sex ground against me with even more urgent need than before.

I couldn't help but let out a light chuckle as I saw her unfocused eyes that were seeing nothing but wanting everything. “I love you, Des.” I kissed her cheek again. “Even if you're half-crazed from abstaining.”

“Yes. Need.” She pawed at her breasts as she lay below me in nothing but stockings. She certainly hadn't been wearing anything underneath that sheer nighty. And with her having removed my clothes earlier, there was nothing left between us.

She was clearly eager enough. I thought it would be cruel to keep her waiting. I plunged myself into her sex without any further preamble.

Des wrapped her legs around my hips and squeezed me all the way into the hilt as her eyes began to flutter as the magic circle carved around us glowed.

“This is what I get for loving a warlock, isn't it?” I said, but Des didn't look like she could hear me. Instead, she was just pulling and tugging at my

hips, and when I didn't respond immediately, she tried to flip us over and take control.

I was stronger than her and didn't let that happen, pushing her back down to the bed and thrusting with the force to crush her to the bed and make the whole thing bounce and quiver precariously.

“More,” she begged.

“Careful what you've asked for, Des,” I teased as I began rocking the bed hard enough that it jumped in the air, gaining a solid inch of air as it bounced from my force.

Des's nails dragged along my skin. “Yes, more,” she growled, and her sex squeezed me like it was trying to wring every last drop out of me already.

I had to hold her hips with my hands, squeezing her ass to plant her firmly on the bed so that she didn't rise with me when I raised my hips.

But I was not sure she even noticed the change.

She had her head pressed back against the pillow and reached up to grab my head, kissing me in a way that only fueled my passion as I continued to rock the bed underneath us, the two of us going at it like reunited lovers.

Every kiss, every touch was sensual and seductive, drawing me deeper and deeper into a feral need to pump everything I had into her body.

Vaguely, out of the corner of my eye, I realized that the magic circle around us was glowing brighter and brighter every time one of us reached the peak of pleasure, which was happening far more frequently than I had expected.

I hadn't even begun using [Delirious Pleasures]. Deciding to see how wild I could drive Des, I activated the ability, sending Des's eyes rolling up into her head as her hips wouldn't stop moving as her fluids flowed freely down her thighs.

I pumped while Des clung to me with crazed need, the two of us simply ceasing to exist as individuals. In our place were two wild animals rutting with abandon.

Des’s sex squeezed me again, and it was like her body’s signal was all that mine needed.

I soared over a peak as my balls emptied themselves into her, the moment lasting longer than I expected. Then far longer as I continued to drain myself into her.

Des let out a moan as she twisted her hips back and forth, causing me to lengthen and grow inside of her as she coaxed me towards another round as

soon as the first ended.

By now, the room was practically nothing but pink light, and I could vaguely still see Des's eyes through the bright glow of the room.

“I am almost there. Just a little more,” Des begged, and even as sexy and tempting as she was, my body felt like it was trying to tap out. But Des wiggled her hips, drew a sweet kiss from my lips, and managed to get me ready for one more.

“Ken, I love you,” she murmured through the sex haze clearly filling her brain.

This time, when she went to flip me over, I was exhausted and decided to let her have her fun.

“Ken, you’re perfect,” she whispered as she began to ride me, pulling her breasts up and squeezing them between her hands. “But more than love... I crave your touch. Every day, in and out, I just want you to fuck me,” she said the last in the barest whisper as she rode me slowly, throwing her hair back and rocking while licking her lips.

I held onto her firm ass, guiding her motions, while slowly but surely, the pink glow all around us began to fade, coalesce, and become part of her as Des changed right in front of me.

I grabbed her hips after her confession, wanting more myself, my own hips rising to meet hers in a wet, fleshy slap.

The two of us pounded into each other hard enough that I would have broken a non-adventurer, but I needed to feel her.

Des had stirred a hunger in me that I couldn't suppress, and I felt a second wind as the two of us went at it while Des changed subtly.

The shift wasn't so much a quantifiable difference. Her eyes were still hers, and her face was the same.

Yet my eyes simply drank her up more. She was somehow more beautiful, more radiant, and I could never tire of staring at her.

Something about the way I was looking at her only caused her to go off the deep end, bending down over me, pressing her chest to mine, as our tongues intertwined and twisted together while her hips pumped up and down. Des fucked me harder than she ever had before.

I let out a shuddering gasp as we came together, and she clung to me, the glow fading from the room.

Des slumped atop me, panting heavily and subtly changed.

I was about to ask if it had worked when a thin, delicate, spaded tail flicked out behind her to curl around my bicep and squeeze me like she was holding on for dear life.

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Chapter 18

After my time with Des, I found myself in the living room of our place in Star City, recovering from our intense time together.

Des was situated firmly in my lap in a possessive way, which was a bit new for her. Still, I had my arms wrapped around her, wondering if she had in fact entranced me in some way. I did not want to move my hands away from her. She was still Des, but there was an extra air of beauty that surrounded her. We hadn’t had a chance to talk, but so far, she didn’t seem that different.

Elysara had been busy, but Fayeth had made time to join us in representation for the elves. Meanwhile, Crimson had insisted we let Candice come as the class's representative, which, while slightly odd, didn't faze me too much. I already began to understand what direction Crimson was going to take this with Candice present.

And, of course, my immediate party was all here, along with Misha, who had taken to coming over early in the mornings.

"Well, if that's everyone," I said, only for Crimson to check her CID and rip open a portal, my UG liaison Sandra stepping through.

"Wonderful to see you," she said with a smile.

"Wonderful to see you, too." I nodded, glancing around the room and looking at Crimson to see if she was going to summon anyone else.

"Nope, I'm done," Crimson answered my unspoken question.

"Good. Now then… we are coordinating with the orkai arbiters, planning an assault on multiple threadspawn bases. We believe these to be dwarven

hives that have been taken over." The group before me all nodded, while Sandra scratched on a legal pad. Something about the note-taking made my eye twitch; perhaps I simply disliked the formality it represented.

"Anyway," I pushed past my discomfort and continued, "we have decided to participate, if for no other reason than to show the orkai we're here to put in the effort."

"There's more to it than that, though?" Sandra guessed.

"Yes. I expect that orkai are essentially testing us, to ensure we're here to support the peace of the dungeon," I stated with a heavier sigh than usual. "That, and the threadspawn are a real problem. They've decided to assign us the one closest to Earth, so I suspect they want to make sure we'll participate."

The group all nodded.

"Well, if we're just going to go kill some threadspawn, that certainly seems like something we can do to show we'll uphold our end," Fayeth said, speaking for the elves. "After all, while they haven't affected our people overmuch, we're very cognizant of the danger they could pose. And, in full transparency, we're interested in returning the favor you've given with the drow."

I smiled at her. "Thank you. That will be noted," I said, hearing Sandra's pen scratch, adding it to her notes. "Otherwise, I would like our group to organize itself and lead the attack. I've asked the UG to assist us." I glanced at Sandra. "And I believe you've gotten at least some response?"

"Unfortunately, the response hasn't been as enthusiastic as I had hoped," she said, flipping her pad to a new page.

I gritted my teeth but nodded. "Please, go ahead and give us the details."

"Generally speaking, given that you stated this hive is on a level-forty safe zone, our assumption is that the dwarves are at least strong enough to be continuously present in that area. Thus, we haven't extended our offer to anyone beneath level forty. While certainly there are parties skilled enough to fight above their level, we generally consider it unsafe for them to continue doing so, especially in this context."

I frowned but gave her a slow nod. "Understood. Still, it's only level forty," I said, and my words caused her to grimace.

"Ken, I think you might be overestimating the strength available to us," Charlotte said quickly and put a hand on my arm.

I could only tilt my head. "I mean, I know our class is strong, but…" I started.

"I'm sorry if there was any misunderstanding." Sandra shook her head. "You are strong, Ken. However, I would go as far as to describe your class's strength compared to the rest of humanity as abnormal."

"Abnormal." I frowned at her chosen wording. It struck a little too close to aberrant for my liking, but I shoved that aside.

"I'm sorry if that's an uncomfortable phrasing, but it is the reality," she said, quickly folding her hands in her lap, like she was waiting to be scolded.

I glanced over at Crimson, then eyed Candice. "If we're such an anomaly, then I guess one of the best places to look for more fighting forces would be right under our own nose."

Candice's presence suddenly made a lot more sense. I wasn't upset at Crimson in the slightest, but I did find myself squinting at her, wondering if she knew we were going to get here.

Candice cleared her throat. "While we're honored to be included, I do think provision seventeen, section forty-two B, would be applicable if the UG were to request our help." Candice and Sandra suddenly faced each other with the kind of silent, cold temperament that settled between two predators acknowledging each other in the wild.

"Yes, I suppose that would apply if you were full adventurers. However, you are students," Sandra stated.

"Oh, well, that's a relief." Candice put a hand to her chest. "Because if you consider us full adventurers, provision three, section D, would apply to us instead."

I squinted between the two of them, watching as my assigned secretary seemed to weigh Candice's words. The particular rules they were quoting meant nothing to me, but that's why I wasn't the one negotiating.

"Would you agree that utilizing provision seventeen here would set the precedent that you're also considered full-fledged adventurers for other purposes?"

"Unfortunately, so," Candice let out a put-upon sigh, and Sandra narrowed her eyes briefly.

"Then I believe you to be correct. You would qualify for provision seventeen. Though I would like your assistance, should any media criticize this decision, in coming forward and recognizing yourself as an

adventurer." Sandra paused, pulled up her CID, and tapped at it, before something chimed on Candice's.

"Have every student willing to participate sign off on one of those?" Sandra said.

"Like a field-trip waiver." Crimson giggled, and both women scowled at her.

"She's not wrong," I said, and they both seemed to judge me for a moment before settling into some tacit agreement.

"I still don't like this. There have to be other adventurers willing to put in the effort," I said before either of them could gang up on me.

"Talk to my parents," Des spoke up. "At least as far as putting in the effort, they're more than willing to join us for the low, low price of Ken making sure to bring me back for the holidays."

Crimson snickered, and I shot her a glare. "Oh, come on, it's cute."

"It really is adorable," Charlotte added.

Des didn't seem quite so convinced but simply crossed her arms and let it be as she took the opportunity to cuddle me further.

"Of course I'll go enjoy the holidays with your parents," I said, smiling. "As long as that's what you want to do."

"Yeah, just don't let them weasel too much out of you." She squinted. "I know my mother's up to something."

"Her help here will be more than worth it, I'm sure," I said quickly before Des could get too upset at her own family. The Renards all held some demonic blood, but none of them had awoken anything nearly as strong as Des's current succubus blood. Still, I wondered if that gave them all devious natures.

"My mother's a little shit," Des grumbled, only to watch as my face fell. "But she's still family," she said in a hurry, and I gave her a small smile.

"Still family," I agreed. "And your parents…" I looked at Charlotte.

"Happy to help. They brought up provision seventeen as well." She nodded toward Sandra, who seemed to understand what she meant.

I wondered if he'd have a new sword that he wanted to show me this time? Hopefully, Crimson didn't end up breaking it.

"Of course. Given that this concerns the safety of humanity, the UG will be putting forth all effort to ensure adventurers are compensated for their efforts." Sandra nodded.

I suddenly understood everything was about money. I wanted to roll my eyes.

"Still, Ken"—Crimson looked at me sideways—"I know you're not entirely comfortable with the idea, but you and the rest of your class are still amongst the strongest in humanity."

"We are strong. You're a massive outlier," Des said, turning back and giving me a pointed look that said not to refute this one. I still felt uncomfortable with the praise and being put on a pedestal, but for now, I'd just have to accept it.

"The other schools are doing decently, right?" I asked, trying to shift their focus to another group that was probably already shining nearly as brightly as our class.

"There might be some in the mid-forties," Crimson agreed, "which is substantially better than prior years, and not by a small margin. But still. You're level sixty now, Ken. Which means you're four times stronger. And your access to trial abilities, which the other schools are requesting our assistance getting as well, has certainly expedited the power of Haylon's class," Crimson said, to which Sandra was nodding along. Apparently, they'd already had that conversation without me.

"All right. So we bring our class. Do we bring the other classes from our grade?" I asked, feeling unsure how they had been progressing.

"You could, but I'd put them on the outer edge. 3A really is an anomaly amongst anomalies. Even putting you guys on a bell curve, you're outside six sigma," Sandra stated, while I didn't fully understand that significance,

Candice seemed genuinely impressed and decided that was a good metric for me to be impressed by, too.

"That's good?" I asked Candice.

"Improbably good." She nodded before glancing at Sandra. "Has that curve been adjusted for the most recent adventuring cohorts?"

"No." Sandra shook her head. "You're right, though. In another two or three years, if the trend we're seeing from all of the dungeon colleges continues, you'll probably pull into the six-sigma range. Still incredibly rare, but not statistically improbable."

"So we're just ahead of the curve by a few years. We're at the top of the curve even now," I said, understanding at least a little of what they were saying.

Sandra nodded, and whatever passed between the two of them seemed satisfactory for both. "Statistics," Candice said to me, as if that explained everything. Unfortunately, it explained very little to me, but I got the gist of it well enough.

I wondered if this was how Harley felt in our class.

"It means we don't have a whole lot of other options," Candice explained. "We're stronger than we have any right to be, at least statistically. I also think that means this is riding on our shoulders, to some extent."

"You're the best we have to offer," Sandra said. "And I would agree with the reality that now, you're the ones who get to decide what the UG does. I shudder to think if it were a bunch of the heirs having these conversations with the orkai instead of you, Ken."

I grinned at the thought of them even trying to talk to the powerful orkai. Not to mention the heirs trying to tell me or the rest of my class what to do.

Before I could say anything, Crimson bellowed a laugh. "They probably wouldn't last long. Orkai leadership is pretty reasonable, but there are also quite a few assholes in the bunch that would eat a bunch of nepo babies alive."

"The UG is at least marginally relieved its orders will be coming from people with experience in the dungeon," Sandra explained. “That, and Amatto is really championing your group as leadership from within adventuring rather than from the outside. It’s rallying many of the lower ranks in the UG that really got into this to do good for adventurers.”

"I believe it," I acknowledged and shifted my focus back to the problem at hand. "I think next we need to talk about how we're going to prepare." I tapped my CID, and a hologram appeared in front of us. "This is the information the orkai analysts were able to acquire." It showed a map of the dungeon, with the hive marked in relation to Earth.

"Dangerously close," Fayeth commented, seeing the map for the first time.

"I tend to agree, but I'm hopeful we'll be able to stave off the worst outcomes." I put my CID down and looked around the room. "Crimson, I would like your help assessing the area." I looked to Des and Charlotte. "If your families have any guidance in this, I would also be incredibly thankful for their help ensuring we have the best possible strategy." I shifted my attention to Penny. "As for your father and his guild, I'd like his help leading the lower levels. He's forty-six now, isn't he?"

"Forty-eight," Penny responded proudly. "I think we can count on him to lead some of the other students, as well as lower-level adventurers who wish to join."

"Good." I shifted my attention to Crimson. "If you've got any friends you'd like to pull out of your hat, I'm certain we could use their help in preparing. My greatest concern here isn't just our capabilities, but also our cooperation. We're bringing a lot of people to the same battlefield. Because it's a safe zone, I think we can prepare to approach it from four different directions. Our ability to portal any of the groups in will be substantial, but we'll still have to organize ourselves in such a way that we minimize our own risks." I glanced back at Sandra. "Here's where we could certainly use some help from the UG. Perhaps any veterans you might have that could make this run smoother?" I asked the last with a hopeful look.

"We will see what can be done," Sandra agreed with a nod. "Though please understand, it's not as if the UG is a war machine we can simply turn on at a moment’s notice. The UG is realistically one-half regulatory body, one-half mercantile business."

I held my hands up. "I have no illusion of it being a war machine. I simply wish to give us the best opportunity to finish this quickly."

Despite being the leader of the UG who was preparing to attack an alien race with my loves, as well as countless other responsibilities, I was still a student. Having this much responsibility would not be my first choice, but it did seem that with my power and abilities, it was falling on my shoulders.

I could feel the weight of it, and rather than try to take it all on my own, for something like this, I needed to ask for help.

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Chapter 19

Wanting some alone time, I used a portal to head over to the Haylon library to read my next lesson. Unfortunately, with the dwarves coming down the pipe as well as everything else, I was finding my Star City location too easy for people to find, and thus, I couldn't study there. In the Haylon library, there was a nice, quiet corner where I hoped no one would bother me, but my presence had not gone unnoticed.

Even walking in, I was turning heads. Many of my underclassmen stopped to stare, wide-eyed, and so I snuck back into the stacks, finding an empty, quiet corner and settling in to read.

I had just started getting into the materials when I heard somebody step up behind me. A moment of dread that someone had followed to make a scene filled me.

"Fuck, now my spot is ruined," a familiar voice stated.

I turned to find Helen, her emerald eyes full of baleful fire as she stared at me. "What do you need?" I scowled.

Rather than answer, she just lifted a book in the air. "I just want you to know that you stole my spot," she said, pointing at the table I'd just started using.

I scowled, instantly wanting to pick a fight. At this point, there was just a permanent tension between the two of us. It felt like a fight was inevitable the second I found myself in the same room as her. “Not my fault.”

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect you to be here," she said, gesturing at her table. "If I'd known I'd have to fend off the fantastic Ken Negato, perhaps

I'd have come with a sign so I could label it," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I'm just here to read, too. So if you promise not to be too much of a hassle, I'll share the table with you," I told her.

"How magnanimous of you," she said sarcastically.

"I like to think I'm pretty nice when I'm not dealing with you," I said bluntly. At this point, I wasn't going to get any work done. "Sit down. I don't have time or energy to deal with your shit today, Helen. It's just a seat, or am I that big of an obstacle?"

"Yeah, well, same." She plopped down with an arrogance that said, 'I'm doing this to prove you can't get the better of me'. "This reading Crimson wanted us to do is horrible." She changed the subject, pulling her red curls back over her shoulder.

"Have you started?" I asked.

"Yeah. I suppose Crimson rarely does things without a reason. The question is why we're reading about battlefield tactics. Also, I seriously thought 'The Art of War' was just a meme." She huffed and cracked the book open, a bookmark showing she had actually started it.

"I mean, you knew it was a real book, right?" I lifted a brow.

"Does it matter if it's real or not? The end result is still that I'm reading something more philosophical than practical." She huffed and focused on the open book as a way of ignoring me.

"Well, it's going to be important soon," I told her.

The paladin squinted. "You know why she's making us read this. Of course you do. She probably tells you everything after she's— she's d-done with you." Helen struggled with the last part.

"She tells me a fair bit. We are, after all, together," I stated, expecting a sneer or for Helen to wrinkle her nose.

Instead, she just deadpanned at me, as if asking if I needed to say that out loud.

"Well, in case you didn't know," I said stupidly, trying to justify it after her expression.

"Don't worry, we're all well aware. Maybe give me a hint as to why we're doing this? Maybe then it'll make a little more sense for those of us who aren't sleeping with the teacher," she grumbled.

I choked on her bluntness. "There's going to be a conflict between a bunch of threadspawn-infected dwarves and the rest of humanity," I said, deciding telling her would be fine enough.

"Really?" she asked, looking up from the book.

"Yes, really. Candice was negotiating with the UG yesterday, getting some sort of Provision Seventeen payment," I told her, hoping I had gotten that information right.

"Section forty-two B." She nodded to herself, smirking when she saw my face. "Do you seriously not know what that is? It's basic adventuring knowledge. The UG has utilized it a number of times over the years when they call on high-level adventurers; they get to request payment." She said the last a little smugly. "And there's a big difference between a UG call to action with the article active versus inactive."

"My grandparents have been retired, whereas I'm sure your mother has had to be more concerned with this particular rule than me," I told her.

"Fair," Helen said and went back to her book, before looking up again with another question. "We're not full adventurers."

"No, but you're going to be asked to sign a document so that you're considered one for emergency needs. It's been pointed out to me, on numerous occasions, that the class and the Silver Fangs are now quite the power amongst humanity," I explained.

"The UG is going to pay us, but then give us full adventurer status for emergency needs? You control the UG anyway. Why do they need to do that?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Formalities. If it got really bad, to the point the UG needed to take emergency measures, I'd probably call on the Silver Fangs anyway. I guess now they just feel better having it more baked in and formalized. We're here to read, right?" I said, taking out my own book and beginning without waiting for her answer.

Helen stared at me across the table for a moment, before sticking her nose back into her own book.

Conversation done, the two of us were silent at the table, save for the occasional rustle of a page. After a while, I pulled out a bag of chips, popping it open, and she scowled. I figured it was at least polite to offer her some.

"I'm not going to be able to concentrate with your munching loudly," she said, like it was my fault.

"All right, then. What's the reading about?" I asked, peeling the bag completely open flat, so she didn't have to reach in, and neither did I. Talking the reading over would be a good way to internalize much of it.

The chapter we had been assigned was about a war from about fifteen years back. However, war seemed like the wrong term. It was more a scattering of battles adventurers had gotten involved in during a conflict in the Middle East. The UG eventually stepped in once it was determined that enough rules had been broken. And multiple countries had advocated for that support, concerned that the military's use of adventurers was going to spread. It was one of the few adventurer-centric conflicts to have occurred on Earth, but it also gave decent insight into how some abilities could be used for other purposes. Crimson had also tied this to a reading on the Art of War for us to assess how they went about it all.

Helen munched on a few chips before she decided to answer the question. "I think it's a shitty use of all of our powers, not to mention the ethics of these adventurers who basically became mercenaries. Now we're all looking at how to kill people?"

"Somehow, I doubt Crimson's particularly concerned about the ethics of all of it," I said, only to earn another scowl.

"Oh, she cares. Otherwise… Do you have any idea how much money people probably offered her to go kill someone or worse?" Helen pointed out.

I wasn't entirely sure what 'worse' meant, but I ignored it for the moment.

"The Nagato Clan has its own ethics. You should have learned those as part of your initiation to the Silver Fangs," I told her.

"Yeah, yeah." Helen waved a hand. "Fine. Let's focus on how to use our abilities to kill people."

"Well, there's obviously quite a bit covered on how they used abilities to deprive resources," I offered. The small war had been savage as both sides escalated, hiring more and more adventurers, straying from direct conflicts to trying to choke off each side.

She shuddered. "Using an ability that creates a small, localized sandstorm to ruin reservoirs was particularly heinous."

I shuddered in agreement. That part of the reading had been quite unfortunate and hard to read without having my stomach turn over. The collateral had been horrific; nearly a hundred thousand died of thirst.

"Otherwise," she said, "a lot of it still harkens back to standardized war doctrine, at least according to the book. Mostly this reads as why it's a really bad idea to let adventurers engage in conflicts. I don't know how much it particularly pertains to us, who are about to start one."

"I would actually agree," I said, feeling almost uncomfortable agreeing with Helen. "It's very much a lesson in what not to do. Though I would say it highlights the danger of drawn-out conflict."

"Yeah. ‘Don't be an asshole.’ It's not that hard," she agreed with a laugh. "But most people are going to find it harder than either of us would believe. In any social system, there's someone with too much of something, and someone else willing to pay for it. Sadly, it’s often a propensity for violence."

"Well, here, we're in a position of power to do what we want with our abilities," I said, pulling another book out of my CID. This one was apparently the highlights of The Art of War.

"'Knowing one's enemy means you've already won half the battle,'" Helen quoted, and I rolled my eyes.

"That's the only thing most people can quote from this," I told her. "I was surprised it describes the ultimate victory as one won without fighting," I said, trying to continue the conversation as I picked at my chips.

"Somehow, I feel like people who try to read The Art of War really just want to start a fight and probably plug their ears and sing along when it gets to actually fighting," Helen said. "Really, the biggest advice is deception and adaptability." She tapped the table. "Now that I know what all this is for, my first thought against the dwarves would be to go kill their queen."

She checked with me, and I nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“The advice here says to go after their weak points, but I'm not sure a giant dwarf with a bunch of regeneration and minions that'll throw themselves in front of her really counts as a weak point," she told me.

"I'd agree, unless you think of it as a weak point because that's also where all their reinforcements come from," I offered.

"Well, you can stop the reinforcements by keeping her busy. You don't have to fully engage right away, do you?" Helen pressed.

"Decent point," I said, probably sounding more surprised than I meant to.

"Was I not supposed to be intelligent?" Helen snapped.

"No. You just had a better point than I expected," I answered honestly.

She rolled her eyes and finished off the chips. "You know, I'm actually pretty good at school.” Sighing, she went back to reading her book.

"Never said you were a bad student," I told her, lifting up my book to join her. "You're just not usually cooperative enough to have a conversation with."

She scowled at me over the binding of her book, before letting out a snort that seemed to decide I wasn't worth the fight and going back to what she was doing.

I shook my head. She was really impossible. The brief meeting with her mother came up in the back of my mind, and a small chuckle escaped my lips, only for her to slap the book down.

"What are you laughing at?" she snapped.

"You really shouldn't have told your mother we were a thing," I told her.

"What are you talking about?" Helen asked, though how defensive her posture was made it impossible for me to believe she didn't know.

I thought about The Art of War, and how it said to always strike at weakness, manage morale, and not give everything away. Lead with deception to gain greater understanding. "Well, your mother came to me and declared her happiness at us dating. Honestly, I was a little stunned, but I knew that if you'd lied, it was probably for a good reason. So I went ahead and rolled with it."

"Wait, you did?" Helen said, in complete disbelief.

“You're my classmate," I said and shrugged. “Given the opportunity, I wasn't simply going to chuck you under the bus and watch it bump over your poor, lifeless body."

"Imagine that often?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Sometimes, when I'm having trouble sleeping," I shot back, which only left us in an awkward stalemate as we stared at each other for a moment.

"Well, thanks, I guess," she said, sounding so thankful I nearly swooned.

"Don't mention it, really," I deadpanned. This small lie had turned into something more, but I couldn’t exactly back out now.

"Look, it's not like I wanted to lie. My mother is"—she hesitated—"obsessed with trying to get me more romantically involved in the world." The way her nostrils flared, it was clear she wasn't the biggest fan of that concept.

"Yeah, well, I suppose I don't really get to say much to that. My love life's as complicated as they get," I joked. Fuck, I was in too deep.

"Rub it in." She scowled.

"Not really my thing," I said and tried to go back to my book, lest I dig myself any deeper. Though it did feel like I’d grasped Helen’s weakness with this. Thanks, Sun Tzu, but you didn’t exactly explain how to get out of this. After all, I’m not trying to crush Helen.

"What… what did she say?" Helen was clearly not willing to let this conversation go just yet.

“She asked a lot of questions, though I was sure there were plenty she already knew the answers to what she was asking, so I had to be careful not to upset her more. I really did try my best.” There was no going back at this point.

"Never mind. As long as she doesn't start getting me any sex toys as a result of your conversation, I think we'll be okay," Helen backed off.

I held my hands up. "Like I would even feel comfortable hypothesizing about that concerning you. Your mother, while she largely ignores tact, isn't so crude as to have that conversation with me in public."

"Fuck," Helen groaned and covered her head. "Where was this? A cafe in France? Of course it was," she said after one look at my face. “And you didn't say anything weird?" she asked pointedly.

"I think I kept it fairly neutral," I told her.

"Well then… thank you." She struggled with the words, as if it had been physically hard to be that polite to me.

"You are very welcome," I said with my best smile, though it was clear she was barely paying attention, still caught up in whatever this meant between her and her mother.

"Well, back to work," I said, nodding toward the books.

She blinked, set her jaw like she was about to go stomping through the sewers, and focused back on the books before us.

"Thank you. And if it's not too much, I might have to ask a favor or two from you later. After all, you now have me caught up in this lie with my mother." She hid her face behind the book while she asked.

I wanted to point out that it was more likely she owed me, but it was also pointedly clear she'd begun ignoring me, focusing back on the book in front of her. Letting it go, I focused back on my book and let her have the last word.

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Chapter 20

"Alright, class." Crimson clapped her hands together. "We've had lessons on war and lessons on dwarves. Now, it's time to put them together. For the rest of the day, I want to split the class in half." From her lectern, she held out a hand, as if physically dividing the room. "Those of you on the left will be representing the dwarves. And I've decided"—she pointed to her eyes, then out, scanning the room—"Candice is very specifically on the dwarven side, to make this exercise as hard as possible."

There were groans from several people around the room. Meanwhile, I ended up crossing my arms and looking forward. At least Helen was on my team.

I paused and internally checked myself that I'd just actually had that thought. But the library had been a decent place to get work done, and I ended up sharing the booth a decent amount with Helen. Apparently, Crimson opened a portal between Haylon and Star City a few times a day to allow anyone in our class to go between the two.

Helen and I had had enough conversations that I thought we'd be on the same page. I paused momentarily, wondering what I'd done to think Candice being on the other team was going to work out well at all. I held back my own groan.

"As for the rest of you, you'll be a team of adventurers that happens to look very similar in composition to our class, as well as some of the most well-known adventurers in the world," she told us.

Harley raised her hand, and Crimson leveled a gaze that indicated Harley’s question better be important.

"So… are we, I don't know, going to war?" Harley asked.

"War? No, Harley. However, there's a good chance you will be fighting a large number of dwarves in the coming days."

There was a heavy groan from the class.

Candice raised her hand. "What happens if one of the teams wins?" she asked.

"Well, obviously, you win," Crimson said, in a tone that challenged Candice to ask for more.

"Is this being graded?" Candice asked more directly.

Crimson smiled. "Yes. Given that the position for your final has already been taken, I can't make it your final. But know that it will be a substantial portion of your grade. I don't do this because I take any joy in giving Harley failing marks—"

Harley yelped and then covered her mouth before Crimson made her pay for the outburst.

"—but because this is a very important exercise. Our class, whether we like it or not, is a substantial portion of the UG's and humanity's current strength. Ken has negotiated on humanity's behalf with the orkai, and one of the areas they'd like our assistance is cleaning up what appears to be a dwarven hive now infected by threadspawn." Crimson flipped her hair. "You will all be fighting alongside some of humanity's strongest and most famous adventurers. It is a wonderful learning opportunity, because you won't get many chances in life for a trial run of a battle of this magnitude or importance. It's critical you understand just how dangerous this will be and go prepared."

Harley stuck her hand in the air and, for once, looked very serious. "Will you be there?" she asked.

"I will be. But it's likely I'll be preoccupied with a number of tasks around the battle. There likely won't be many people who could take on an infected dwarven queen, so while I will be there and will do my best to look over my students, I cannot promise I'll be there to bail you out."

Crimson let out a sigh and shook her head. "Honestly, at your age, when I was in those seats, something like this would have been utterly unfathomable. And while some of you certainly need some work"—she glared directly at Harley—"many of you, despite being students, have

already grown into fine adventurers. The kind of adventurers I'd happily have at my back. So don't worry too much about everything, and simply do your best to prepare with the time we have."

Harley gave a slow, grave nod with the rest of us. I was feeling confident, and the lessons only helped me feel more prepared for what was to come.

"Good. Now, if I haven't completely killed the mood"—Crimson clapped her hands together—"let's get started and do our best to make this fun. There's no perfect system. However, those of you in the center of the room, shove your desks together. I want the classroom split in half for discussing strategies. Meanwhile, I'll lay out a grid, and we'll do this like a tabletop game." She said the last part with a strange tone and pulled reams of sheets out of her CID. "These were prepared at my request by the UG. While not perfectly accurate"—she held up one, frowning at it, before handing it off to my side, representing humanity—"it'll do for our exercise." She held another set out toward the other team, which Candice snatched and began going over with laser focus.

My group huddled back around. "Alright. Plan?" Helen asked.

Harley shook her head. "We're gonna lose. How can we beat brainiac Candice in a strategy game?"

"Given that we represent humanity in a fight we're about to actually do, I sure hope you're not already ready to lose." Des grabbed Harley by her ponytail and pulled her head back until she was face to face with her.

Harley was surprisingly flexible. "No, I'm not planning on losing."

"Good!” Des snapped. "Because we're not going to lose, right?" She looked up to me.

"Of course not. We've definitely done our reading, so we know a decent amount about the dwarves, as well as several aspects of war. I think, in this scenario, we still have the advantage of surprise. That means we don't have to fight them head-on. We can try more creative strategies." I gestured at the sheets. "We could even hang back and pick a bunch off before we fight seriously." I threw the idea out there, seeing if the suggestion would get any interest from the group.

"I don't know if that's necessarily going to work," Des offered, and Charlotte looked between us with wide eyes. But I was open to others’ ideas, and I let silence linger as I looked at the board and considered our options.

"Anyone else have thoughts?" I opened it up, rather than letting our tight-knit group run over everyone else with our decisions.

"Well, if we work the problem the way we've been taught," Helen said, "what's their weakness?"

"The threadspawn or the dwarves?" I asked.

"Both," Des said before Helen could give her own answer.

"What she said." Helen tipped her head, and Des looked absolutely scandalized by the agreement.

Wendy raised a hand. "Well, I'm not certain, but aren't the drones fairly weak individually?"

Myrtle piped up, "They should be wandering the area collecting loot and food to bring back to the hive pretty much constantly. So, if we pick off drones, can we starve them out?"

I shook my head. "I have no clue how much of a stockpile they have, or how long it'll take for drones not coming back to starve them. Even then, it's hard to know how they would react to that problem. They could very well have years of storage."

Helen cleared her throat, and I gave her my attention, which happened to make the rest of the group stare at her, too. "I think cutting off the drones can't hurt. Worst case, we lose some element of surprise, but I doubt we'd really have much surprise anyway. The second we show up, everything we understand about the dwarves says they're able to communicate quickly, quietly, and across long distances. So chances are, the second we enter the hive, the jig is up."

"All right," I said, meeting Helen's eyes. "Then the plan for round one is trimming the herd to start."

Helen seemed taken aback that I would simply go with her idea. But it was good enough with what we knew at the moment.

"We're ready." I raised a hand.

Across the room, Candice's group looked like they were ready to flay us all alive. "We are ready as well."

"Good. Let the first scenario commence!" Crimson clapped her hands together.

The first scenario lasted all of twenty minutes. We made a general plan, then our group split up, each person controlling a number of tokens individually to speed the whole process along. Meanwhile, Candice sat back and coached her group one by one.

I was a little concerned before we started that everyone would cheat to some extent, but to my surprise, the class all seemed to be taking this practice very seriously. There wasn't even a hint of cheating from Candice's side. She was meticulous and only made decisions on her side of the field based on what they should know. All in all, it was set up to be really great, except that we got our asses handed to us.

I scowled at the board after our first loss and met Candice's eyes. "You're very good at this."

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, pulling back her hair.

Helen grunted from our side. "You guys do realize she's like a RISK champion, right?"

"Fuck," Harley cursed. "Can you be bad at more things? Please, Candice." The bard pulled at her hair. "Or if you're going to be good, can you be on my team?"

“Just think! Maybe playing you will be harder than actually going against the dwarves for real," Wendy tried to sound hopeful.

I waffled my head, not sure if that would be true, but this was valuable training. "Come on, guys, we got this," I rallied my team. "We're just going to play another round."

***

It was demoralizing to admit, but Candice was fantastic at war tactics. We lost almost every game we played. The final score was twelve to three. At that point, Crimson flipped the teams and put Candice on the side of humanity, and our team took over the dwarves.

Over the week, we played a multitude of games. Once we switched sides, the game went well for about two rounds before it ended extraordinarily poorly. Candice had managed to win, despite the odds, though as soon as the game ended, it was apparent why.

"You can't do that," Harley shot back. "You made the character that's clearly supposed to be me commit suicide."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I simply played my role," Candice said, folding her hands in her lap with the faintest of smirks.

I watched for a moment, ready to step in.

"Yeah, well, when I was controlling little Harley and you were the dwarves, you went after her multiple times.”

“I was targeting critical supports, not you,” Candice retorted, and I saw a glimmer of what she’d been doing.

"It's not how this works." I frowned at Candice. "Candice, you have to play the game, not the players," I said, realizing what had happened. She was smart enough to not only play the game but also start to pick at our members and get them angry enough to make mistakes. That wasn’t really applicable to what we were trying to learn.

The blonde blinked, looked at me, and immediately dropped her head. "Apologies. I was getting competitive and not giving this *game*," she said the word with a heavy touch of irony, "the attention it deserves."

"It's just a game," Harley said, crossing her arms and leaning back.

"It isn't," Helen snapped at her.

"Of course it is. Look at the board." Harley waved her hands at the combined desks.

"Maybe to you"—Helen stabbed an accusing finger at her—"it's just a game. We're all about to go and do this fight for real. This is practice that could save our lives."

“We’re just going to go and do what the UG tells us. This isn’t that important,” Harley spat back.

"Yeah, then what about fucking Ken?" Helen used me to raise this a notch.

Harley jumped, and most of the class sat there silently.

"What about Ken?" Helen pushed.

Harley gave a dismissive wave. "Yeah, Ken's fucking awesome. He's also fucking Crimson. But that doesn't mean—"

Helen slammed her hand into the table, her passion as fiery as her hair. "Are you really that dense? Do you not get it?"

Harley guffawed, then looked around the room, realizing she was on an island. She hesitated, then sighed. "What is it that I don't get?"

Helen pointed a finger at me. "Ken took over the UG because a bunch of assholes were causing problems for them that would have absolutely rippled out to a bunch of the other adventurers and us. Those heirs were assholes who were killing adventurers in droves with stupid decisions. Him taking over likely saved a good number of lives. Our lives!"

I hadn't expected that from Helen but stayed quiet.

"Now the UG is going on the offensive. Guess what happens if it all goes tits-up? If a bunch of people die here, who's everyone going to turn to and

blame?" Helen asked.

"The UG, right?" Harley answered proudly.

"Great. And now Ken's the head of the UG, so who does *he* get to blame?" Helen asked.

Harley understood then and swallowed. "Probably no one."

"Exactly right. So step up and be something other than a burden to him and this class," Helen said, then turned on Candice. "Which is why you're going to play this like the dwarves and not simply to win. But good job messing with Harley."

"Hey!" Harley shouted.

"Oh, you brought that on yourself," Helen said. "If you want me to stop picking on you, stop reacting so much because you clearly love the attention," she snapped. "Now let's do this right so that maybe, just maybe, all this practice is more than just a classroom exercise and makes some real-world impact." Helen sat down with her arms crossed and an angry glare for everyone.

Beside me, Des muttered, "Did not have Helen coming to your rescue on my bingo card today."

"Yeah, well…" I paused and stayed my tongue before it caused any reaction from Des. Whatever this was, I would take it. Maybe we were managing to form some sort of odd friendship. Though I had lied to start this and was a little stuck, it didn't entirely suck.

The class was still frozen from Helen's outburst.

"Helen's right," I said, stepping up and taking the reins. "We're practicing for a real fight. And we're not only trying to save other people's lives"—I met Candice's eyes—"we're trying to save our own. The threadspawn are a very real threat that's already caused issues on Earth. If we don't take out the hive closest to Earth, there's a chance it comes back to bite all of us. We could lose family. Heck, we could lose ourselves. So I'd appreciate it if you did your best to play the dwarves authentically and not antagonize Harley so that she makes mistakes. Understanding the potential risks here helps all of us be more aware in what's likely to be a very chaotic battle."

I could tell Candice had half a dozen excuses on the tip of her tongue, but she was also smart enough to realize they were all just excuses. Closing her mouth, she nodded.

"I apologize," she said, bowing to Harley. "I was antagonizing you, because that's how I could ensure my side won the game. But Ken is right.

The game is practice for something far more important, and I will take it more seriously."

"Good," I said and dropped the subject. She had agreed, and now we had work to do to finish this exercise.

"Back to the game," I said. While some of them had been treating it as a game from the start, I had understood the importance of this exercise and had been practicing and playing with the pieces as if they were my own party's lives. I was not taking this lightly in the slightest. I would preserve as much human life as I could manage while we removed the threadspawn threat.

"Sorry," Harley mumbled and scratched the back of her neck. "I guess you must be going through a lot," she said, and I smiled.

"It's fine. Just do better," I told her.

***

After we had finished the exercise, I found myself standing with Director Amatto, going over a final plan to move forward. It felt eerily similar to the games, but the stakes felt so much higher.

"Everything alright, Ken?" she asked, glancing at me. I must have been making a face.

"Peachy," I said with a smile and turned back to her, Sandra, and a host of adventurers standing ready and waiting.

"Given that this safe zone is at the center of their activities, we're going to split the units into four main groups and close the net about one safe zone away. We will attack them from each direction," I told them, the weight of responsibility hanging heavily from my shoulders.

Sandra raised a pen to get everyone's attention. "We've already secured transport to each of those safe zones," she explained.

"Thank you for the clarification," I said. "Our elven allies will be taking this direction." I pointed to one line in the diagram, representing a path down into the dungeon. "Meanwhile, our second team will be led by the Harem Queen"—I pointed to another path—"and the… former president of the UG." I nodded to Scaredy Cat, who was present, though no longer standing in a position of authority. "The final team will be with most of my class and me. We'll be coming up from deeper in the dungeon. We expect there might be stronger forces on that end, and this group is our highest

combat potential." I glanced at Crimson, who was for once being serious, watching the proceedings with her arms tucked tightly behind her back.

"Individual failure is unacceptable," Crimson intoned. "Each side is being given substantial resources. Though I'm certain this won't go perfectly, it's on each of you to make this as successful as possible."

"It will be done," several people voiced in unison, and Crimson's attention didn't waver.

"Everyone's assignment is being sent out to their CIDs separately, and we will report to our units shortly after this meeting. Understand that each group is to be broken into thirds based on strength. Once you clear successfully to the safe zone, I want the weakest contingent of your group to hang back and protect the entrance to the safe zone, while the more capable adventurers push in with the rest of us."

"What about unexpected situations?" someone asked.

"That's up to you to handle. I'd suggest having some capability to fall back ready in case they have significant reinforcements or your zone gets pushed hard. And a reminder for everyone present: the goal here is to remove a danger to humanity. There's no sense in holding back or using this as a training ground for members of your guild," I offered.

I didn't think any of them needed the reminder, but the solemn nods all around were at least comforting. The chances that someone died today were decent. I just hoped we came out of this in good enough shape that we'd be able to revive them once it was done.

All of the scenarios we ran through were rough estimates, but the one thing that stood out was that the harder and faster we pushed from the start, the less loss we suffered. Going in from four directions was necessary to split the dwarven forces and prevent the threadspawn from escaping and moving their operation.

"Any final questions?" I asked, as most of their CIDs began chiming as the packets Sandra had prepared began arriving.

"None here," Elysara said, looking quite official in her ornate armor. Neldra stood beside her, her hand never leaving the pommel of her sword, staring down everyone like a fierce guard dog throughout the entire meeting.

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Chapter 21

Arthur Renard stood with the Harem Queen as the rest of their group walked through the portal. At over four hundred strong, it was one-third of humanity’s strength above level 40. So many had either given the dungeon up or focused on making a living over risking themselves further in the dungeon.

"How do you feel about all this?" the gray-haired warlock asked, turning to the woman.

The Harem Queen let out a beaming smile. "I think it's fantastic to watch the changing of the guard. At least we lived to see it, right?"

"Of course we lived to see it. I'm not that old." Arthur scowled at her words.

"Honey, don't let her get under your skin again." Desmonda's mother patted Arthur on the chest as she walked by, then cast a scowl towards the Harem Queen that turned into a sickly-sweet smile. "I hear your daughter still hasn't found her way into Ken's good graces. Perhaps after this, you can talk to Des. I'm sure my dear daughter would be willing to put in a good word for Helen."

"Some people just aren't meant to be," the Harem Queen replied, dismissing the comment quickly. "I'm more interested in this fight ahead than my daughter's pathetic excuse for a love life."

Arthur visibly winced at how much bite was in those words. "She's a charming young lady. Certainly, she's had some interest."

"Absolutely none," the Harem Queen said. "It is her failing and no one else's. I think it should be on her to resolve it, even if, as a mother, I wish I could fix everything for her." Heather set her jaw. "But again, I think I must remind you that it's time we focus on the matter at hand. While our children are certainly stepping up, we can't let them do all of the work on this." She glanced around the group gathered with them. "It looks like everyone's here. Let's get a move on." The Harem Queen lifted her sword as it sparked blue, catching fire as if it had been coated in oil. Her hair splayed out behind her.

Bringing up the rear, their group numbered over a hundred main combatants, and about twice that in support. There was no reason to keep numbers limited, so they had brought in plenty of healers. They could stay in back and be kept safe with those of lower levels, helping clear chaff and run messages between the groups. There was no guarantee the CIDs would work at all, and in many ways, they'd have to go old-school to ensure communications traveled swiftly between groups.

They'd already killed a handful of dwarves in the current safe zone, but now they were headed for the floor below. As she moved, dozens of dwarves came into view, and she flashed forward, her blade burning as she cleaved the air before her.

The space was set alight in a wave of blue fire that caught the dwarves and burned them to ash in a second. The few out of her range suddenly turned black, as darkness seemed to spill out between their pores, quickly consuming their lives.

Heather marched through the dungeon floor, the group fanning out behind her.

The Renards kept pace easily, throwing out afflictions that caused many of the dwarves they spotted to cease functioning correctly or dealt enough damage to kill them before the larger group reached them. The mass of adventurers pressed down upon their enemies with sheer numbers, solving everything with remarkable speed.

It was impressive how well the army could strip all life from a dungeon floor. The dwarves simply didn't stand a chance, made even more abundantly apparent as many of them began running even before they saw her group. More and more seemed to know they were coming and rushed away in advance. It wasn’t surprising. They already knew the dwarves had some way to communicate across long distances—as did the threadspawn.

Heather was moving as fast as she could while keeping the group with her. Even the dwarves who'd begun to run wouldn't get far. Their group was like a blade sweeping through the area, clearing the first floor in less than twenty minutes, already preparing to move on to the next.

Soon a dozen dwarves began to stuff themselves into the stairway down to the next floor. Unlike her daughter, who was taking literal classes to prepare for this, Heather had hired several experts who'd prepared dossiers on the dwarves. She understood that this group before her weren't the drones they'd just been cutting down in droves. These were the warrior caste, with more self-awareness and considerably more strength.

They didn't speak. The first three simply held up large shields and formed a wall several dwarves thick, while those behind drew back javelins and spears, warning her army not to try to pass.

"Pathetic," Arthur said from behind her, his hand outstretched as purple orbs floated up the stairs, as if each had a mind of its own, tracking the dwarves in the back. Even as they swung their spears, trying to bat the orbs away, the motion was futile. The orbs passed through their weapons, reaching the dwarves in back before exploding in shadowy flames, setting them alight.

The chaos was enough that Heather took a proud step forward that boomed within the dungeon stairs, launching herself down them in the blink of an eye, a blue flicker of flame trailing after her sword as the dwarves simply fell apart in her wake.

"Fancy." Arthur chuckled.

"I like to think I don't need fancy tricks, but sometimes it's fun to show off," Heather winked. "As long as you do it tastefully," she added with a subtle pause and a glare for Desmonda's mother.

"Beauty and taste are really in the eyes of the beholder," Desmonda’s mother said calmly. The two of them had once competed for Arthur's affections and had been at friction more than once since that time. Then again, it wasn't as though their children understood the conflict between them and had somehow put them in the same grouping.

The Harem Queen huffed. "I hope you're not just all talk today. We are here to fight, after all."

"Of course," Desmonda’s mother said with the sweet smile of a devil. "But we have the easy part. It seems our kids are going to have all the fun."

She crossed her arms and began strolling down the stairs, only to flick her wrist and take down a dozen more dwarves.

There was a flood of action happening farther ahead. It seemed dwarves were amassing a huge army not far away.

The Harem Queen braced herself for what she knew would be a massive battle and shouted over her shoulder, "I want a team of level fifties at the base of these stairs, protecting the support teams behind us. Everyone else, down here with me!"

There was a rapid flurry of reshuffling based on her command. Not sparing any of her attention, the Harem Queen faced forward. It was clear the dwarves weren't going to give them time to prepare as a dozen warriors charged up front, with hundreds of drones rushing silently behind them. All their steps together made the dungeon rumble and roar before the first blade even connected.

***

The fighting had begun. Multiple of our groups had already made contact with the enemy, and it was my class’s turn to start as well.

I waved my class forward. It was strange that we were now a power unto ourselves despite still being in school. Grandpa and a number of the Silver Fangs marched with us, though we would likely leave them in position to deal with many of our smaller opponents. This was, after all, a rather risky attack.

Eager for a fight, my classmates rushed first, with the rest of our tanks not far behind. Dwarves were scattered throughout the area, and we'd already cleaned up a fair few of them at the previous safe zone as we had pushed up through the dungeon from the lower floors.

The dwarves had been scattered around, killing monsters and collecting resources. It was an orderly process. Oftentimes, those doing the killing and those running off with the loot were different dwarves, especially given that they never seemed to use an inventory of any sort. They simply gathered items or materials off the ground, throwing them over their shoulders or collecting them in loose bundles in their arms before hurrying back toward the hive. They were oddly similar to ants.

Our group had moved along the dungeon wall to get in front of them and cut off the next floor before a massacre began. We did not show an ounce of

mercy as we worked our way through the dwarves. They certainly wouldn't have shown us any if the roles were reversed.

I scowled briefly at the thought, wondering if I was being too cruel. But from everything we'd seen of the dwarves, they were truly heartless creatures, toiling away like robots.

The way the dwarves so tirelessly worked came with a hollow expression that I suspected showed just how little attention they gave to any particular task. There wasn't anything behind those eyes besides processing the task before them.

While I finished off the dwarf in front of me, Des bounced to a stop next to me hard enough that her soft bits jiggled pleasantly, and she snapped a salute. "General, the floor is clear." She'd been in an incredible mood since her succubus transformation. Though, at present, she had a military cap on, which was out of place with the warlock robes.

I scowled briefly at her, but she maintained a stoic face. It was just absurd of her to do this whole bit.

"Alright, proceed to the next floor." I let my command come out loud enough for everyone to hear. "Tanks, up the stairs."

Des pointed. "You, too, Helen," she added for emphasis, and the redhead scowled at her.

"Take this seriously," I told her.

"I am," Des shot back with a saucy wink. "It's just… when is a girl going to get a chain-of-command fantasy like this again?"

"Alright, Des, you're with the tanks. Hurry up, and make sure to slow any of the dwarves that try to run away," I told her, completely ignoring the comment about her fantasy. What even was that kink? Really, Des had all the kinks and just enjoyed playing with them.

"Aye aye, Captain." She slapped a salute, and I wanted to press my face into my palm. Apparently, I was both a captain and a general. And now I needed to figure out what the fuck a chain-of-command fantasy was so I could help Des live her dreams.

Everybody moved, ignoring Des's antics, but I could see the slight lift it gave to the room. And despite her horsing around verbally, she was all seriousness as she followed the tanks up the stairs. She understood that I refused to let anybody mess around in the dungeon to the point that they could get hurt, especially those I loved.

Grandpa came to a speedy stop next to me. "She's quite the spitfire, isn't she?" He rubbed his chin.

"Yeah, but she's my spitfire, so she gets some leniency," I told him.

"Of course. A man should always treat his harem better than anyone else." Grandpa nodded sagely, walking alongside me with his hands behind his back.

I moved along the back of the fighting group, helping make sure everybody got out to the next area and providing leadership direction. I was itching to do more direct work, but until we got to harder fights, I was meant to hold back. The same went for Crimson, though her idea of not holding back took a slightly different form.

I looked over to see her lounging with a drink.

"Are you going to stay like that through all of this?" I asked her, pointedly, only for her to slurp loudly through the straw stuck in a coconut, complete with a little yellow umbrella.

"Can't I?" she asked. "It's not like you guys need me with these small fry." She waved a hand at the dwarves being cleaned up.

"You know that's not what I mean," I told her.

"Yeah, well, this is good experience for all of them. And I'm saving my strength for when we get into the hive, and there's the queen and the warriors. Not to mention the threadspawn." Her eyes glowed blue.

So far, in cleaning up all the drones, there hadn't been any threadspawn among them, much to my own surprise. Then again, the threadspawn had been slaves to the drow. It was possible that handing off all the manual labor to the dwarven drones held particular enjoyment for them. I scowled at the thought. I'd hoped for better from a race that had been hurt so badly.

I followed after the main group, stepping up the dungeon stairs and finding our group working to clear the floor. I activated [Eyes of Wisdom] to locate where the next stairs up would be, following the blue line until I found Penny and Des stationed at the base, both of whom snapped a salute as I came closer.

"I get nothing out of your salute, Des," I said, hoping to discourage her.

"Oh, but I get a lot." Des winked, a giant smile splitting her face. "I bet Penny over here is getting plenty of inspiration," she said, bouncing her brows.

"It is kind of hot," Penny agreed.

I scowled at the two of them, then back at Crimson. "Crimson, you're going to come with me. We're going to cut off the dwarves from the main hive. I'm a little worried something's going to come from the other side if this all takes too long."

Des wrinkled her nose, only to spot my reaction and salute again. "Sir, yes, sir!"

"Fine, I suppose that probably wouldn't be completely without merit." Crimson got up with the groan of an old man and drained the last of her coconut before chucking it off to the side hard enough that it broke the sound barrier.

"Worse than Grandpa's," I said calmly, only for her to grab at her hip.

"No, but you could go easier on me. I swear, now that you've gotten more strength, it's even tougher than before." She clung to me with wide eyes.

Rather than blush or shy away, I simply squinted at Crimson, ready to call her on her bullshit.

She realized and stuck out her lower lip. "Fine, fine," she suddenly said in a hurry, when I didn't fold like a lawn chair.

Des did a double-take and jumped right in behind Crimson's urgency.

"Grandpa, you're in charge of these forces. Behave," I said to him and rushed to catch up with Crimson, who had already started moving.

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Chapter 22

Crimson and I stood by the stairs. Every few minutes, another dwarf would try to wander down, only for Crimson's whip to snap out, scoop him up, and deposit him in front of Penny. Penny then would heave her blade off her shoulder, cleaving down into the freshly caught dwarf before it even realized what was happening.

Crimson yawned. "Just another day of hard labor you're putting me through, Ken." She leaned back, hands on her hips, and popped her back.

Thankfully, I didn't have to deal with their antics much longer, because I could already see our raid closing in on the safe zone. This floor was already mostly cleared, and the final scraps of dwarves were being taken care of while my people tightened their ranks. I flicked open my CID and tapped on it, only for the Harem Queen's face to appear, the connection flickering in and out.

"Oh, Ken, lovely to see you. I hope everything is going well on your side."

"Well enough," I said.

"Helen said she'd take great care of you during this trip." The Harem Queen winked. "Don't lose hope for her yet."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'd muddled all of this with a lie. It sounded like Helen had already deepened it on her end. Fuck this was almost certain to come back and bite me in the rear at some point. "I'll do my best," I said to the Harem Queen, noncommittally. "But, more

importantly, we're closing in on the safe zone from our end. How's your side?"

"We've already had a number of warriors appear and try to stop us. They must know something's up," she reported.

I frowned and glanced at the pile of dwarven bodies nearby. "We haven't seen a single warrior. Perhaps you've drawn them all."

"Perhaps," the Harem Queen said, "but don't worry; they haven't been a problem. We've only had a few needing revived, but we haven't lost anyone permanently yet."

"Good." I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. "I'll contact the others to make sure they're in position, but you should expect to move in the next five minutes." I set a timer on my CID as I said it.

"We will be," the Harem Queen said, with a beaming smile while she fidgeted with her own CID. "Take care of my daughter for me." She winked and ended the call.

Des, beside me, snickered. "Oh, yes, we'll take wonderful care of Helen."

I gave her a long enough stare that she mimed zipping her lips. "I mean, in all fairness, her mother did ask us to. However, I doubt your interpretation and hers are the same," I said, pointedly.

"Oh no, I'm sure they're more similar than you realize." Des chuckled, pulling up her CID and calling her father, her expression flitting from its usual joyfulness to something stern and emotionless. "We're almost wrapped here. I hope you're in position." I suppose even if her family was on the same route as the Harem Queen, it was still polite to keep them informed.

I saw the gruff man on the other side of the screen.

"We'll have this finished clearing momentarily, but we have enough forces at the final safe zone that even if we're a few minutes late to the party, nothing will slip past us," he told us.

"Prepare to go in four minutes," Des said and canceled the call before he could respond. She turned back to me with a smile plastered on her face. I knew her family was rather demanding of her and her siblings, but it was still uncomfortable watching her expression flit to something so different from normal and back again.

"Everything all right?" I asked quickly.

"It's fine." Des waved away the concern. "Renards don't do the friendly-family vibe. It's more hierarchical. If I smiled, it would make him

uncomfortable."

"Like the military," I said, and she waffled her head.

"That wouldn't be incorrect." She waved a hand.

"And is that where your wanting to play chain-of-command comes from?"

Des gave me a horrified look. "Ew, no, no, ick, ick, ick, ick." She started rubbing her shoulders like she was trying to get the thought off of her.

I turned with a smile as my CID opened to show Elysara in more ornate armor than I'd ever seen her in before.

"Oh, are you guys finally done?" she asked.

"We're going to move in a few minutes here. We were letting some of our lower-level members get most of the experience," I told her and then shared my timer.

"Ah," Elysara said, her smile broadening. "Neldra made it a competition for the sentries, so our floors didn't last long."

"How long?" I asked and checked the time.

"About three minutes."

I noticed Elysara looking down, distracted, then suddenly heard Neldra in the background beginning to bark orders. "We'll move with you. I will note we didn't see much to indicate there was threadspawn on this floor," Elysara said.

I nodded slowly. "Same on our end. We're guessing the threadspawn, after being slaves themselves, have let the drones take care of most of the grunt work. That, or they're not disturbing the hive too much. Perhaps they need it, and the drones, to keep functioning as usual."

Neldra's voice came from the side before her head popped into view. "I doubt threadspawn are exactly experts in how to maintain all of this."

"Another good point," I said. "We'll have to wait and see for now. I'd rather not spend all our time speculating."

"Fair," Neldra said, holding her hands out. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"Well, I welcome your thoughts, especially from someone as wise as you," I tried to butter her up, only for Neldra to scowl.

"Did he just call me old?" she asked, a sharp expression overcoming her features.

"I don't think he was calling you old," Elysara said quickly, though I could tell by her face there was a correct answer to that one.

"No. And let's put that aside to deal with what we came here to do, Neldra," I reprimanded her, only to hear Elysara hiss in laughter.

"He got you there."

Through the whole exchange, Neldra's eyes were nothing but cold and dead as they stared back at me. "I eagerly await the conclusion of this discussion," Neldra said and turned away to yell at soldiers again.

"Don't mind her," Elysara said quickly. "She's been in a bad mood lately."

"Something you did?" I asked.

"Oh, no. She'd never be upset with me," she dismissed the possibility. "Family stuff, is all." She didn't give me much detail, so I'd have to leave it for later.

"Later?" I asked.

Elysara nodded. "Later, for sure. For now, let's finish this."

I nodded to her and closed out the call on my CID, glancing up and looking around. "Alright, everyone! We move in a minute. Do what you need to be prepared." There were a number of nods as people sorted themselves out, filling up on water or sitting down to triple-check their equipment one last time, straightening their belts and scabbards as they prepared for a fight in their own ways.

I then opened a call to the new UG president to make sure she'd be moving with us, too.

***

As soon as I stepped into the safe zone, I could already tell it was different from anything we'd seen thus far. Where so often it was a large, open area, this one was much different. Instead, from floor to ceiling, taking up a good two-thirds of the central area, was a massive, smooth stone structure. It wasn't ornate in any way, but it was strangely cohesive, as if it had been carved from a single slab of stone. The thing had an odd elegance to it, minimalistic yet solid.

"Not what I expected," Des said, stepping up behind me.

"Me neither." I stared at the structure. The whole thing twisted and wound upward, filled to the absolute brim with dwarves hustling and bustling about.

"Surprised?" Crimson asked, stepping out beside me with a hand on her hip, watching me closely.

"More civilized than I expected," I admitted.

"Fair." Crimson tilted her head. Our appearance had caused more than a few of the dwarves to turn in our direction, pausing in their tasks. Some of the drones dropped what they were doing and threw themselves forward. Others ran deeper within the safe zone. A few of the warriors met our current challenge, and those that came were already being engaged by Grandpa and his people.

Still, I hadn't seen much in the way of threadspawn. Activating [Eyes of Wisdom], I peered deeper into the safe zone with my ability, only to be proven right. While many of the dwarves on the outskirts were uninfected, those within the depths of the hive were all infected and beginning to move now that we'd come and picked a fight.

They were surrounded. There was no option for them to try to escape otherwise.

As we began fighting, the drones were quickly replaced by dozens of warriors, these with far more intelligence in their gaze. And unlike the drones who fought simply, the warriors had actual skills they used to great effect.

But even with those skills, the first wave met an unfortunate end as Crimson stepped forward, her whip lashing out and turning most of them into mincemeat before they even had an opportunity to put up a fight.

"I thought you were going to hold back." I smirked at Crimson.

"Would you like me to stop helping?" she threatened.

"No?" It came out more like a question. "And while you might be a brutal trainer, I refuse to believe you're going to leave us high and dry."

Crimson rolled her eyes but didn't deny the fact. "Everyone, keep your eyes open. There's something coming."

Her words were cryptic, but I could see with [Eyes of Wisdom] that all the threadspawn I'd been tracking were beginning to move. It did not take long before they began to pour out of the hive.

I watched a number of familiar races of nekorian, orkai, and even some sort of large, hairy people come storming out, one after another. I frowned at the new species, which I could only describe as bigfoot, with dark, matted brown fur and faces that leaned right into the uncanny valley.

"Grims," Misha offered. "They're peaceful people. Don't worry."

"Somehow, I suspect these are going to be less peaceful than promised," I said, glancing at the large, heavy blades they carried.

Her tail flopped against the ground. "You're probably right. Of course you're right. They're threadspawn-infected, after all. We'll talk about the grims later."

With all the other races present, it was no surprise that quite a few humans were among them as well, staring at us with deep scowls on their faces. One of them I couldn't help but recognize, and I lifted a finger, pointing accusingly.

"You don't get to come to our world and cause problems," I declared, shouting across the space.

One of the threadspawn in a nekorian's body slowly tilted his head toward the one I had pointed to. There was some silent communication between them before what I could only assume was the leader's head twisted back to me. "It was unaware your people were expert trackers. This will be remembered for a future host."

"No, this won't be remembered, because I'm going to kill all of you," I said. "Meanwhile, the orkai are descending on many of your other bases."

The leader twisted his head in a gesture of curiosity. "You speak with such conviction. I suppose we'll know in time whether your conviction holds truth or falsehood. Either way, today, I am the prophet to tell this future." His eyes glanced over our whole group. "Though from what little I currently understand of humanity, I must thank you for bringing such an opportunity to our door. There are many high-level hosts."

While we were speaking, the drones that had previously attempted to attack our group retreated through the back of the hive, toward its center. I failed to understand exactly what was happening, but I doubted it was going to end well for us.

Doing a quick check with [Eyes of Wisdom], I found more and more threadspawn-infected dwarves pouring out of the center, as if they were being made there. But I knew the truth of what was happening. The hive, which may have previously been allowed to function normally and keep working, was now being sacrificed to fight all of us.

I drew my weapon. I had hoped to learn more, but the stalling was only going to benefit them as they created more fighters. My weapon was out and at the ready, so I sent it straight into the face of the nearest threadspawn. My blade sank deep, but it was just one down as many more appeared. Threadspawn-infected dwarven drones poured out from the base

of the structure. Crimson's whip lashed out and diced a good many of them to pieces, only for them to stand right back up.

"I knew I hated these things." She cracked her whip as the mass reached our own forces, becoming close enough that she could no longer attack so recklessly.

My blades hummed as I dove in with [Eyes of Wisdom] active. I stabbed cleanly through the threadspawn on multiple hosts, flitting through the drones like a flicker of death as I came and went through the fight. Threadspawn fell, and this time, they didn't revive so easily.

"You!" a threadspawn shouted, getting right up in my face.

I scowled right back. "Yes, I know you."

It was the human threadspawn I'd pointed out only moments earlier. He lashed out with a punch that I easily caught, rolling my weight and driving his force to the side and away, to his disheartened expression. That look lasted until my blade pierced his chest. I threw him to the ground a moment later, moving past to the next target.

I had clearly made myself a target. As soon as I turned from dealing with him, there were no fewer than a dozen other threadspawn bearing down on me. Three dwarven warriors came at me from every direction with long spears and barbed tips. I blocked two and dodged out of the third's reach, but I hadn't seen the fourth warrior come up from behind.

I learned he was there as one of its barbed tips dug through my leg, causing me to stumble to the side. This time, when they came back at me, I wasn't quite so nimble. I drove one spear to the ground to stabilize myself as another caught me in the waist, and the third jumped high, trying to drive its spear into me.

I lifted my hand, but a blast of Des's green fire caught the jumper and sent him tumbling and well done with charred edges.

I spun, wrenching the barbed spear painfully out of my leg as green, soothing waves of energy rippled across the wounds, closing them in seconds.

Charlotte gave me a thumbs-up, and I smiled back before a golden shield appeared in front of me just in time to take a large spell that had flown across the battlefield, aimed directly at me.

Helen appeared behind it, spun, and the shield on her arm rocketed off in a trail of golden flames, hitting the threadspawn that had cast the spell, before reappearing on her arm in a blink.

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it," she said, just as quickly. "I'm just jumping in like I'm supposed to do as a tank." She ducked her head and turned away.

I watched her go, noting that we'd had a civil conversation for once.

Not dwelling on the fact, I looked for more threadspawn to kill. Unfortunately, there were plenty to choose between. While Crimson could take the intense approach of simply destroying the entire body and everything in a ten-foot radius, not everyone was equipped to end the threadspawn for good. In fact, most people were doing little more than stalling them.

The threadspawn were simply reviving their hosts moments later, healing them back to full and getting them right back into the fight. That ability had been incredibly dangerous in the first few moments. We had lost several of the Silver Fangs simply because they were caught off guard when a threadspawn revived behind them, catching them unaware.

The threadspawn certainly weren't ones for fair play; they revived and almost immediately went for people's ankles, slashing the Achilles tendon before rolling to their feet and resuming the fight they'd just lost. Of course, that just meant our healers had to work overtime, trying to make up for other people's mistakes. It was honestly the worst part of being a healer, and the reason I would never want to be one.

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Chapter 23

With Charlotte and Helen's help, I was back on my feet and resuming the fight. I cast [Eyes of Wisdom] to see where the threadspawn leaders had gone, only to find that they'd retreated deeper into the massive structure while most of us were still fighting outside.

Crimson, on the other hand, hadn't moved, remaining stoic where she stood, as if waiting for something specific. I watched her for a moment, curious, before red lightning crackled along her form. She darted through the crowd like a sudden bolt of lightning, dragging one of my classmates out.

Wendy’s body was pierced and bloody with a dozen wounds. Crimson set her down and stared at one of the support staff until they began to revive her. It wasn't solving the issue for us, but I couldn't help but give Crimson a heavy nod of respect.

"Go," she said, with a nod toward the center of the dwarven hive. "I've got it handled out here. This is good experience for your classmates that you don't need. After all, they weren't trained to kill other people."

My mouth snapped closed, and any argument I might have had died on my lips as I nodded and motioned for my group to follow, though the group that stepped forward to join me was not entirely who I was expecting. I glanced back to see Helen, Misha, Charlotte, and Selene hot on my heels.

"Oh, don't worry. We've got you, Ken," Selene promised.

I gave her a big smile in return. I wasn't disappointed, just confused by the change in group.

As we charged forward into the hive, the threadspawn clearly weren't happy, diving forward and throwing themselves, life and limb, between the hive and me.

Misha showed off her strength, jumping forward and petrifying a dozen of them, only for Helen and me to come up behind her, shattering the petrified dwarves. My blades quickly found the threadspawn within each of the bodies. I eliminated them with as much prejudice as I could summon.

Helen's shield glowed gold as she smashed it into several of the petrified figures, then spun and whipped her mace into another. "If they don't want us to go this way, then I think this is exactly where we should be!" Helen shouted over the fighting.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Charlotte was keeping up, but I shouldn't have worried. As she passed one of the petrified statues, she drew back her staff and clubbed it with enough force to shatter it, pumping her fist in the air in satisfaction, before realizing we'd all watched and blushing deeply.

"Go, Bun-Bun!" she shouted, pointing forward.

The rabbit, at least, seemed to be pulling his own weight in the fight. I hadn't been impressed with him lately, but he let out a shrill cry of victory and bounced through several of the crowd-controlled targets with a deep growl I hadn't expected from the little guy. Then he bounced off and continued deeper into the hive ahead of us.

Helen and Misha followed behind. I hung back only to make sure Charlotte and Selene were able to keep up. It was moments like these that I was glad that Crimson had made us train so hard. We all had the physical endurance to rush through a battle, but I still wanted to stay nearby in case a threadspawn popped back to life and caught them unaware.

As if reading my mind, one jumped back up to try to attack Charlotte, only for Charlotte's staff to find its chin and send it sprawling out of the way. Then she puffed up and checked to make sure I'd seen her in action.

I shot her a thumbs-up, a small grin on my face as I flicked a dagger right into its chest to destroy the threadspawn within.

Meanwhile, Selene rushed up to me with her arms up and wide. "Carry me, Ken!" she shouted and jumped on my back.

I glanced at Charlotte, but there wasn't a flicker of anything on her face. Honestly, it made it hard to guess how she felt. But that didn't matter, because we were thrown headfirst into the next part of the fight.

It seemed the threadspawn had decided that throwing fodder at us wasn't going to work, especially as we crushed any and all opposition, and so now we went into a more cavernous room. Inside, a dozen threadspawn-infected figures awaited. These weren't dwarven drones who'd simply been possessed and thrown forward to wear us down. They were a variety of races, all waiting in the room, watching us carefully.

Helen, Bun-Bun, and Misha had stopped short, assessing the new opponents.

"I hope we didn't spook you," the central figure spoke. He was the grim I'd seen before, carrying a massive blade over his shoulder. I'd call it a machete, but that wasn't even close. It might have the shape of one, but it was three times too big, even for his large form. He moved with it easily, resting it on his shoulder.

Seeing him up close, he had to be eight feet tall, giving the orkai a run for their money, while also just being so disgustingly hairy.

"Are you in charge?" I asked, squaring up against him, only for him to completely disregard me. He leaned on his blade, cocking his hip to the side, not even remotely concerned with us.

"You know, you caused quite a bit of trouble," he said with an easy grin.

"I don't suppose you're just going to let it go at that."

"No," he said, with a heavy shake of his head. "You will die. Your women will die. And so too will your people. This is simply the price of standing up for yourself. It is the price many of my people paid. Do not be ashamed as your time arrives." He leveled his blade at me, eyes nearly on fire with a passion I didn't think I'd ever see from a threadspawn. "Might I know your name, warrior?"

"Somehow, I don't think it's particularly important to you," I answered.

The threadspawn grinned before he vanished from the space he'd been standing in, and the others around the room all jumped into motion.

Helen threw her shield out; it worked around the room, going one direction and then back the other way. As it moved, it suddenly caught the grim where he must have moved while invisible, finding him in the middle of the room. Angelic wings sprang from her back, wrapping around our group and protecting us from the initial assault.

"Ha!" The grim seemed undaunted by the loss of his stealth.

The other threadspawn all came down on her golden wings, their combined efforts shattering Helen’s barrier, but it was enough to stop their

charge.

As soon as the golden wings disappeared, I was out from under Helen's protection, punching into an orkai whose skin crackled with green lightning. My blades almost touched him before I stomped hard and pivoted to the side, his own axe swinging past where my head had been. He'd predicted I'd try to pull out of the maneuver. I could only grunt and twist my ankle painfully as his axe swung back faster than expected to bite deep into my torso. Charlotte's heal blossomed in my chest just after.

I needed to wait out his [Absolute Reflect] and dodged away from his next swing as the green lightning still crackled around his form. I pivoted my attention to a nearby nekorian, activating [Shadow Ambush] as I pulled myself from its shadow, blades crossing on its hamstrings before I twisted and stabbed right through the chest, aiming for where the threadspawn should have been.

The nekorian lashed out and grabbed the blade recklessly, slicing off half his own hand in the process, but saving the threadspawn within the body. Then he spun and smacked my blade away with his elbow.

I was momentarily stunned by the maneuver, realizing we were playing by slightly different rules than I'd fought by before. I dove back into the fight with the nekorian, who was already regenerating, preparing to fend me off.

Usually, losing a hand was the same as losing a fight, but these threadspawn had incredible regeneration, like they all had their own personal healer on board at all times.

I should have been annoyed, but I found myself strangely excited by the difficult fight. I decided two could play at that game, especially with Charlotte here to back me up. I let the nekorian's claws sink into my gut before I cleaved off his arm and twisted for his chest, my [Shadow Blade] coming out as my reach stretched slightly beyond what he might have expected, pricking the threadspawn inside him with enough force to cause it to explode out of his back. The hit left a far larger hole than my blade had made going in.

I twirled around, keeping the nekorian’s body in my sights while I took in the status of the group around me.

Helen was keeping the grim busy, her shield flying off in a golden flash and interrupting the Bigfoot-like humanoid every time he tried to slip away

and blend in with some form of stealth. "Get back here!" Helen shouted angrily as she flew across the room to try to chase him down.

While she handled that opponent, Misha had three that she was bouncing between, keeping them occupied with various crowd-control abilities.

Charlotte perhaps had it worst of all, now riding on the back of Bun-Bun while throwing out healing as quickly as she could to anybody nearby.

The only one being largely ignored was Selene, who had launched herself up into a corner of the room and braced herself there, creating floating ghostly skulls that were swarming anyone who tried to get close. Meanwhile, burning blue lines jumped from her and drained the souls of various targets, though it was doing little to stop the threadspawn-infested opponents from healing far faster than any damage she could output.

I braced myself and darted back into the thick of the battle.

Three of the threadspawn chasing Charlotte turned away at the last moment to find my daggers perilously close. One twisted out of the way, only for me to rush past and slam my full force into another, even as the infected human I'd passed turned and lifted an axe at my back.

I didn't bother with him, focusing instead on the one before me as my daggers punched in and out with incredible speed, my own trial ability sending purple lightning crackling down my arms.

Before the impact even landed, Charlotte's healing blossomed green light over me as my daggers played whack-a-mole with the threadspawn squirming and worming its way through the body, twisting randomly in a desperate attempt to stay alive.

The axe fell heavy on my back, crunching into my spine and splitting me open, but Charlotte's healing immediately washed over the area and stitched it back together.

Feeling my skin mend, I stabbed to kill the threadspawn beneath me before I spun on the floor, blades with me, and took him out at the ankles, rolling and flipping back to my feet.

A moment later, Helen came in on a searing golden light and pancaked the infected human I'd just laid out. There was still a small moment of wiggling amid the mashed body, so I finished the job. One of my daggers shot out, piercing the threadspawn and ending both it and the host. I had to believe that no longer being possessed was a relief to most, even if that was their last solace on their journey to the afterlife.

The original ten threadspawn had now been reduced to five. The group gathered behind Helen as she stood with her shield raised, staring back at our opponents with deathly calm.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked, her breathing heavy and ragged as she took her stance.

"I'm fine," Selene said, the last to join behind us. "If I'm honest, though, I could use a less invisible, spooky Chewbacca over there." She nodded toward the grim.

"What's a Chewbacca?" Misha asked.

"A very hairy humanoid," I offered, and Misha's eyes lit up with a dozen questions she immediately suppressed.

"What now?" she asked, only for the side of the room to explode as spells flew in from a dozen different directions. One of the remaining threadspawn shifted aside, crossed its arms, and the orkai grew to three times its original height as green lightning crackled along its skin once more.

"Shit," I said, grabbing Charlotte and Selene, ready to run.

Helen stepped in front of us, her shield doubling in size just in time for the orkai to take all those flying spells and turn them back on us. [Absolute Reflect] crackled dangerously before exploding and filling the room with green light bright enough to blind me for a moment.

If it wasn't for all my grandfather's training, I never would have felt the bloodlust coming from behind me in time to spin and swing, catching the grim's massive machete on my two blades hard enough to buckle my knees.

I gritted my teeth against the blow as the light faded, and I saw Helen charred where she'd taken the explosion. Healing washed over her from both Selene and Charlotte. Only then did the group realize the grim had appeared behind us, and I was still working to hold it off. Selene launched three ghostly skulls at it, and it disengaged from me, leaping back as a dozen adventurers poured in through the broken wall.

I recognized them briefly. Candice's mother's guild, the Arcane, came into the space. Each wore heavy purple mage's robes as they turned and began blasting spells over the threadspawn.

Two of the threadspawn leapt forward to protect the others and were utterly obliterated in the process by the volume of spells cascading over them. This group was a magical battering ram, punching straight through the threadspawn present.

The grim must have realized their power, too; he waved his massive blade, and the two remaining threadspawn jumped with him, throwing up protections behind them as they fled deeper into the hive.

Our group paused, sagging as we recovered from the fight, while the Arcane moved in a measured, unified step, robes swaying in time.

As they swept past us, Candice's mother, who was apparent by her features now that she'd lowered her hood, stepped closer. "Children, we will push. When you are ready, please join us," she said, gesturing, and several spells washed over our group.

I could feel my health and stamina replenishing faster than before as they cast a variety of buffs over us.

The mages resumed blasting spells, boring through the hard structure of the dwarven hive. They were apparently uninterested in using doors, simply blasting their way through instead.

Helen plopped down on the floor near me, crossing her legs and laying her shield in her lap. She let out a heavy breath, then glared at the rest of us. "What are you doing? Rest and recover. The Arcane might be all mages and hardly famous for dungeon delves, but they're still one of the best damn raid teams out there, and they brought their whole A-raid." She nodded at the hole they'd made in the far wall and the continued destruction beyond it.

"If they're good at raids, why aren't they good at the dungeon?" Misha asked.

"Something about critical mass," Selene said. "When they've got the full twenty-five for a raid, they have so many buffs going around that their magic is near endless, as long as they don't fight something too far above their level."

"Yeah, they don't have tanks." Helen nodded. "Just magicians creating barriers while other members use buffs to increase strength and mana regeneration. Supposedly, they've shown they can tank bosses indefinitely." She crossed her arms and took a deep breath, as if trying to force herself to relax. "That's their shtick, though. We've got our own. Though, Ken, you really need to be better at defending the healers."

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Chapter 24

"What was that?" I asked, glaring at Helen. We were taking a small rest during the raid of the dwarven hive, and she'd said it was my problem that the healers were in such tight spots.

"You heard what I said. That was definitely a moment for offensive pressure if I've ever seen one," she told me.

"Yeah, well, offensive pressure doesn't work when they don't have healers," I said pointedly, knowing that even though PvP was frowned upon, there were basic strategies, which was clearly what she was referring to. "Right now, if their damage dealers are focusing on your healer, you focus on their healer to force their damage dealers to break off and protect their own. But there was no healer; they all basically had an onboard one with the threadspawn."

"They were clearly protecting that grim," Helen said pointedly. "It would have worked the same."

I snorted, but there was no point arguing. The threadspawn were so reckless, I doubt it would have done anything. "We live, and we learn. Until next time," I said, letting out a breath of my own and resting while I recovered, knowing this battle was far from over.

Everyone sat, sipping water or having a light snack.

I sat for as long as I could before I grew restless. Which, in the situation of an ongoing raid, was about five minutes.

"Well, we can't sit on our butts this whole time." I prepared myself to fight again as more and more commotion rose from the surrounding area. It

seemed the Arcane wasn't the only group that had moved into the hive and begun assaulting the structure itself. The hive shook, and the ceiling crumbled in places, as if warning that the whole thing could come down at a moment’s notice. That, of course, only made me more eager to keep moving.

Helen shot to her feet. "How's your mana?" she asked, glancing at the healers.

Charlotte waffled her hand. "About ninety percent."

Selene's gaze settled on the ceiling. "Eighty, but we should be good to keep moving."

Helen glanced at me, and I gave her a thumbs-up. "Feel free to lead the charge."

The paladin grunted, set her shield on her arm, and marched into the hallway the grim had fled through. Even as we moved, the structure continued to shake, and chips of stone fell from the ceiling.

"Are we sure this is going to hold?" Helen gasped, staring at a massive crack in one of the walls.

"I'd hope so," I said. "I'm not stopping to stare. Otherwise, we'll just have to make a temporary shelter here, which seems less than desirable. We could drop a couple of vertical supports and hope Helen can stop the roof from caving in on us."

Helen nodded. "I've got a few spare building supplies just in case we need to make a ramshackle bridge in the dungeon."

"Me, too," Charlotte said, "and a small boat."

Selene stared at her hands. "I suddenly feel woefully unprepared for a dungeon dive."

"Me, too," Misha agreed with a comforting pat on Selene’s shoulder, "though if the roof does collapse, I can make earthen pillars. I bet those would work wonders."

I smiled at her, making sure she felt included, and Misha beamed right back, her ears flopping.

"So we just need to huddle together should the place come down," Selene summarized.

"I think that's a fair plan," I agreed. "But we're going to have to do something about the remaining threadspawn first. We are here to clear them out, and them regrouping deeper in is only going to make this harder."

I activated [Eyes of Wisdom] to scan what was left in the structure. Where there had once possibly been thousands, the number was now contained to less than a hundred and continuing to concentrate at the center of the structure, dots winking out one by one as the other groups pushed deeper into the dwarven hive.

"This way," I said, taking a turn and following the masses.

"You know, those eyes are pretty useful," Selene said. "I bet there are a lot of things you and Crimson could use them to accomplish."

"Yeah, I'm sure there's a lot of trouble she could get up to. And that's trouble I'd like to avoid," I said, carefully measuring my tone. Selene nodded in full understanding.

[Eyes of Wisdom] was nearly as dangerous as it was helpful. The ability was almost too strong; at least I had made a few friends in both the orkai and demon societies to let them get used constructively without having myself or Crimson locked up and abused for the ability.

Then again, we were both hitting a point that containing us was going to become increasingly difficult.

The path through the hive sloped gently upward toward a more central section, and more threadspawn were waiting for us. The place shook hard enough that Selene fell into my arms, and I had to crouch low to stay on my feet.

"My hero," Selene said, batting her lashes and pecking me on the cheek as I lifted her back to her feet. Helen watched with a scowl, Charlotte sighed, and Misha looked decidedly jealous.

"Flirt later. We need to get through this now," Helen said, charging forward through an opening that led into a massive central hall. The place had to be several football fields deep, lined with columns to hold up such a massive space.

As I took it all in, one of the columns shattered, fragments blown away as small figures darted between them by the dozens. It took me a moment to recognize who they were, but Charlotte beat me to recognizing them.

"Dad!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, rushing forward with Bun-Bun hot on her heels. Helen darted ahead of her, staying between the healer and any danger.

Marcus DuVell, leader of the Verdant, paused mid-attack, his massive gem-studded green armor hanging off his body and a new sword nearly as big as he was loose in his hands as he blocked an infected orkai. "I love

you, dear, but later," he said, breaking the stalemate and spinning his sword, cleaving green wind through the air.

The wind slashed the orkai, sending its blood splattering, only for the wounds to heal instantly as it charged again. A moment later, a gale-force wind caught it and sent it flying through another set of pillars.

I drew my blades, ready to join the fight.

"They've got it," Charlotte reassured me. "Why don't we see what's at the end of the hall?" she asked, looking down the length of pillars into the dark mystery beyond.

With [Eyes of Wisdom], I could make out the glowing figures of dozens of threadspawn at the very end.

"There's more threadspawn down there," I told Helen, and that was all she needed to hear. She put her shield in front of her and barreled down the long hall, the rest of us in hot pursuit as threadspawn occasionally blasted out from between the pillars.

It seemed Charlotte's family had been among the first to find this area. I took on the threadspawn within as I charged through several attacks coming from amongst the pillars, though Misha surprised me. She ran alongside Charlotte and Selene, her new gauntlets flashing out to catch and deflect abilities coming from between the columns.

The space ahead slowly came into view, threadspawn gathered within. And as I watched them, I felt a horrifying sense of power bubbling up from something. I came up short, ripping open a portal to my side.

From the other side of the portal, Crimson's eyes turned toward me in fierce assessment of what might be happening.

"Crimson, come," I said before she could ask any questions. Without a moment's hesitation, she jumped through the portal, her own eyes glowing blue as she assessed the gathering threadspawn before us. She went so far as to grimace and rip open her own portal.

"Hey, Broken Blade, do you want to prove you're not a complete waste?" she shouted through the portal, stepping away as a fuming, angry Neldra yelled through from the other side.

"What was that?" Neldra shrieked, and I couldn't help but spot Crimson's massive grin.

"Did you have to provoke her?" I asked, only for Crimson to turn to me with a smile.

"We might as well make it more fun," Crimson stated, eyeing the threat in front of us.

Neldra stormed through the portal, blade out, a contingent of royal censors marching behind her. My eyes went immediately to Fayeth and Elysara, who were in the center of the tightly packed unit.

"Well?" Neldra barked, scanning the space and frowning, no doubt realizing the sheer size of the space.

"That way," I said, pointing the angry elf in the right direction, which was also notably not toward me.

Neldra came up short and turned to her contingent. "All of you, stay with Ken. Miriam, with me," she said, and with her [Limit Break] active, Neldra exploded down the hall. Miriam, who would do most anything for a price, did a small twirl and winked at me before exploding off with the same ferocity, minus the red lightning.

Hopefully they'd be enough. [Eyes of Wisdom] only answered if they were higher level than me, with most of the ones up ahead being bright red and one figure such a dark, dangerous red that I knew I needed to call reinforcements.

Helen turned to me. "Do you have to upset everyone you interact with?"

"Hey now, that was totally Crimson. You don't get to blame her shortcomings on me," I said quickly. "But more importantly, are we all going to wait here and let them have all the fun, or are you going to join me?" I rushed down the hall to join the others, and Helen set her jaw and rushed to overtake our group.

"I'm glad to be with you, Sir Ken," one of the royal censors said, her group easily keeping pace with our own.

I glanced at her, expecting I'd recognize her, but I came up blank. It didn't hurt to be polite. "Wonderful to have you, as always," I said, and the censor beamed before setting her face into a hard grimace.

"Stop flirting with my censors," Elysara snapped playfully.

"I mean, aren't they my censors, too?" I asked with as much dramatic effect as I could manage.

Elysara huffed, though a small smile danced across her face. "This is what you all have to watch out for," she said loudly to her censors. "My imperial husband will shamelessly devour all of you if you aren't careful."

I nearly missed a step and tripped over my own feet, only to watch Elysara giggle at my reaction. "Of course, if any of you can handle him, I

welcome the night battle reinforcements."

"Fucking sex fiend," Helen mumbled up ahead.

"He's an incubus," one of the elves was quick to retort with a giant grin, and Helen seemed to nearly choke on the words. The atmosphere among the group improved considerably as my ladies and the elves found common ground almost too quickly for my comfort.

This hall was giant, and in the midst of the banter, it felt nearly endless. That was, until a bright red flash lit the whole space ahead, followed a moment later by a deafening boom, and then the shockwave washed over our group, causing us to stagger to a stop. It rolled through a second and third time, buffeting us and forcing us to dig in lest we be tossed about like ragdolls.

"Pillars!" I yelled without further explanation, grabbing Selene and Charlotte and pulling them in that direction. The elves followed without a moment's hesitation, and Helen somehow got ahead of all of us. Our whole group collapsed behind the pillars as the violent shockwaves continued ripping down the hall.

At least with the pillars cutting some of the wind, we could continue down the hall.

We peered out to see the fight playing out ahead. It had been a while since I'd seen Crimson going all out. A glowing short sword sat in her left hand, a whip as dark as the midnight sky in her right. She was dashing back and forth among dozens of threadspawn. At the center sat one wearing the dwarven queen's body, perched on an enormous throne. It was bigger than any dwarven queen I'd seen before, at least ten feet tall and rippling with muscle. The familiar dark carapace covered her unbelievably large chest.

"Who goes there?" the dwarven queen called out, her eyes snapping to us as we waited in the wings. Before I could so much as flinch, a dozen dwarves flowed out of the surrounding stone, encircling our group while Crimson, Neldra, and Miriam fought at full, explosive force.

"Ken," Helen hissed, taking a step back. "Any chance you have more reinforcements?"

My eyes turned instead to Elysara and her cluster of royal censors all squared up against the dwarves that had come spilling out. And there were more than a few that stood frozen like statues, eyes wide, staring at the dwarven queen.

I could feel it from this close; the queen oozed danger. It felt like a rusty, bloodstained knife resting against my skin in a way that Grandpa’s bloodlust could never quite mimic. It was so soaked in blood that being this close gave me goosebumps.

From the other side of the hall, more shouts erupted as conflict continued to trickle in from farther down the hall; more and more attackers were filling the space.

Yet the threadspawn seemed completely unperturbed. A group of six threadspawn kept Crimson and Neldra occupied while the rest stood idly by, watching our group with vague disinterest, their attention never drifting toward what was happening farther down the hall. It was as if we were being gathered before a regent about to hold court.

"Please," the dwarven queen boomed, "must we cause such discord? I believe I speak for all of us when I say there's no need for further loss of life." She waved a hand, and the wind picked up, howling through the hall and dragging Crimson a good hundred feet, her sword creating a trench as she plowed it into the ground to try to stop her movement.

The clashing continued as dozens of adventurers I recognized made their way to the end of the hall. Charlotte's parents, with the Harem Queen among them, and dozens of others came to a stop when they saw what lay at the end.

Crimson was on the ground leaning on her sword, and Neldra was blasted against a column, clutching her ribs. Somehow, Miriam was the only one of the three still standing, though the blood running down her chin didn't inspire much confidence. More than a few gazes fell on me with questions in their eyes.

"I only got here a few minutes before you," I told them, particularly to the angry expression on the face of Des's mother.

More groups kept arriving until nearly every high-level adventurer I'd ever laid eyes on was arrayed in the fighting force before me.

"Ah, I see all the human and elven forces have finally reached the center. I suppose you were all due a warm welcome," the massive dwarven queen said, clapping her hands together. Each strike created a resounding boom loud enough to affect my equilibrium and make me wobble in place.

"I am Dohaeth, lord of my people," she said, loud enough that my eardrums bled. It never stopped being odd hearing a threadspawn speaking in another’s body. "Your people have come, and they have lost. And if I

understand the ways of the dungeon correctly, the proper next step is for you to submit. Let it be known that I am benevolent in my acceptance of you, lesser races. Despite the great harm to my people that you so woefully ignored, I will allow you to live." She sat back proudly on her throne.

"So magnanimous," someone groaned in the crowd.

"I know you would not be questioning my virtue," she boomed, making it a point to show she'd heard everything, "because that would upset me." This time, anger infused her voice enough to drive many of us to the ground, myself included.

I gritted my teeth against a wave of nauseating pain in my inner ear, suddenly glad for all our gravity chamber training. Charlotte was already whispering something, causing healing to wash over our entire group and settle whatever had gone wrong.

"My people have been shackled, chained, and held within the depths of this dungeon. Yet races so profound that little escapes their notice mill about above our wasting forms, and you expect me to believe our plight was never recognized? That it was simply our own failing?" The threadspawn smashed the queen’s hand against her throne, a reverberation rocking through the hall and knocking everyone off their feet. "For that, I declare each and every one of you lacking. You indulge in some sense of superiority, reigning above smaller races such as my own.

“I apologize for the pain your people have been burdened with, but we truly did not know.” Scaredy Cat stepped forward with a small contingent of his summoned valkyries.

“It is almost comical that we only recently discovered other races living within the depths of this dungeon. But you all knew. You have stories of drow, of orkai, of dwarves, and all manner of beings going back centuries. And you want me to believe that you had no knowledge of what was happening to us? You chose to ignore us.” Dohaeth paused and resettled into her chair as if her anger had faded, but I doubted that.

The same feeling of a knife resting against my skin persisted as if there was barely constrained violence. There was only a trace of pity for the threadspawn in me. Once we’d learned of how they were exploited by the drow, there was a sense of pain. But that didn’t justify the hate and malice they now bore everyone.

“But you were brave enough to step forward, so I will allow you to live and serve as hosts while you watch the dawning of a new age as my people

take control of the dungeon, amassing the forces that should have been used to free us, to destroy the drow scourge within it." Veins pulsed along the queen’s forehead as she clenched her hand hard enough to show bone through her skin.

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Chapter 25

Scaredy Cat, however, took a step back, realizing that having the dwarven queen's attention wasn't going to work out well for him. Several of the fighters who'd been fighting Crimson and Neldra jumped forward and dragged him out of the group while the dwarven queen laughed.

"See? You're all pathetic. Perhaps if you all rose up together, you could save this man. But you don't even dare." Many suddenly paled in shame, ducking their heads.

I kept mine high, knowing the choice at hand. If I jumped forward to stop her, I was fairly certain she or her combined forces would give me more trouble than I could handle. I had thought about using a vial of improved drow venom, courtesy of Grandma Yui, but I wasn’t even sure I could cut the dwarven queen, who could drive Crimson and Neldra to the ground with a clap from her hand.

If we all jumped forward, we might win against those before her, but the dwarven queen clearly had a very deep well of strength. The threadspawn appeared to deeply enjoy bullying those weaker than them.

But while the dwarven queen was busy monologuing, I hadn't been idle. I held a stone in my hand, pulled from my inventory. I rolled it across my palm, desperately hoping Lady Frey would finally answer my call. I couldn't help but feel for Scaredy Cat as they pulled him forward, and the dwarven queen lifted a hand. A stone slid aside to reveal a pit in front of her throne, filled with squirming threadspawn shrieking now that they were exposed.

"Hey!" Crimson barked, her whip snapping out, grabbing Scaredy Cat by the legs, and jerking him free, his head bouncing roughly on the floor as she pulled him back. "I may not like Scaredy Cat very much, I may have even worked to get him fired from his job," Crimson began, even as he complained and was shut down when her heel smashed the stone next to his head, "but you don't get to just stick a worm inside him in front of me."

I smiled at Crimson's inability to put up with anything, glad that even in the face of this much danger, it hadn't dampened her attitude one bit. Although my stomach also dropped, knowing that Crimson had now put herself in the line of fire.

It had been one thing to watch Scaredy Cat get pulled forward, but I wouldn’t be able to hold still if the same thing happened to Crimson. I squeezed the stone in my hand harder, hoping that it would convey some sense of urgency.

The dwarven queen shifted, a feral smile lighting her face as she stared at Crimson. "Then I see you've offered yourself as tribute in his stead." The threadspawn before her fanned out around Crimson, taking her far more seriously than they had Scaredy Cat.

The stone in my hand finally grew hot, and my vision shifted until I was seeing Lady Frey, her hair wet and pulled back over her shoulder, as if she'd just changed into fresh clothes.

"I hope you have a good reason for disturbing me, Ken," she said pointedly.

"I'm about to die," I muttered, only for one of the threadspawn near me to jab a spear in my direction.

"Unfortunate," Lady Frey said. "What's the level?"

"Don't know," I said under my breath, earning myself another jab, knowing she should be able to see my situation somewhat.

"Big-ass threadspawn-infected dwarven queen," I said, and I could see her making an assessment as she rubbed her chin.

"You agree to go further into debt?" she asked.

"In about two months, I go on summer break. You can have me for two whole months as your gopher, if you'd like." This time the spear went through my armor and into my skin, twisting as it stabbed.

"Looks like you're in quite the pickle," Lady Frey said, a devious grin sliding across her face. "It seems you're not really in the best position to

negotiate right now." She drummed her fingers on her desk. "I suppose in a few hours, I could do something."

"In a few hours, I doubt I'll have much left to do, not to mention whatever incubus project you wanted me for will be gone." I tried to find what leverage I could. Truth was, we'd gotten in over our heads. No, I held some blame for this. We saw this as a chance to be considered a bigger player among the races that ran the dungeon, but the threadspawn had far more strength than we'd seen before.

"You're not the only option we have," she told me as the spear twisted deeper into my gut. The threadspawn had no idea what I was doing; it didn't even bother warning me to be quiet, apparently content to just stab me into compliance. And to be fair, the tactic would normally be very effective.

Lady Frey hummed, tapping her chin, and pulled up another stone. "I may even have to bring in my princess if I'm to help you, which comes at significant cost, Ken." She held the stone out, and a moment later, the bubbly, pink-haired succubus Princess Xanthana appeared in the room.

"Oh, we're with Ken?" she asked, touching Lady Frey's stone, her eyes widening. "Oh," she said, with a sad look. "Looks like he's not going to make it."

"Well, he is asking for help," Lady Frey said, the two of them clearly enjoying the byplay. "Though I think his offer was a little weak. He offered two months of his time."

"That is rather weak," the princess agreed, stalling for time while I watched the threadspawn closing in on Crimson, standing alone for the rest of humanity.

"What do you want?" I asked, getting stabbed again, but I barely felt it next to the mounting dread that they were going to stick a worm in Crimson.

"Oh, now he's putting the burden of thought on us," Xanthana said. "I suppose the price will go up."

"Rip off the Band-Aid. Tell me the price," I growled, willing to pay any price to protect those I loved.

"Oh, we have plenty of options," Lady Frey said, deciding now was the time to educate me. "After all, perhaps you could get a threadspawn inserted inside you rather than simply killed. Then we could come at our leisure, snag you, and get it removed. Though I suppose the non-urgency of the request might be outweighed by finding someone to remove it safely."

"Help. Please. Anything." I tried and failed to keep the desperation out of my voice as I watched six threadspawn gang up on Crimson.

"Oh, he said please," Xanthana said, bouncing in place, far too bubbly for the situation. "I suppose if he said please, we should act. Not to mention, he's already given us a blank check. As soon as you're ready, Ken."

I didn't waste another second, ripping open a portal beside me.

The action cost me, as three threadspawn immediately stabbed me and pinned me to the ground while another raised an axe overhead. They must have figured a random portal could be easily closed by canceling out the spellcaster. It was decent logic by my measure.

As the axe fell toward the top of my head, a dainty hand snatched all the momentum from the blade, stopping it dead. Xanthana bounded through the portal, smiled at the offending threadspawn, and with a wave of her hand, she turned it to ash.

"Oh, this is exciting," the demon said as the threadspawn immediately around me were simply incinerated. It was as if being near her was too hot for them to handle. They blew away in dust as Xanthana played with the axe for a moment before it snapped, and she dropped it before kicking it aside while looking anywhere but at the broken weapon.

Lady Frey stepped through a moment later, taller than the princess and in a sharper dress, giving off the air of someone far more responsible. The first time I'd seen her, the crown of horns on her head had made her seem regal.

She turned toward the threadspawn attacking Crimson, and her attention alone seemed to have an immediate effect. The air shimmered, gravity seemed to shift, and all the threadspawn found themselves rooted to the ground, unable to move.

Crimson jumped back, her suit tattered and torn, covered in her own blood. "Thank you," Crimson said to them, before turning some of that thanks toward me. "If Ken owes you something, I'll be happy to help."

"Sure, sure." Xanthana bounced forward, patting Crimson's shoulder as she passed, having to reach up to manage the gesture. "Unfortunately, he's not very good at bargaining, and we have a blank check this time. I'll remember your offer, though," she said sweetly, and Crimson grimaced at how much she'd just lost in that brief exchange with the short and very pink succubus.

Xanthana paused before the rest of the threadspawn, hands on her hips, all five feet of her doing her best to intimidate the ten-foot-tall dwarven

giantess.

But the giantess was no longer sitting on the throne, her full attention now fixed on the powerful succubus before her. She’d stood and hefted a massive maul. "What are you doing here?" the dwarven queen bellowed.

A lovely heart-shaped bubble seemed to snap into place around all of us, quivering under the force of her voice but blocking the shockwave.

"Oh dear, you’re a loud one." Xanthana grimaced, sticking a finger in her own ear and bouncing on one foot as if trying to get water out. It was comical the way her long hair dragged on the ground as a result.

The dwarven queen moved in a flash, appearing before Xanthana and clasping a hand around her head. Her arm glowed for a moment before a massive wave of energy erupted from her palm, disintegrating Xanthana in a wave of dark flames.

The heat off of it was enough to cause the stone pillars to smolder and the ends of our hair to curl.

I froze, my breath stopping for a moment before Xanthana reappeared a moment later, sitting on the dwarven queen's shoulder. She leaned forward with naive interest as she watched her own form blow away.

"That was a pretty cool move," she said, looking toward the dwarven queen's face. "Let me try!"

Xanthana vanished from the shoulder and appeared before one of the gathered threadspawn, grabbing it by the head as pink flame pulsed down her arm and exploded in its face, incinerating it from the waist up. "Oh! That was fun. There's a certain raw intensity to that move. You have my approval." She gave the dwarven queen a thumbs-up as the legs of the threadspawn toppled behind her. "However," she added, with a sad shake of her head, "you tried to kill something that's mine, so you're on my naughty list.”

“You may take whomever it is you wish to protect." The dwarven queen took a step back. Threadspawn didn't really seem to project fear, but there was the wariness of a predator finding another in its own hunting ground.

"You see, the thing is," Xanthana said, looking down and carving shapes in the stone, breaking it up with the same effort of someone drawing in sand with their feet, "he wanted to be helped out of the situation. While he didn't explicitly say I had to kill you, I'm certain he wants all the humans here pulled out and to survive. That is really quite a lot to ask of me. And if we're

honest, the best use of my time would simply be to obliterate you and the others." She smiled.

From across the way, I cleared my throat. "If that would be the best use of your time, perhaps that would be ideal. Just get rid of the threadspawn," I said, and every eye in the room shifted to me.

"Well, it wasn't apparent before. He happens to be the one I'm here to protect," Xanthana said, pointing at me and meeting the dwarven queen's gaze. She tapped her lips, considering. "I think you're pretty strong," she said, shaking a finger at the threadspawn, "and if you survive, promise me you'll try to kill him in the future. Like, really try. Make a good attempt to turn him into dungeon food."

The dwarven queen frowned in confusion. "If you want him to die, why would you spare him today?"

"Oh, no, no, I don't want him to die," Xanthana said, waving her hands. "However, I would love for him to get some proper motivation." She bopped her head a few times. "So, if I kill enough of your children to make you mad…" She twirled her finger and pointed down at the pool before the throne.

A pink fire engulfed the water and the writhing threadspawn within, reducing them to steam and ash in the blink of an eye. The stone around the pit was now warped and cracked from the sudden shift in temperature.

Xanthana turned and blew a kiss toward one of the closest threadspawn; the kiss expanded and consumed it in a pink mist. A moment later it dissipated, and the threadspawn knelt toward her, its eyes replaced by pink hearts.

"Your job is to kill as many of your brethren as you can," she commanded. "That's what he wants," she said, pointing at me.

It moved faster than I'd ever seen it move before, tearing into its own kind while Xanthana rooted the dwarven queen in place with a massive smile on her face as she rocked back and forth on her heels, hands behind her back, waiting.

The charmed threadspawn ripped through its brethren faster than I could have expected until only the dwarven queen remained standing. At that point, it punched its hand into its chest and tore out the threadspawn, crushing it with its last vestiges of strength before collapsing.

Lady Frey moved over to me, staring down at my wounded form. "You will finish this year of school and then report to me the second it's over,"

she said, leaving no room for argument. Charlotte had already begun healing me, but somehow, I dreaded Lady Frey's words more than I'd dreaded getting stabbed.

"Wee! So fun. You're pitifully weak; just be happy I have a cause for you," Xanthana clapped, as the last of the threadspawn fell to the ground. "Alright, you can run along now," she said.

The dwarven queen clenched her teeth so tightly they cracked, then healed before my eyes, her gaze shifting to me. "I will find you, and I will kill you," she declared with a brief pause where she seemed to consider it before her eyes darted back to Xanthana and decided it was better to leave, and for how large she was, she shot away faster than my eyes could track.

Xanthana was still rocking on her heels, smiling. "Do you see that, humans? If you want to play with the likes of the orkai, you need to be at least that strong," she said, pointing at where the dwarven queen had been. "Otherwise, you're just children playing in the big leagues."

She turned to Lady Frey. "Did I say that right?" she asked excitedly, and Lady Frey bowed briefly.

"Magnificent, my princess," Lady Frey answered.

Xanthana clapped her hands and bounded over to me.

I was still on my knees, which put my head right at her chest as she pulled my face into it, only the thinnest layer of cloth between us as my head bounced between her mounds. "Do you see that, Ken? If you work really hard, that's the kind of power you can have." She pointed around. "Now, unless you want to rack up more debt to me, you need to be nice and give me a kiss goodbye."

She held out her cheek, and I gave it a small peck, immediately feeling a wave of dizziness wrap around me, as if getting too close to her had triggered some subtle charm. As the world swayed, I heard her laugh, disappearing back through the portal I'd created, Lady Frey following after.

A moment later, the portal cracked and broke away. They had forcibly closed it.

In those few moments, the world seemed to swerve, and when I came back to it, all the high-level human adventurers were staring at me.

More than a few had deep questions in their eyes.

I held a hand up to forestall any of them. "Please, for now, I just need to get my head back on straight," I said, more an afterthought than anything, but it seemed to be enough.

President Amatto stepped forward and clapped her hands once, immediately getting everyone's attention. "For now, we will consider this mission complete. You may loot everything you'd like from this location for the next half-hour. However, as you can see, the dungeon is a dangerous place, and I'd like us all gone from this safe zone before any more danger finds us."

Everyone snapped to attention and hustled to begin looting.

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Chapter 26

The looting was done faster than I could have imagined, as the remaining members of our teams scoured over the dwarven hive like starving, feral rats. However, I had a different task.

I ripped open a portal to allow a great many people to leave, occasionally changing the location to allow those who were done to get out, but it was slowed as Helen stepped up beside me and slid her arm into mine.

"What are you doing?" I said, turning to the flaming-haired paladin, who responded by leaning on me cutely with what passed for a genuine blush on her face.

"My mother's here, and you said you went along with what she believed. Just bear with me for a minute. I'm sure it's worse for me than you," she told me, her tone sickeningly sweet as she batted her lashes.

It was like cuddling a tiger who still had the blood of its last meal dripping from its jowls.

I froze in place, somewhat unable to believe that this was really happening. My eyes looked up and met Des's, whose jaw was currently hanging open wide enough to catch flies. My succubus was shocked into complete disbelief. She slowly blinked like it was going to be a different image when she opened her eyes again.

She was just moments from making this a far bigger deal than it needed to be.

I subtly shook my head at her, and her mouth snapped closed as she gave me a squinty side-eye and mouthed, 'Did you charm her?'

‘No,’ I mouthed back as snappily as I could. The idea that I’d do something like that was horrid.

Meanwhile, Helen was completely oblivious to this long-range conversation happening and snuggled in closer, shooting a beaming smile across the way in another direction towards a well-dressed man who I could only assume was one of her many fathers, uncles, or whatever she called them.

The man himself looked on with only a little interest before flashing Helen a smile and walking away as if he suddenly had something urgent to do.

Des caught my attention again, staring at me very hard and rolling her hand as if to demand an explanation.

I waffled my head back and forth and then stared at her with wide eyes that I hoped would communicate that we would talk about it later.

Des then tilted her head, made a ring with one hand, and stuck her index finger through it repeatedly, her head tilted slightly askance.

My eyes went wide, and I shook my head violently. ‘No! Nothing happened!’ I mouthed.

"What's wrong?" Helen asked, looking up at me through her lashes. It was so strange for her face to be so close and for there not to be a scowl on it.

I turned back to Des with serious eyes, demanding that she stop.

Des grinned, a wicked smile spreading across her face that I deeply knew I was going to regret.

I stared back at her, lowering my gaze and doing my best to tell her that this was serious, and she needed to back off for the moment.

Her grin only grew wider and wider as she gave me a big okay sign and spun away.

“What was that?” Helen frowned.

"Nothing, I was just talking to Des," I told her.

Helen looked at me like I was a fool.

"You know. At a distance." I pointed across the way as if that would magically make it all make sense.

Helen still looked at me as if I'd hit my head, and I brushed her expression off.

"When two people love each other very much, Helen, distance does very little to stand between us," I offered.

"Oh," she said slowly, with a small amount of thinly veiled disgust. "Yeah, I don't need a birds-and-bees conversation from you," she snapped, and I felt far more comfortable when she was being angry with me.

Really, I had dug this hole deep enough. I could handle her being more angry.

"You know, Helen," I began, only for a flash to streak across my vision before the Harem Queen landed before the two of us.

She squealed and picked me up, kissing me on each cheek before she put me down and did a similar, if more excitable, version of the greeting with Helen. "I'm so proud of you," she squealed.

The Harem Queen was wearing a flowing silver dress with a burgundy shawl; both had seen better days, having been cut and smeared with blood. Her dress was probably a little shorter than it had started, and I could see hole-ridden stockings through the holes in her dress.

Helen cleared her throat. "Mom."

"What? And don't tell me you're going to be embarrassed of your old lady now." The Harem Queen planted her hands on her hips, daring Helen to say more.

However, she was smarter than that, clamming up immediately and changing tactics. "Well, just don't make too big a deal of it. You know, it's still new, and if you come on too strong, it could ruin it," Helen said, blushing.

The Harem Queen spun back to me with a victorious smile on her lips.

I was surprised at how badly it felt to see the Harem Queen so excited that something was happening between Helen and me. I had just been mere seconds away from telling Helen about the lie and getting rid of all of this awkwardness, and then her mother had to come blazing in, so happy that I would feel even more guilty interrupting this.

God damn it. If I said it now, it would feel like I was punting a puppy through a ring of fire and into a spike pit. I sighed and looked up at the ceiling, wondering what in the world I had done to end up here. This was certainly a good example of why lying never solved anything. Fuck you, Sun Tzu.

Speaking in my head to the dungeon, or whatever higher power ran the space, I promised that I would be good and stop lying if it saved me from this moment of awkwardness.

But nothing happened. So I did the best thing I could do and squeezed a smile onto my face.

"Mother," I said, trying out the term on the Harem Queen.

She squealed with absolute giddy delight. "Again," she exclaimed, batting her lashes.

I sighed. I'd fucked up. I'd fucked up bad, and the Harem Queen continued to stare at me with barely constrained excitement.

"Yeah, it's just a little new. It's a little awkward," I said, grabbing Helen by her hip and squeezing her tightly against me. Her face turned bright red, most likely angry enough to hit me for that motion. Thankfully, she didn't, or it would ruin the moment. Helen seemed fairly invested in this. I supposed while it was awkward and a terrible lie, it was making two people very happy. Maybe that karmically balanced it out?

"I'm just so excited," the Harem Queen said. "Can I take a picture?"

"No," I said, only for Helen to speak over me.

"Of course, Mother. But please don't share it online. You know how weird social media can be these days."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said, though it sounded to me like she was barely listening as she suddenly stuck her nose into her CID and began excitedly typing something out.

Helen took that moment to shoot me a small, apologetic smile. Perhaps she wasn't as angry as I had thought.

I took a deep breath. "Look, Helen, we need to talk," I said carefully, hoping that I would be able to extract myself from all of this.

Yet those words made it look like I might as well have just killed her dog, based on the way her eyes went wide, and a small gasp escaped her lips.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

No, it's not, I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs.

"Everything's fine." Somehow came out instead. "It's just, your mother's hope is a little much for me to take on." I tried to be diplomatic about it all.

"Oh, of course," Helen said, while her mother was distracted. "Don't worry, I'll try and minimize how much we have to do."

I squeezed my eyes closed. That wasn't the problem.

"Say cheese!" The Harem Queen whipped back around, swinging herself behind us and pressing Helen and me together. And just by happenstance, she managed to press my arm deep into Helen's cleavage and my face into the side of hers, with a wicked smile that told me perhaps that wasn't an

accident at all. Her CID was held out in front of us and began taking pictures, all three of us pressed together.

I took a deep breath. Everything in this situation was fixable. All I had to do was tell the truth. I glanced at the Harem Queen, knowing that I would also crush her soul a little in the process. I swore to myself, pinching my eyes closed. This wasn't supposed to be this hard.

The Harem Queen looked through her CID quickly and then beamed, came over, kissed me on the top of the head, and then did the same for Helen.

"I'm so proud of you, Helen. Don't worry, the wedding will be beautiful," she said and hugged me one last time while she whispered in my ear, "Just think! If you couldn't have the woman on the poster in your room, you could at least have her daughter." And then, with a wicked grin, the Harem Queen ran off, leaving me speechless.

"Is everything okay?" Helen asked, and I turned to her, my expression a practiced neutral.

My real answer was that nothing was okay, but I didn't have the heart at this point to clear anything up. I had been thoroughly defeated in that interaction. I would perhaps have to find a more gradual way out of what I had stepped into.

“Everything is peachy,” I said.

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"Order, order!" Des banged her gavel on the table.

We sat around the kitchen table; she had pulled me into this immediately after the raid on the dwarven hive, though I desperately needed to get to the UG and have some post-mission conversations. However, with everything that had happened, they would likely need at least a few hours for people to get their ducks in a row.

So here I was, at a family meeting. Des sat at the head, gavel in hand, wearing a silk robe that matched her pink eyes.

I paused, scanning the room and suddenly noticing that most of the women around the table were wearing silk robes. That felt like more than random chance.

"Can we get this over with?" Crimson asked as she cracked a beer and put her bare feet up on the table, wiggling her toes at me in greeting as she

knocked back the first of what I assumed would be more than a few beers before the meeting ended.

"Order." Des banged the gavel again. "Feet off the table. Wait." She looked at Crimson's feet, then at my eyes, then back at the feet. "No, you can put them down. I don't think they're going to win Ken over."

"Excuse me?" I sputtered.

"Foot fetish is more rampant than you'd think, Ken," Des said, wagging the gavel at me. "Just needed to check your reaction to see if I need to get a pedicure. The ones for adventurers are so expensive."

"Yeah, because they have to bring a freaking sander out," Penny said with a huff. "I went for one once, and… there is something deeply unsettling about power tools around my feet."

Many of the ladies around the table began nodding along with Penny's words. Just the thought made me shudder.

"Des, why are we all here?" I asked, once I was sure everyone was listening.

I noted that Crimson had already been a bad influence. Felin had now pulled out a bottle of Irish cream and started pouring shots for her and Misha, who apparently had gotten added to this group.

Meanwhile, Selene seemed to prefer wine, pouring herself a glass before looking around the table to ask if anyone else wanted some. Des gave a quick give-it-here gesture until the bottle was passed to her. She was at least refined enough to pour it into a glass before handing it off to Bellaire, who sat in a cream silk robe happily showing off her tanned legs, a burgundy sash tying it all together.

"Look," Des said, leaning over the table, threatening to bang the gavel again. "I said the family meeting is in order. Even the elves came." She gestured at Elysara, who was wearing a sapphire silk robe with golden patterns dancing across it.

"Well, of course. I assume you saw the same thing I did." Elysara's eyes glimmered as she stared back at Des.

"And Ken promised an explanation," Des quickly added, shooting me a look.

"This is about Helen?" I said, deciding to cut through all the unnecessary bullshit.

"So you do admit you've done something," Des said. "Did you charm her? Turn her into your unknowing love slave who simply slavers at your

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I banged my hand on the table and pointed a finger at her. "Don't you even dare accuse me of doing such a thing."

"It's hot," Penny said, and I shot her a sharp look.

"Taking away someone's free will is not hot, Penny. However, pretending to do so can be," I added with a grin, and Penny's cheeks flushed bright red as she suddenly found the center of the table very interesting.

Elysara was fanning herself after those words. "Well, if that's the way you feel," she said, "I suppose there's something we can do about that."

"Enough. None of this. Back to the topic," I said. "Helen." I looked around the table, then sighed and put my head in my hands, running my palms over my face, wishing this would just go away. But while I might have told a small lie for Helen, I would never lie to the ladies here. "So where do I start?"

I leaned back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling. "Apparently, Helen told a small fib to the Harem Queen. She told her mother that she and I were in a relationship to get out of some blind dates. I found that out when I was confronted by the Harem Queen and, of course, told her that it was not the case. But then later this came up with Helen while we were reading The Art of War, and she's such a pain in my ass, so I thought… what if I told a small fib and tried to grasp her weakness?"

The table all nodded, staying quiet, and I found myself letting out a breath that at least they understood this was hard for me.

"Then what?" Des leaned over the table, tilting her head as she watched me.

"Well, I told her that I hadn't outed her secret to her mother. And she was incredibly thankful. At the moment, it seemed like it would really bite me in the ass if I told her what I'd done," I answered.

"So it's just going to bite you in the ass harder the longer you wait," Crimson commented, taking another swig of her beer.

"Yeah, well, that's the thing about pain. We humans are very avoidant of it, aren't we?" I said, scratching the back of my head. "So I didn't tell her the truth, and she stayed thankful to me for keeping up the fib with her mother. And now it seems she's gone to her mother, who now does believe we are in a relationship. And the two of them are being so incredibly sweet and encouraging. And fuck." I rubbed my face and let out a heavy sigh that was immediately followed by all of them laughing.

I peeked between my fingers, curious what they would say, frowning as I spotted Charlotte. "Are you done, Charlotte?" I asked.

She was still clutching her stomach while Bun-Bun held on for dear life. She took several deep breaths and tried to calm her laughter. "It's pretty funny, Ken."

"Is it now?" I gave her a flat look.

"Yeah, well, you've dug yourself a hole so deep." She laughed. "What was it that set all this off? What did Des see?"

"My interactions with Helen, where she was leaning on me, resting her head on my shoulder," I said, pinching my brow.

"Helen?" Penny sat up straighter. "No way, you must have charmed her."

"I swear by all things holy, and I guess in my case unholy, that I did no such thing. And I would never do that, except in combat, or with your permission." I mumbled the last part and really wished I had a drink to stuff my face into.

Crimson must have practically read my mind, because she cracked a beer and handed it to me, and I drank it gladly.

"I guess I'm not going to be the only red-haired lady in the harem soon," Elysara lamented exaggeratedly, pulling at a wisp of her hair and curling it around her finger. "Though I suppose some company in that regard would be welcome."

"I am not adding Helen to the harem," I said with certainty. "After all, this is all starting with a lie. And at some point, I'm going to have to come clean, and it's going to blow up in my face to epic proportions."

"Or… or, hear me out," Des said, holding her hands up, "you go along with this long enough that real feelings start. Then it won't be a lie."

"It's still based on a lie," Fayeth said. "I don't think the foundation of a relationship can stand on a lie."

Crimson squinted at Fayeth. "Didn't yours and Ken's start because you thought he had proposed to you, and he thought he was just giving a gift to an elf?"

"That's different. That's a misunderstanding," Fayeth frowned.

"Misunderstanding, lie." Des waffled her hands. "They're not that different."

"Kill me now," I groaned and set my head on the table.

"We'd all really prefer if you didn't die, Ken," Crimson said casually, continuing to drink her beer.

"Yeah, well, I feel like it might be easier than digging my way out of this," I said with a sigh. Helen wasn’t my biggest fan right now. But if I revealed what I’d done, then she would go nuclear.

The table fell quiet for a moment, save for the noise of people enjoying their drinks.

"Well, there is one way you can move through this," Elysara said. "You commit to the bit. You tell Helen that you're fake dating, and then you tell the Harem Queen that you are fake dating. That way the lie clears itself up, but you don't have to upset Helen, nor are you lying to her mother."

“The Harem Queen would probably go for that just in hopes that some actual feelings bloomed,” Fayeth agreed.

I leaned back and stared at Elysara. Of course she would have perhaps the most politically savvy answer. Her idea was a way to try to undo the lie.

"We'll see," I said noncommittally.

Des banged her gavel, and I nearly jumped. "Anyways, back to the next order of business. Loot," she exclaimed.

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Chapter 27

Crimson leaned forward and banged her fist on the table. "Loot." She banged again. "Loot." She banged a third time, and this time, Felin and Misha joined her, until she had the whole table banging and chanting, "Loot! Loot! Loot!"

It was an interesting image of very attractive women sitting around in silken nightrobes going feral for loot.

I couldn't help but sigh. "Really?" I looked at Crimson, who leaned back, savoring her small victory and taking a sip with a deep, satisfied sigh.

"I can be bought for the low price of loot," she said, making the word pop from her lips.

"Alright. Well, I don't have everything. You all did some looting, correct?" I said, flicking at my CID. Most of my time had been on portal duty, but I'd managed to nab a few pieces after the raid. Of course, I wasn't so crass as to loot mid-combat.

"Me!" Des piped up, her own CID out in front of her, swiping through it with the gleeful smile of a child on Christmas morning. "After we took down the dwarves, we found several storehouses in our section." She grinned and began dumping piles of mana stones onto the table.

Felin picked up her Irish cream so it didn't get swept off the table.

"Mana stones are good and all," Elysara said, staring at the overflowing pile, "but we can do better than that." She pulled out raw ores with a faint greenish hue and began stacking a pile that went from the floor to the base of her chair.

"Valuable," I said, gesturing at the materials, "but somehow, I don't think any of us is a blacksmith."

Elysara pouted at my failure to praise her loot.

"That's why you need cold, hard weapons." Felin pulled several out and slapped them on the table, though most of them were heavy two-handed ones that didn't catch my fancy. I peered over them, struggling, though Penny seemed intent on snagging one of the broadswords and turning it over in her hands.

None of us so much as flinched as a sword capable of removing heads swung in her wrist around the table.

I smiled and placed a find of my own on the table, which was a long, flowing dress.

Des jumped out of her seat to snag it, only to scowl. "Who makes a dress with agility on it?"

I barked a laugh. "I have no idea."

"It's terrible, isn't it?" Des wrinkled her nose.

"It really is," I said. She wasn't going to wear it, and her eyes lit on Crimson, who only scoffed.

"It's not red," Crimson stated, as if that were a thorough answer in itself.

"Well, she does have a point," I said, doing my best to hide my smirk. Crimson had a very narrow idea of what was fit to wear.

Selene picked it up and held it to her chest, turning around in it. "I think it looks lovely. The color suits me. And as for stats, well, I'm already on Ken's… second child," she said, rubbing her hands together with a sparkle of mischief in them.

Crimson choked on her beer and sputtered some onto the table while pounding on her chest. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me," she said, coughing into her hands.

"No jokes here. We are on our second," Selene said, holding up her hands as the dress disappeared into her CID. "And while the loot was scarce amongst the dwarves, I did find this." She produced a dagger and held it out to me.

I snatched it and twirled it in my hand. It was a little on the long side, with a sixteen-inch blade that pinched in just above the hilt before flaring to a wider tip. I held it up and spun it around to test the balance. I had to admit it was an epic blade at level 57. With my recent increase in levels, I hadn't quite found the gear to match it yet.

"Thank you," I said to Selene, using the dagger to give her a sharp salute. "Do take care of my second child." I nearly choked on those words but held it in, knowing she was getting great joy out of teasing the others about already getting her second round of stats from me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small spark of competition bloom in several of the eyes around the table. I knew deep down that I was going to be made to regret that comment. But for now, I had a shiny new blade.

"What else do you all have?" I said, looking around the table.

Penny surprised me and pulled out a shield, offering it to Fayeth. "Even though I'm a tank, shields have never been my thing," she said, holding it out.

Fayeth snatched it up, gave it a good look, and grinned before dismissing her previous shield, which had been strapped to her back, replacing it with the new offering. "I'll treat it well," she promised.

"You'd better." Penny wagged a finger at her. "Tanks need to take care of their equipment more than anyone. Though if you want, I did find a spare." She pulled another one out of her CID with a grin.

I couldn't help but shake my head. "How many more are you going to pull out?"

"Just a few. I found a whole stash of them." Penny winked, then handed the shield over to me. "Maybe you should give that to Helen. I'm sure it would make her incredibly happy," she said, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

The rest of the table wasn't quite so polite. Des roared with laughter, and Charlotte hid her face, leaning to the side while her shoulders shook.

“You should really see if you can’t cheer her up. Who knows, you might actually thaw her out,” Crimson suggested while barely containing her laughter.

“And your hell will freeze over,” Misha barely got out between her own laughs.

“And I will give up cream!” Feline added, taking a shot of it for emphasis.

"Yeah, yeah, get it out," I said, waving a hand, and a few of them didn't hold back, laughing boisterously. "Well, if you're all done having fun, I do need to go see the UG tonight."

That caused several of them to clam up immediately, in a way that was very satisfying.

“Do you have to go?” Des pawed at me.

"Yeah, unfortunately I have to get this part done. Control of the UG isn't all fun and games. Though you're welcome to come with me," I offered, and to no surprise, they all suddenly found anything and everything else in the room far more interesting.

"I'll see all of you later," I said pointedly, meeting their gazes, before walking out with my head held high. But I’d only taken a few more steps before Selene came rushing to catch up to me.

"Hold up," she said, panting. "Let me at least come and help you entertain my mother."

I smiled. "I think I would appreciate that."

And before I could say more, she took the initiative and ripped open a portal for the two of us to enter. We were off to visit the UG.

***

"Ken, lovely to see you." President Amatto stood from her desk and held out a hand. I shook it with a smile, Selene clinging to my arm, and having thankfully changed out of the silk night robe back into her school uniform. The grin on Selene’s face was a mile wide and reflected her mother's.

“We’re lovely, Mother. Just blowing off a little steam after the raid before coming here.”

"Well, I'm glad to see you two are doing well." The new president of the UG sat down at the familiar desk. It seemed almost like the office itself was her way of gloating. Everything but the desk was changed. It was cleaned off, everything cleared away, almost to draw more attention to the surface like a pelt hung above the mantelpiece. It served as a constant reminder to anyone who walked in that she had taken this position from its previous owner.

"So, what are we in for? Is there much to handle on the wrap-up of the raid?" I sat down on the couch, Selene not hesitating to join me a moment later. I knew I’d be needed here, but I didn’t really want to participate in those meetings I’d been a part of in the past where the UG executives grilled me on my actions.

"We did have a few public meetings and a few broader-scope meetings, before calling you in for this. I would hate to bore a major shareholder of the UG with all the tedium of our questioning." She grinned like she’d read

my mind and stood from her desk, walking to a small bar cart in the corner. "Drink?" she asked, lifting a crystal glass and wagging it back and forth.

"None for me right now, but I'd happily hear the recap," I told her. No doubt by the end of this, I was going to be asked to make decisions, so it would be best if I did so while being as informed as possible.

"Of course. Perhaps it's not the time to drink," she said, setting the glass down and pouring her own.

"Not going to offer any to me, Mom?" Selene asked.

Her mother smirked. "I assume you'll have your own after-party. Most guilds are having one tonight to celebrate the victory and remember those who fell," she said with a wave of her hand, sitting down and leaning against the front of her desk, swirling the drink absently, ice clinking in the glass.

"Unfortunately, we did lose forty-two adventurers." Amatto shook her head and took a sip. "We'll, of course, be honoring their sacrifice with a bounty paid to their families—or to their guild if they had none."

"I'm sorry for their loss," I said quickly, truly feeling the weight of all those lives. This wasn't a number that was so big I couldn't conceptualize it. These adventurers had just marched with me, and I knew if I saw their files, I'd recognize each one.

"I'm sure they would appreciate that," Amatto said. "But we must persist. Most of those lost either had a threadspawn inserted into them and were handled as hostiles during the event or they were separated from the group, which is a truly unfortunate occurrence. But we knew going in there would be some loss of life. I'm glad we minimized it as much as we did. It does bring several uncomfortable accusations down on the UG, but don't worry, Ken. We'll weather them fine. The UG has dealt with far worse over the years."

I wasn't overly surprised, but I did enjoy simply getting the information this easily, rather than having it piecemealed out to me. "Well, it isn't all bad news, right?"

"The good news," she went on, "is that all threadspawn have been removed from that safe zone, and we're able to push forward with several other operations. At present, we're doing everything we can to ensure the safe zones closest to humanity have been cleared. For that, we'd request your assistance, Ken." She said the last with a sickly-sweet smile—the kind everyone used when asking me for a favor.

"Of course," I said calmly. They'd want my [Eyes of Wisdom] to do several passes over the maps. After starting a conflict with the threadspawn, they didn't want to leave room for their retaliation.

"Perfect." She clapped her hands together. "We'll have some of our people come by soon so we can get all the information in a single session." She paused. "Though I am curious… do you have any sense of how the orkai might react to the outcome?" she asked, with a small squint and no small amount of hope.

"We'll see how they did on their end, though I rarely worry about the arbiters. But I doubt they'll be too upset with us if we report that one extremely high-level threadspawn escaped," I said, confident those massive orkai wouldn't struggle with something like this.

Amatto seemed relieved. "After what we experienced with that incredibly powerful threadspawn, many here have been shaken. I'd deeply prefer fear not continue to intrude on the UG's day-to-day operations. People have been worried about the orkai reaction on top of the threadspawn threat."

I gave her a slow nod of understanding. "Will you be doing anything in particular with me or the rest of my class?"

"Not only your class. We'll be doing our best to raise the spirits of as many of the administrators who participated as possible. That means we'll hold several adventure-centered events in the coming days." She shot me a quick smile, and I couldn't help but shake my head.

"I suppose that's the best way to raise everyone's spirits, isn't it?"

"There's a reason every business in the world throws pizza parties. Though it can certainly be abused to the point where it stops working, it is effective at boosting morale." She chuckled, and I shook my head at the comparison.

"So, no pizza party for me?" I asked.

"Well, if you want one, all you had to do was say so." Amatto and I shared a laugh. "Will you be able to report back once you've talked to the orkai?" she asked.

I gave her a slow nod, understanding how important it was to her. "It will be done. Soon," I promised. "The last thing anyone wants is to drag this out." Our failure, as it was, wasn't something I wanted to report out, but it needed to be done. Not to mention, it showed our sincerity when it came to working with the orkai to keep the dungeon orderly.

Selene bounced out of her chair and hugged the director. "Mom, stop being so cold. Ken is family now," she insisted with a huff.

"Of course he is." The director kissed her daughter on the cheek. "But family requires at least a little control."

"Control wouldn't be the word I'd use," I said pointedly.

"Of course it wouldn't be, dear. You've already knocked my daughter up twice," President Amatto said to me, then kissed Selene on the top of her head.

My jaw nearly hit the floor.

"Be nice to Ken. I'll be good," Selene promised in a way that somehow made me doubt her words.

"I would. But we do have business to attend to. After all, while Ken is family, he's also a major shareholder of the UG. I can give him some favorability, but not too much."

"Well, in that case… how about that drink?" I said and relaxed on the couch as Selene peeled herself off her mother and jumped up to make it, while her mother scowled at me.

"Men do better if you make them work a little for it," President Amatto said, only for Selene to wave a dismissive hand over her shoulder.

"You're welcome to such games, but I wouldn't dare play them with Ken. Not when I'm already expecting."

The director eyed me, and I gave her my best look of utter innocence. And part of that was true. I had no idea what game the two of them were playing, and I felt somewhat caught in the middle.

I sat back and enjoyed the drink Selene brought me while Amatto began to pull up several more detailed documents to go over with me.

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Chapter 28

I left Selene with her mother as I headed straight to Star City and into the arbiter's office. After my talk with Amatto, I had decided that it would be best to get the conversation with the old judge out of the way.

When I arrived, I began noticing sidelong glances on my way in. I initially took them as merely curious, but when I got a bone-chilling glare from the receptionist, I knew something was wrong.

"You might want to come back tomorrow," the receptionist said and went back to her work.

"I believe I need to talk to the judge. It's about the raid," I told her.

She let out a heavy sigh and stared into the middle distance for a moment. "I assume you know the way to his office," she said, and the door slid open for me to pass.

It was also odd that the old judge hadn't come to greet me. The whole situation made the corners in the room feel darker, like I was walking into a more dangerous situation.

I walked down the hall; the whole place seemed to carry a grim countenance. When I reached his office, I knocked and slipped my head in.

For once, the old judge looked his age; his face was more deeply wrinkled than before, the hunch in his back somehow more genuine. He glanced up, and the smile that rose on his face was completely fake.

Their raids must not have gone as well as I'd hoped.

"Ken. Wonderful to see you," he said quickly, standing. "I apologize for not greeting you at the door. Today has been"—he hesitated—"*difficult*.

Come. I'm afraid I haven't been able to check on your raid. Was it successful?" he asked with a hint of trepidation.

"Unfortunately, we killed all but a single threadspawn," I told him. “We did suffer losses, but we’ll handle those.”

"Oh, good." He let out a heavy sigh.

"The single threadspawn appeared to be the leader," I said. "The truth is, we wouldn't have survived if I hadn't made a deal with Princess Xanthana of the demons. Of course, I’ll pay the cost for that."

The old judge's gaze dropped. "I assume that hive was stronger than expected?"

"Yes," I said simply. "I'm not sure what level the dwarven queen was, but we were unable to do anything to her, and several of her subordinates stopped our push short. Once it was clear that even with a heavy sacrifice we were unlikely to kill the threadspawn living inside the dwarven queen, I made the agreement with the demons for assistance."

I waited a moment, but when he didn’t speak, I asked the question in my mind. "And how did your own attacks go?”

The judge stood, crossed his arms behind his back, and stared out the window, his eyes distant. "Not well. I assume you've sensed the mood in my office. Unfortunately, three of our assault teams didn't report back today." His shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. "Completely wiped out. The dwarven hives they were assigned to were checked within the hour and had already cleared out."

The arbiters had always seemed like paragons of strength, yet they lost three teams? The thought shook me to my core. Did that mean there were other hives that even Xanthana couldn’t have dealt with?

He projected a list in front of me. "For my sake, would you be able to use your [Eyes of Wisdom] and tell me if they're alive?"

I stared at the list. Being wiped out while attacking threadspawn didn't necessarily mean they were dead. There was an even worse possibility. I asked the question carefully, wording it to ask if their hearts were still beating. [Eyes of Wisdom] showed me a faint glow off the window as I studied the names.

"This one. This one. And this one." There had to be fifty names on the list, but only three were dim. "They're dead. The rest—" I couldn't bring myself to finish, but we both knew what had happened. They'd most likely been turned into hosts for the threadspawn.

"As I feared," he said, shaking his head. "We were far too spread out. By the time word reached me that there was at least one difficult hive, I rushed there and dealt with it myself. But even then, I knew there were likely other teams facing something similar on their assignments. By the time I checked in on all the teams, it was too late. The hives were gone, and there were no bodies left of my men. For a moment, I hoped the dungeon had simply absorbed them, but it seems my worst fear came true instead."

"The threadspawn are angry. In our fight, they were spitting vitriol and ready to start a war in the dungeon," I said.

"Of course they are. A great injustice has been done to them. They were systematically enslaved and tortured into compliance. Perhaps if someone had come to free them, given them something more productive to focus on, it wouldn't be like this. But in the dungeon, violence is often the easiest answer, if not the best one. As for the debt you owe the demon, I'd be happy to take some of it in your place. I feel at least partly responsible for sending you and your people into this."

He shook his head. "So far, the threadspawn hadn't fielded anyone near this level," he said, as if that made a difference. "Mostly they've been restricted to the forties through sixties, with a few slightly stronger or using threadspawn abilities to temporarily raise their strength. But it's apparent they now have several individuals over level one hundred. It boggles the mind how someone of that strength could be infected."

"Perhaps the dwarves made better targets?" I suggested.

"You may well be right." The judge clenched his jaw, and I saw the muscle work at the side of his head. "If the dwarves had been willing to parley with the other races at all, they might have understood the danger and prepared better. Though perhaps their hive structures are simply perfect breeding grounds for the threadspawn. Either way, we must continue to cleanse this incursion. It seems the threadspawn are breeding at an alarming rate, and even the young ones can possess hosts many times their own level."

“Then we must grow stronger to meet the challenge.” I tried to raise his spirits.

The old judge turned and smiled at me. “Ah, youthful vigor. Sometimes the arbiters need that; we are, after all, all quite old. You grow a little pessimistic with age. Right, previously you asked for training grounds.” He tapped in the air. “On your way out, please see the receptionist for a few

options. I would love to see you and your people bounce back from this challenge even stronger.”

“Thank you,” I said with a small bow. That was something I could use to help smooth things over, too. Not to mention it was exactly what I needed.

He let out a deep sigh, and his gaze grew distant like an old memory came to haunt him. "I apologize, Ken, but would you leave me be for today? Come back soon and spend the day with my analysts, and after that, I'd like to meet Princess Xanthana to discuss taking on some of your debt." He nodded and turned back to the window. His mind was elsewhere, and I was dismissed.

***

I sent my report off to President Amatto and found myself lying back on my couch, staring at the ceiling. On one hand, I was mortified that I'd led everyone into such a precarious situation. On the other hand, the fact that the orkai had fallen into a similar trap gave me an odd sense of relief. If they'd run into that much trouble, it was only reasonable that we would, too, if not worse. And I knew that had the demons not come and helped, we would have been infected similarly to the orkai that had been lost.

I let out a heavy breath and stared at the ceiling, only for Felin's face to pop into view above mine.

"Felin, what are—" I began, before she grabbed my head and kissed me upside down, silencing me, her tongue slipping into my mouth as we tangled together for a moment. I forgot my worries as Felin broke the kiss, her brilliant blue eyes slightly hazy. She pushed my shoulders down, flipped over the back of the couch, and landed deftly in my lap, grabbing my head again to resume kissing me as she ground against me. Her tail twisted around my wrist and pulled until she had my hand planted firmly on her leather-clad rear.

"What are you doing?" I asked, giving her a sharp squeeze.

"Distraction," she admitted, tilting her neck to the side, and I trailed kisses down her offered neck.

"In that case, you're succeeding," I said, and she gave a throaty purr, pushing herself further into my lap.

"Oh yeah?" she asked. "I bet I can think of another dozen ways to keep you thoroughly distracted. Des said you might be brooding tonight."

“Me, too.” My hands roamed over her athletic form, savoring each and every inch. They stopped at her chest as I cupped them and lifted an eyebrow at what I found.

Felin peeled off her shirt and flung it aside, showing me that she didn't need a bra at all. And that despite having very little body fat, she was still generously built. She kissed me again, purring, as my hands trailed up her waist, tracing the blue tiger stripes along her skin.

"Felin, how do you feel after the raid on the dwarves?" I asked.

"Don't care," she said, tossing her hair aside and leaving a trail of kisses down my chest.

"You can't just not care," I said.

She grinned, wide enough that the tips of her canines flashed between her teeth. "Try me," she said and pushed me back against the couch, her hands working to free me from my jeans. “I have something I want before me, and I’ll just enjoy it rather than worrying about the past. Let me show you.”

***

"You look like you're in a fantastic mood today, Ken," Crimson offered as I sat hunched over a bowl of cereal. In fairness, I did have a broad grin that I couldn’t seem to wipe off this morning. Last night had been great; Felin had successfully pulled me away from going to dark places in my mind. It was a strange thing, so often influenced by external factors.

I glanced up and squinted at her. "So you and Des colluded on all of that last night, did you?" I'd meant it as a tease, but by the way her expression fell, it was truer than I'd expected. "Come on, Crimson, I wasn't going to be that broody."

"Of course you'd take some of the blame onto yourself. I would, too," Crimson said. "But you didn't need to wear the poor kitty out that much. I bet she’ll sleep through the whole day."

"Felin bounces back fine. She's made of strong stuff," I said, trying and failing to hide a smirk. There was something primally satisfying about bringing your woman to such heights that she was completely and utterly worn out after.

Crimson rolled her eyes and started sorting through the fridge with her rear high in the air and wiggling tantalizingly. "The real question is what's

next. Right, Ken?" She peeked around the fridge door. "Or are you content?"

I rolled my eyes at the obvious provocation. "Somehow, I don't think 'content' is the best description of anything right now."

“Obviously, after all, there’s too much wonderful stuff in front of you.” She bobbed her eyebrows suggestively.

“Well, that is just too tempting. You might regret your offer later once I’m through with you. But outside of this, everything boils down to the fact that we need to keep getting stronger. We're getting close to being done with the area we've been grinding."

“Yeah.” Crimson put her ingredients on the counter and kicked the door closed. “That’s the nature of the dungeon. Do take breaks to enjoy it.”

I played with my spoon for a moment before sticking it back in the cereal, fishing out five kernels as if they represented my group. "We'll keep pushing ahead like we always have. But I think it'd be good to hand this leveling area off to the rest of our class, and eventually, Haylon. In fact, we should be doing a lot more to level up humanity in general."

"Go on," Crimson said, rolling her hand. She at least didn’t point out the massive bottleneck it could create, and I appreciated that.

"I don't have anything specific yet, and you know that. It's just… with my recent understanding of the orkai arbiters, they have a whole program, basically level one all the way up for training the best arbiters in the world. They make incredibly powerful individuals. My only thought, after everything, and our most recent tragedy, is that we can do more. A lot more," I told her.

"Of course we can," Crimson said, a touch too quickly. Then she paused. "We can always make something.”

“This could be the start," I agreed.

"And if it doesn't work?" Crimson asked.

"Then I'll eat my shirt. But I doubt it simply ‘won't work’." I air-quoted. "There's already plenty of opportunity out there."

"Well then, I suppose that's a wonderful way to improve going forward," Crimson said. "Who knows? Maybe when this is all done, you could become a teacher at Haylon." She grinned, a sparkle in her eye that told me she had some plan in motion.

"That's an oddly specific recommendation," I said, watching her out of the corner of my eye.

"Oddly specific sounds more nefarious than anything I'd actually have planned," she said in a hurry.

"So you do have plans?"

"Sort of. Not as nefarious as you think." She suddenly found making her food far more interesting.

"Well, if we're talking about plans, what's happening at this year's end-of-year party?"

"Oh, look at the time! I forgot… my thing. You know." Crimson chuckled, pretending to check her watch, rapidly shoving the rest of her meal to the side and promptly exiting the kitchen.

I sat shaking my head. I knew she and Des were up to something, but I still didn't have a clue what they had planned. And it was driving me no small amount of crazy.

Hopefully, it was something worth taking my mind off the present challenges.

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Chapter 29

After striking out with Crimson, I decided I'd need another approach to figure out what exactly they had planned for the end-of-year celebration. It felt like a nice distraction from everything else going on at the moment. That and I truly wished to know what was coming.

My first target was Charlotte, whom I found doing a small morning workout with Bun-Bun. She was in yoga pants and a loose top, exercising with a foam roller under one foot in some Pilates pose that looked decidedly unstable. I secretly wondered how many times she'd face-planted before she was able to do it.

Bun-Bun was her coach, bouncing next to her while chittering quickly.

"Charlotte, love," I said, smiling from the doorway.

Her gaze flicked to meet mine. "I have no idea what they're planning," she said in a single breath and ripped open a portal beside her, rolling into it like she was escaping for her life.

Bun-Bun barely managed to grab onto her braid to get sucked down the portal with her.

I stood there dumbfounded, then pivoted on my heel and marched down the hall to find Penny furiously typing at her laptop.

She was so focused that the blue-haired frost knight didn't even notice me, giving me a moment to just watch her. She'd let her hair grow out, and it was down past her shoulders; meanwhile, her robes were starting to slip and show off her athletic form.

Given that Charlotte had clearly been tipped off and sworn to silence, I needed to go about this one a little more smoothly.

"Penny," I said, with my most charming smile, sweeping my hair back as I stepped into the room. She glanced up, a matching smile forming before dread replaced it.

Fuck, what did Des or Crimson say to them?

"Sorry, I can't say anything," she said and went back to typing with a hunch, like she was forcing herself to focus on the laptop.

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting beside her and running my fingers through her hair.

"No, Ken. Don't get me in trouble with Des." She closed her laptop and clutched it to her chest. "Sorry, but Crimson already tattled on you, and we're not supposed to say anything."

My jaw dropped. "You're going to keep secrets from me? For the good of the family?"

"You'll need all the luck you can get if you're trying to convince Des," Penny said, catching sight of my expression. “Des locked this one down until we’re closer to the event. For the good of the family.”

"Well, I could probably go ask Felin," I said, rubbing my chin. "I'm sure I could bribe it out of her with a few premium bottles of cream."

"It's need-to-know only, and as much as I love Felin, Des has made sure she doesn't have the full picture," Penny said with a shrug.

I scowled at her. "That's going pretty far to keep this a secret. This is a whole class activity. I mean, aren't I going to be part of it?"

"Oh, you will be," Penny said, eyes back on her screen, pointedly ignoring me. Though the smile that blossomed on her face at me talking about my involvement was unmistakable. "Don't worry, Des already has your part planned out. She'll get everything ready, costume included."

"Costume?" I asked, leaning forward, and Penny mimed zipping her lips and locking them.

"Don't get me in trouble, please. Besides, I actually have a deadline I need to hit. The series has gotten so popular there's even an agent talking to me," Penny said, staring at her laptop.

I paused at that. "Wait. Is this going to get published? Like… actually published?" Somehow, her series had been fine enough when it existed in some corner of the internet, but now my deeds, or misdeeds, were going to

end up on bookshelves. Wait, because I was the central figure, did that make it more popular?

The sudden thought of posters of me going up in teens' bedrooms awoke a very strange feeling in me. I was flattered and also deeply troubled.

"It's still just a work in progress," Penny said, ducking her head and waving me off like a fly.

I grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it like a Prince Charming, then winked at her as I stood and walked out. As I rounded the door, I glanced back to find Penny watching me, biting her lip hard enough that it looked ready to bleed.

"Go, you incubus," she teased and threw a pillow at me. I ducked around the door, laughing, having enjoyed the interaction.

I checked the time. Des would almost certainly still be asleep, so I crept through the house and slipped into her room. She'd kicked off most of her sheets, wearing barely anything underneath, and I crawled into bed with her, running my hand along her side and kissing her forehead.

"Good morning, Des," I said, pressing her into the bed, a possessive growl rumbling in my chest.

Des smiled and kissed me fiercely before running a hand along my jeans. "Why are you wearing these?" She hooked a finger into a belt loop and gave it a tug. "If you're going to visit me in the bedroom, you should really come prepared." She popped the button with one hand and pulled the zipper down slowly, giving me a pair of half-lidded eyes.

"Well, the thing is, Des," I said, "now that we have the dwarf situation behind us, I was curious whether we could talk about what's happening at the end-of-year celebration."

Des hummed, her expression somewhere between sleepy and sultry, and began kissing along my jaw and up to my ear. "I forget," she whispered like silk brushing against my ear. "You're going to have to jog my memory."

I wasn’t able to say much more before Des’s new succubus nature roared to life, and she took control of the situation in the bedroom. I should have known better than to confront Des on the bed. Perhaps that had even been her plan.

***

Des danced out of the room while I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, contemplating my life. I'd completely and utterly failed to get a single iota of information out of Des, though I was fairly confident we'd both been very satisfied with the attempt. It almost made me want to try again.

She seemed to be the only one able to keep up with my incubus nature so readily. For the first time in a while, the constant desire to have sex was utterly quiet, and I wasn’t mad about my failure to get information at all.

It seemed my ladies were going to be difficult about telling me what we were doing for the end-of-year celebration, so I decided to bring out the big guns and threw on some clothes before ripping open a portal.

The lady at the desk looked up and instantly recognized me. "Are you here to see the headmistress?"

"I am," I said and sat down in one of the chairs clearly meant for waiting. The place was all dark stained wood and leather cushions that were just a tasteful touch lighter. It was ‘classic’ but rather boring. "Do me a favor and let her know I'm here."

The wait was but a minute.

"I've expected you," Headmistress Marlow's voice carried, and I was genuinely surprised she wasn't going to make me wait in some feeble attempt at displaying her authority. The two of us were never on the best of terms. From the moment I'd stepped into Haylon, she'd resented my presence, not to mention my closeness with Crimson, which had been a constant headache for her.

"The headmistress will see you right away," the receptionist said, a touch late.

I walked through the excessively mahogany-clad reception area to an office with a stained-glass window behind the desk. It had only been a few years since I'd met her, but she already seemed to have aged. Her gray hair was a little less silver and a little more brittle, and her eyes carried a new shine accompanied by heavier bags beneath them.

"Headmistress," I said with a smile, and she looked at me as though I were about to deliver some horrible, atrocious news. She braced her hands against the desk, ready for whatever came next.

"Oh, don't worry," I said, reading her expression. "I actually came to talk about some of the work Crimson's doing. I thought maybe the two of us could work together."

The headmistress blinked, sat back, and let a scowl replace her surprise. "What are you up to?" Of course, she didn’t trust me to do anything positive for her against Crimson.

"I'm just curious what my class might be doing for the year-end celebration," I told her, finding one of the seats agreeable and plopping myself down.

Marlow crossed her arms, a brow pinching in confusion, then rose with a slow smirk. "Does it disappoint you that you aren't doing a maid café to feast your eyes on all those ladies? Is that it? Are you angling to get it changed?"

I held up my hands; it was better if I was pretending to be on the back foot. Oddly, people tended to be rather afraid of me when I grew serious lately. "No, no, that's not it at all."

"Well, then I'm afraid I don't understand why you and Crimson aren't having this conversation yourselves." She watched me.

I put my feet up on the chair beside me. "For whatever reason, they've decided to make what we're doing a secret. Between you and me, Headmistress, surprises really aren't my thing. It's not that I don't trust them," I added, perhaps a touch too quickly, "I just want to know what they're doing, and I don't have the patience to wait for them to finish their scheming."

"Of course, of course." A slow smile crept across her face. "Now, this has me quite curious myself." She tapped her chin. "But if you aren't aware of what's happening, then I can only assume it's for a very real purpose. I would hate to spoil one of Crimson's activities. You must know how much the woman enjoys her games."

My smile grew increasingly brittle, as it became clear this wasn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped. For a moment, I’d hoped that Crimson had kept this secret would be a nice way for her to get a jab into the indomitable woman. "So what do I need to do to get your support?" I asked, cutting to the chase.

The headmistress laced her fingers together. "You make it sound as though I'm forcing something on you, Ken."

"Oh, no, that's not what's happening at all," I said quickly. We each wore incredibly fake smiles, chuckling like old friends who also wanted to murder each other in their sleep.

"Well, then, forgive me. Some simple details would be enough," I told her.

"I'm afraid that even I don't have all the details," she said, holding up her hands with a shrug.

"Nothing?" I asked, knowing that it was a complete lie. From the conversation earlier, it was clear that she already knew. There was probably a form that Crimson had barely filled out, at least.

"Well, I'm certain there's something, but I can't think of it just now," she told me.

I shook my head and took a breath to center myself. "All right. What would you like?"

The headmistress leaned forward. "What would you say to signing an agreement for the long-term support of Haylon College? After all, you're a very important alumnus, and the school would feel much more comfortable with some assurance you'll continue to be supportive after your departure."

"Fine. Just don't make it too burdensome," I told her.

"How would it be burdensome?" She put a hand to her chest, feigning offense. Then a sly smile crossed her face as she drew the moment out. "It would seem that Crimson has decided on a haunted-house-themed exercise for your class."

I frowned, mouthing ‘haunted house’ under my breath. "Really?”

“My greater surprise is that you weren't involved at all," she said, though it came out more like a question, and I shook my head.

"I have absolutely no clue. Your guess is as good as mine." Though I already knew one thing for certain. Whatever game Crimson and Des were planning, however they meant to make a haunted house sexy, it was going to be blatantly obvious.

"Well, now that we've got that sorted," I said, sitting back and crossing my arms, "I'd like to hand over a program for elevating adventurers to Haylon."

The headmistress looked at me strangely. "Why would you give that to Haylon and not the UG or keep it for the Silver Fangs? Any program for elevating other adventurers is a source of personal power, Ken. While I appreciate the gesture, the reality is that it's too great a burden for an institution like Haylon to take on," she said, holding up her hands and leaning back.

I blinked, surprised at her honesty, then gave her a slow nod. "All right, then. I'll take it back to the Silver Fangs." I'd considered giving it to the UG, but she was right. This was probably something best kept close.

“Buuut.” She drew out the word. “Along with the support of Haylon after your graduation, I’d love to talk about getting you and Crimson to do some speeches this year.”

“By that, you mean have Crimson give a speech with me reining her in?” I asked.

“No. I want the two of you to stand together. You both represent an enormous potential for the future,” the headmistress said quickly.

“Fine.” I waved it off. Another event of being blinded by the microphones was a small price to pay. “Anything else?”

“No. I’m just busy planning too many things,” she said and picked up a stack of papers in what was a clear dismissal.

"Well, then, thank you for everything." I bowed and excused myself, and instead of taking the door, I simply ripped open a portal and stepped through, hearing her click her tongue behind me. I couldn't blame her. Portals really were a fantastic skill.

***

Instead of returning to train, I stepped out into the central courtyard of my grandparents' estate and continued deeper into the compound until I found Grandma Yui's research area.

"Grandma," I said, sliding the barn doors open just enough to see half a dozen drow give me pitiful looks as they rattled their chains.

"They aren't looking so good," I said casually, as Grandma Yui paused and smiled, like someone showing off a prized possession.

"They're doing quite well, actually," she said, watching them shrink back, wary of the admittedly terrifying old woman.

"Well, I'm just glad they're behaving for you," I said, pausing before one of them and giving it a cursory look. "They don't seem to be in too bad shape, though I thought there was another one."

"It can be quite difficult keeping them alive," Yui said, shaking her head in lament. Alright, noted that one hadn’t been made of stern enough stuff.

"I can imagine. But I think they're going to become increasingly important." I tried to say it as casually as I could, but it was hard to keep the edge out of my voice. The threadspawn threat had escalated, and I knew what their worst fear was.

"Because you want more weapons to deal with the threadspawn," Yui said, practically reading my mind.

"Yeah. I've given it some thought, and we need to find a better way to deal with them. Otherwise—" I hesitated.

"Otherwise, you will suffer a lot more loss of life." Yui glanced at the drow. "Do you hear that? You're becoming even more important." She stroked one's cheek, and it flinched away from her. All of them rattled against their restraints to no avail. Yui had made sure to keep them secure both from themselves and from escaping.

If I were still capable of feeling pity for the drow, I might have felt it then. But after my experiences with them, pity was something I seemed to have run entirely out of when it came to their kind. The drow were incredibly sadistic, and after witnessing the rebound of the threadspawn after escaping their cruelty, I realized just how much damage they'd done to the rest of the dungeon.

"They don't seem to be in the best condition," I noted.

"Physically, they're fine. My healing covers most of that," Yui said. "It's mentally that most of the damage has been done. But what can you do?" She shrugged, as if it weren't entirely her doing.

By the way they flinched at her voice, I was fairly certain they believed there was much she could do. Sadly, this was a moment of choosing the lesser evil. Using one to atone for their own crimes was simple math to me.

"If they're not too much trouble, we need more venom," I told her.

Yui crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, entirely undisturbed by the drow chained before her. "Honestly, these six are already a decent amount of work. It sounds like you're asking me to take on even more." She gave me a long look.

"What do you want?" I asked, cutting to the chase.

"The UG's support, of course," she said, smiling.

I rolled my eyes. "Is that all?"

"Well, if you're offering more—" She grinned, and I held up a hand before she could ask for the moon.

"I think that's plenty, don't you?" I pushed back.

By the way her jaw tensed, I could tell the honest answer was that she was capable of asking for far more, but she bit her tongue instead. She was on my side after all. "It's enough to get started. I'll need more drow, of course, and with the UG's support, we could probably increase the volume

to meet your needs. The basics of the formula are simple enough. With their resources, I should be able to increase output significantly."

I squinted at her. "Grandma Yui, you knew I was coming, didn't you?"

"One could guess," she said with a smile. "But again, you're asking for quite a lot. It's not as if this comes free."

She gave me a hard look, and I dipped my head. "Of course. I don't want to come off as ungrateful, or like I'm taking advantage of you. I'll tell the UG that they'll need to pay you a royalty if they are to sell this poison regularly in the shops."

That was my general hope that we could spread it far and wide as a way to deal with threadspawn. Hopefully, giving drow venom to the masses would be a decent deterrent.

"Just don't let your grandfather call me stingy at the dinner table anymore," she said with a smirk.

"He called you what?" I said, exaggerating my surprise. "I'm sure even without my help you could solve that one," I said with a grin.

"Of course. But with you it would be much more effective. Your grandfather's harem isn't always given quite such equal attention as your own," she said, lifting an eyebrow, as though I was supposed to understand something from that.

I really didn't want to understand too much about my grandfather's affairs, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. "I'll keep that in mind, Yui."

"That's all I ask," she said, a beaming smile crossing her face as she started whistling a jaunty tune, adjusting the apparatus on the drow as they began to wail. "Work, work, work. I need more potent venom from all of you."

I shuddered and stepped back through another portal, thinking that I now had multiple discussions to arrange. Not only was I going to need to set up drow hunting parties with the UG and likely the elves, but I'd also have to negotiate some manufacturing. Thinking through how to even start on manufacturing, a few names and faces came to mind, and I opened another portal.

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Chapter 30

I sat with Sandra as she finished something on her tablet. The woman was a stiff beauty. That or I was finding out that I had a thing for pencil skirts. Hell forbid that Des ever got the idea and made the party fight in the unreasonable garments.

Still, my UG secretary was attractive; Scaredy Cat had been on the right track. I far preferred dealing with her over the scarred bear of a man. Maybe I should introduce her to Ambrosia to make more things in my life easy. The gothic angel had been more of a silent presence recently, clearing the path for me without being present much.

Sandra glanced up the moment she was done, oblivious or uncaring of my thoughts. "I apologize, Ken. There were some pieces of work marked urgent. I'm sure you understand."

"No worries. I assume this has to do with the fallout from the raid?" I asked.

"Thank you for your understanding. I don't believe there is more that you need to be informed on," she said.

"I'm sad to say I haven't been able to get very involved in the solutions." I shook my head. I'd been wrapped up in other things. It seemed my plate was full and overflowing at this point. Unlike Amatto—or many of the people who worked at the UG—my priority had to stay on improving myself. For if I didn't push ahead, who else would be the tip of the spear for humanity, pushing deeper into the dungeon?

"That's what we're here for, Ken. Please let me and the UG handle it without worry. Let me be your arms here while you take care of higher-level matters. Now, what can I do to assist you?" She folded her hands in front of her and completely ignored the pun she'd dropped.

"Right now, I have two issues, but let's start with one. My grandmother, Yui, has developed a stabilized drow poison that should be highly effective against the threadspawn, but she's only able to produce small quantities. I want to use the UG to help scale up production," I told her.

"I'm glad to work for someone as intelligent as you," Sandra said, flashing a bright smile.

"Flattery gets you everywhere. It seems that the old UG president was at the very least a competent recruiter," I joked.

She smiled at the compliment. "It's been said that, for all his flaws, he was good at hiring competent people," she preened as she included herself in that number.

"About the poisons, can you do it?" I asked.

"Certainly," she said, without a shred of doubt. "Given the reports on how fearful of drow poison the threadspawn are, I can see many in the UG getting behind this project. It shouldn't be too hard to get the executives all on board with prioritizing it. The biggest question, of course, will come down to cost."

"Of course. The world runs on Ren, and you understand that. I've made sure not to be lacking there. Give me a price, and I'll get you the money," I told her, though unsaid was I expected the UG to fund most of this if it came down to a sellable vial. But I could likely bankroll anything with all of the old SJS money.

"Of course," Sandra said. "The second problem? The one you were going to omit?" Her eyes held too much intelligence as she poked that particular hole.

"Setting up a new training regimen for the Silver Fangs. I assume that's outside your particular purview?" I decided not to hide it. Given that I was about to keep this for myself, I wasn't sure if the UG would support it or if I could offload much of the minutiae to Sandra to handle rather than take it on myself.

"On the contrary," Sandra said, tilting her head. "The UG has a number of priorities, one of which is the continued growth of all adventurers. Given that my job is to assist you wherever possible, this falls well within my job.

Of course, I would document this," she added, watching my reaction carefully.

"Of course," I said, none too pleased at the clarification.

"Unless you ask me not to. Even if it's policy, I believe Amatto would want me to prioritize your requests over UG procedure," she offered slyly.

“Would that cause problems for Amatto, particularly with Scaredy Cat? I know she’s new to her position and don’t want to cause problems.”

“The former president will be retiring from the dungeon and the UG.” Sandra dropped the bomb.

I nodded. The man had likely been scrambling for power, only for the raid to give him a reality check. "He took it that badly?" I asked.

"Devastated, apparently. Given how long he'd been an adventurer, I expected better, though I can't entirely blame him. The idea of being infected by a threadspawn is terrifying. Not to mention, in his own words, he found that he’s grown too old for the dungeon's continued changes, and retirement would be simpler. I believe Amatto has asked that his retirement coincide with him stepping down from the UG as well," Sandra explained.

"Well, if it's any consolation, my opinion is that we should let him go cleanly. No need to make enemies if we don't have to. The business world is cutthroat enough as it is," I told her. While I could be petty about this, it was just easier to bury the hatchet. I had enough on my overflowing plate.

"I'm glad our thoughts align," Sandra said, smiling. "And that if I ever lose your favor, you won't be too hard on me," she added with a perfectly straight face.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget just how much power I actually wielded, and that not everyone treated me like the college student I still was. "I appreciate your candor," I told her.

That, and she was very useful. To make a full spectrum leveling path for the Silver Fangs, I was likely going to have to buy a few areas of the dungeon for the guild to plant their flag. I could imagine it now, specialized training safe zones surrounded by fast-leveling areas.

“There was one thing I needed to bring up.” Sandra uncharacteristically hesitated. “Several executives have been making a fuss about the level of strength that Xanthana showed. Amatto’s stance is that regardless of her strength, we, as humanity, have no choice in it. But if you could ever weave in that there is a positive relationship between you and the demons, I do

think it would put several concerns to bed so that I don’t have to note them again.”

I eyed her for a moment. “Xanthana is the second highest tier of strength amongst the demons. Meaning there are seven that stand above her and many her equal. She’s… very powerful. More powerful than she showed there, because from what I understand, succubi are more supports or summoners than straight casters.”

“Support?” Sandra paused, not writing this down.

“She could charm an army and then buff them to several times their normal strength,” I explained. “But her stats are through the roof from what I understand. Many of the demons have found ways to increase their stats far past the norm.” I was guessing on some of that, but after having my [Stat Incubation], I assumed that the succubi had something as good as, if not better.

“And your relationship with them?” she asked.

“Business. All demons are very quid pro quo oriented. She came and helped so that I would help her with something else. Mine and Crimson’s [Eyes of Wisdom] is unique enough to earn us some things. Also, the incubus king’s seat is empty because he tried to take over demonkind after the dungeon shuffle. As for concerns over them… the demons are individually powerful, perhaps more powerful than any other dungeon race we’ve encountered, but they are the most non-cohesive of the races, too. Very individualistic.” I tried to paint the picture.

“They are selfish and prone to infighting while trying to further their selfish needs. Not the most reassuring, but that might give some of the UG executives what they need to feel comfortable. After all, they do appreciate someone who can be bought, even if they don’t realize they are outside their reach.” Sandra nodded to herself and began taking a few notes.

“Glad to be of help. As long as we don’t have anything too precious and don’t piss off the demons, I don’t think they’ll be an issue,” I offered.

"Of course," Sandra said. "Now, if you'll give me the details of what exactly you want out of this training program, I can put something together for the short term." She raised an eyebrow, more a question than anything, and handed me a pad of paper.

I hadn't gotten the full picture from the orkai yet, but with the basics, I could start recreating something for humanity. It would at least be a start.

Hopefully, once it had been vetted and iterated on, the Silver Fangs would grow many times more powerful than they were now, without relying on luck to find groups that rose naturally through the dungeon. Perhaps we could seek out those with the right skills and raise them more purposefully into powerful adventurers. Not everyone got opportunities like Haylon offered.

***

"Ken! I’m so happy to see you," Bellaire said, opening her arms as I stepped into the crowd of visitors, watching their reactions closely.

"You didn't say you had so many guests." I shifted back and forth a bit as I took in our audience; over twenty people sat around a dining table that felt more like a boardroom right now.

"Ah, well, some of them are PR staff." She kissed me on the cheek, then slid to my side, her voice dropping low. "There have been requests from people very high up that we not let the dungeon become"—she hesitated—"stagnant. There's a lot of fear spreading about the dungeon, especially with so many high-level adventurers coming back in body bags. It reads almost like anti-war sentiment, though I suppose it isn't entirely wrong." She lifted a brow.

“Not entirely incorrect," I agreed. "And I assume, since you called me over while you have guests, that means I can be of help?"

Bellaire's smile was a clear answer.

"No need to worry about asking for a favor. I'm not Crimson, after all," I told her.

Bellaire chuckled, then suppressed the laugh. "I have no idea what you mean," she stated diplomatically.

"Of course you don't. Crimson would never cause anyone any trouble," I said smoothly.

"Of course not. Crimson's an absolute saint," Bellaire added, laying it on a touch too thick, then pecked my cheek again while eyeing several of the others in the room with a smug look.

Bellaire was very good at managing any situation.

"Well, now that we have Ken's agreement," she said calmly to the room, "let's decide how best to use his time. Unfortunately, his schedule is limited.

If you'd like to go take care of other matters, we'll have a script ready for the five o'clock news." She turned back to me. "I'll see you at four."

I kissed her, then gave everyone else in the room a look that made it clear what would happen if they upset her before turning and heading out.

***

I spent some time trading messages back and forth with Sandra as I worked through the training options. I found planning my training was a useful way to kill time, short of jumping into the dungeon and actually training. But going to the dungeon was better done in a larger, focused session with party members who could complement my strengths. Going in solo now would be close to a waste of time.

"Ken, we're ready." Bellaire stepped into the room. I'd made it easy to find me.

Bellaire held out a small packet. "We have several news crews lined up and getting into place."

"And the message?" I asked, taking the document from her. I started reading it, my eyes threatening to glaze over at the sight of the massive paragraphs. I focused and read.

It instructed me to focus on the fact that humanity is entering a new age of strength, and that the younger generation, including myself, has stepped up to help solve the new threats.

"This makes it sound like I knew this was coming," I said.

"You're not a prophet, Ken, and I sincerely hope no one expects you to be one. Though, I'm sure someone will try to put far too many expectations on you because of this. Controversy sells, and if done right, it makes people sympathetic to you." Bellaire somehow made it sound as though arguing with me was about to become a business of its own.

"All right," I said, reading through the script. "Seems harmless enough." I set it down and checked the clock. "We've got time to kill, Bellaire. What color has your tattoo turned?"

[Stat Incubation] hadn't been entirely uniform across my ladies, but one commonality we'd noticed was that the stylized heart on their abdomens shifted from pink to red as the incubation fully matured. For those who stayed out of the dungeon, it took longer.

Bellaire grinned and showed off a bit of her toned stomach. "Looks like it's ready. But you'll have to make it quick, Ken." She gave me a sharp look. "You will not be late for this press conference."

"I will not be late for this press conference," I repeated.

She fell into my arms with a smoldering kiss.

"Then let's be quick. But not too quick. I wouldn't want to ruin my reputation," I joked.

"Don't worry. If you ever have an off day, I won't be the one to spread the rumors." She grinned, and I swept her off her feet.

"Well, then I'd better impress. After all, you're the one who controls what most of the world thinks of me," I teased.

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I stood at a podium in front of a massive crowd, lights flashing, threatening to blind me. The trick, Bellaire had told me, was not to stare directly at the crowd, but just over the tops of their heads. That would be enough to keep my eyesight through the whole session.

I leaned forward into the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming and listening to what I have to say. For those of you who don't already know, I'm Ken Nagato, leader of the Silver Fangs and a forerunner of the next generation of adventurers. Even as a student at Haylon, I've already made significant progress. Most of my class has reached level sixty. We've explored the dungeon far deeper than our predecessors. And where the dungeon was once an unlimited treasure trove for our people, where it was once something to dive into and rip as much profit from as we could, like it was an untapped vein of gold, that has all changed. We have to accept that fact. We are no longer alone in the dungeon."

I paused, letting dramatic quiet descend across the crowd before continuing. "We'd already encountered the elves, and that spurred no small amount of concern. There are people who, out of fear of the world changing, did their best to fight against it. But the world is changing. Willful ignorance won't stop what's coming. We've already had hostile races come to Earth. They have already invaded us when we were unaware. I'm sure many of you in the news remember the recent attack on New York. The fighting spilled out into the populace, affecting all of you who've chosen not to dive the dungeon. For this fight, we chose to handle this problem within

the dungeon to spare you the collateral effects of a fight at this magnitude. And it is worth remembering that these creatures, if left unchecked, were already planning to come to Earth and cause another incident like the first.

“To join this fight, the UG requested the most powerful adventurers on Earth to go fight for humanity. At the end of the day, we are the UG. We can't pull people out of retirement or conscript new ones. But we will make sure to do our best to keep conflicts between adventurers within the dungeon. That is what we have done, and that is what we will continue to strive to achieve. I hope you'll support us. I hope future adventurers will cause fewer problems amongst themselves, realizing there are now greater concerns lurking in the depths of the dungeon than we've ever previously known.

“Now, if there are any questions…" Dozens of hands shot up in the crowd. "Please." I nodded to a woman in the front row.

"There are concerns that you're actively creating an army that could destabilize any of the political establishments," she told me.

"Probably," I said, staring her dead in the eye before letting my gaze sweep over the rest of the crowd. "The dungeon is incredibly dangerous, and the adventurers who dive through it are becoming increasingly powerful. So powerful that even modern technology can't keep up with them. So yes, if I build a team of level-sixty adventurers, I'd expect some shift in power in the world. They won't always stay in the dungeon, and though the UG will do its part to police adventurer activity outside it, we all know that not everything is perfect."

"So you admit to sticking your hands into politics?" she asked, and I shook my head.

"Pardon my French, but hell no. My sights are solely on the dungeon. Earth is beautiful, and one day I might like to retire up on the surface, but I figure I'll be in the dungeon for as long as I can hold a blade in my hands. And if we're being honest, chances are I'll die in there with a blade in my hand," I told her.

"Can you speak more on that danger, sir?" another reporter spoke up.

"It's the reality, as many of you are no doubt aware, that the operation didn't go smoothly." I nodded my head, letting my true pain show on my face. "Working alongside the orkai, we discovered a number of threadspawn-infested dwarven hives mobilizing within the dungeon. The orkai took on most of the hives themselves. However, they pointed out there

was one close to Earth, and they asked us to clear it out ourselves. That was this operation."

"If the orkai are so powerful, why didn't they just clear all of them out themselves?" the next reporter asked.

"For all their strength, unfortunately, it wasn't enough either. Three of their teams didn't come back. The entirety of those teams perished. In fact, our own survival largely depended on calling in assistance from another race within the dungeon. The orkai have apologized for all of this, but there's of course no way to make it right with just words. Instead, to help humanity, they'll support an initiative to create better training programs for our adventurers. It's high time we rose up and joined the other races we've met in the dungeon. We must stop using the dungeon as an economic engine and start using it to build real personal strength."

I gave the orkai more credit than I needed to for some of the leveling program I was going to create.

The reporters began clamoring for more questions, but I held up my hands. "Thank you, everyone. That's all the time I have today." I leaned away from the microphone, and several people Bellaire had sent with me began politely clapping behind me to signal it was done.

Bellaire grabbed me and gently guided me off the stage. "That was fantastic, Ken."

"Just glad I could help," I answered as smoothly as I could manage.

"Of course you helped." Bellaire held a slight smirk. "Though it's important, like you said, to keep developing everyone for humanity." Her smirk shifted into something I couldn't quite read, until she pressed a hand to her abdomen with a smile that told me exactly what I needed to do. It seemed she hadn’t been satisfied yet.

I smirked back. "Of course. After you." I ripped open a portal and stepped through, Bellaire following, her fingertips dancing along my shoulders as the portal closed behind me.

"I'm sure I'll have a few items to take care of soon, so let's make sure we keep up our training." I swept her off her feet and kissed her deeply as I carried her deeper into her home.

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Chapter 31

"Going already?" Bellaire asked, rolling over in the bed and holding onto the sheets with some sense of propriety. Still, it made her only more beautiful. There was something about the look of a woman with messy hair trying and failing to be modest that stirred me.

Her neck was a wash of red hickeys that would fade in a few hours. I knew there were plenty more beneath those sheets she covered herself with.

"I don't get to talk the talk at a press conference and then not back it up, now, do I?" I asked.

"Suppose not," Bellaire answered. "And it’s probably for the best. I don't have anything left in me to entertain you." She flopped back onto the bed, and I got the faint sense that her words were more of an excuse to let me go than the reality.

The look in her eye said otherwise. I had a feeling she was still plenty hungry for more.

"Well, come by Star City more often." I brushed her hair aside and kissed her forehead. "Des is always trying to get more reinforcements."

"I'll tell Des you said that," Bellaire teased as she stood up to put her clothes on.

"You wouldn't dare," I told her while taking in her stunning form, my eyes making me linger longer than necessary.

"I absolutely would. But don't worry, I'm sure there's something you have to offer as an apology." She bounced her eyebrows, and it seemed I wasn't

going to be putting my clothes on just yet. I figured it did not hurt to make sure the stat incubation really stuck.

***

Bellaire was passed out on the bed, and there was no way I was getting back to sleep, so knowing I had work to do, I portaled back to Haylon with my books in tow. Weaving my way through the library, I headed towards a place to sit down and study.

What I really wanted to do was dive back into the dungeon, but I needed a party for that, and I knew that after everything that had happened recently, the rest of the group needed a break from fighting.

I might be a dungeon-head, but I knew when others needed a moment. Yet, I was anxious to get back in and train. We'd lost so many, and that was motivation to me to do better, to be stronger. I needed to prevent that outcome the next time we went into battle.

This time, when I reached the little alcove where I liked to study, Helen was already there. I paused and leaned against the doorway.

"Oh, hello, study partner," I greeted her as I moved to sit down. "I figured you'd be relaxing like everyone else."

"Well, you clearly aren't." She looked up from her book, and I half-expected a scowl, only to find a rather soft smile on her face. It didn't belong there.

"I don't need pity," I said, reading it in her expression.

"Not pity," she said quickly. "Just sympathy. That much is okay, right? Or is the famed Ken Nagato too tough to even accept that?"

I glowered at her but didn't respond, sitting down and cracking open my book.

"Sorry, that was harsh." She was at least trying to make amends.

"It's been a shitty few days for me, Helen. I don't really have time for your crap. I just got back from a press conference where I had to promise I'd solve all this by making humanity stronger," I grumbled.

"Well, that was a stupid thing to promise," Helen said.

"I do have all of the UG supporting me on it, so it's not like it can't be done. Just… it's not exactly going to be easy." That plate of mine was overflowing and starting to make a real mess of everything. All I could do was clear one thing off at a time. That and scoop as much as I could onto

Sandra or others who could bear it. I wasn’t alone. Sometimes I needed a reminder as much as the next person.

"Well, how are you going to do it?” Helen asked.

"Training regimens," I said quickly. "My group's been down on floor seventy-two in a boss room that spawns infinite adds. It's a great spot for grinding experience."

"Spots like that are incredibly limited," Helen told me as if she had extensive experience in searching for them. "My mother had a training regimen for her harem."

I tilted my head. "Really?" Though I had seen a bit of it earlier in the year, I let Helen continue.

"Of course. They can all give her some of their strength. That ability is the core of my mother's, well, everything. They've done plenty to try and optimize ways to give her strength. Even if only five at a time can join her in the dungeon, the rest are always training, because if they can get another twenty or thirty points of strength, it just means it's more likely my mother's going to come back alive from her latest round in the dungeon. They all kind of knew the deal when they signed up to be with her," Helen stated with a dismissive wave. "So yeah, my mom or I could probably help you quite a bit with training regimens. And if you set it up so she gets bonus points with the UG, even better. I do owe you something," Helen said, "but I'm not sure this is really enough to count."

I leaned forward, squinting at her. "I would appreciate it. And about this whole faking-it-with-your-mother thing… the lie is making me uncomfortable. Your mother was more excited than I expected.” I let that sink in, hoping to ease everything back and get out of the present situation. Going and having her mother help me now would only deepen this, and I needed to get out before I dug a hole so big I could never get out.

"Of course, my mother's over the moon. Now, I'm apparently a giant pervert like her, because I'm dating a rampant sex fiend like you," she told me. At least the sympathy was gone and replaced by a bland, if slightly annoyed, glare.

I sighed and palmed my face. "Helen, that wasn't the point."

"So, you want me to come clean. What if I say no?" She crossed her arms, and I had no idea what to do with that question. She was supposed to be a paladin and righteous.

"We're lying to your mother," I reiterated.

"She's my mother, not yours. Trust me, this is better than the alternative." Helen’s tone was hard; there was no room in it for me to convince her otherwise. At least not cordially.

I scowled at her. "What if I decide I'm no longer going to play along?" I asked, and Helen's smile stretched across her face, as if she'd been waiting for exactly that moment.

"Well, then we're just going to have to find a way to change your mind, now aren't we?" she said, with such absolute conviction that I wondered exactly how she planned to do it.

"Helen, I'm on a pretty uncomfortable line here. Obviously, I let this happen, but I don’t want to continue lying.” I sat back and let us be at odds. Perhaps if I let us sit against each other in silence, she’d at least get to a point where she’d be willing to negotiate.

"Great. Then go on a date with me," she said, without missing a beat.

"Helen, I have no interest," I said, and her face turned bright red with anger.

"You think I do? You said that lying makes you uncomfortable. A solution is that we could go on a date for real. Then we wouldn't be lying to my mother." She smacked the table loud enough that I worried one of the librarians would come kick us out.

"Or we just don't force this at all and tell your mother we've broken up," I said, which I thought was the obvious answer.

Helen, however, was growing increasingly red in the face. "Fine. If this makes you uncomfortable, then just consider it a job," she snapped.

"I certainly don't need your money." I was stupid rich. Well, the Silver Fangs was, but as their leader, it was pretty much my money. I’d put it all into the guild rather than hold onto it and do nothing but hoard it.

My repeated denials just seemed to frustrate her further.

"Helen, I'm sure we can find some other guy who's not such an uncomfortable sex fiend for you to play this out with. It doesn't have to be me," I offered.

"No, it has to be you," she said, with absolute conviction as she shook her curly red hair, trying to shake off some thought. "No one else will work."

"Well, then we've got a problem, because I don't much like lying," I said with added emphasis.

"Well, then why'd you agree to it in the first place?" Helen snapped.

"A moment of compulsiveness. I don't know. But whatever it was, I can say it was a bad decision." I could own up to that.

Helen was now standing, her book and studying entirely forgotten. "Whatever. You've ruined any peace in this room. I'm not going to get any studying done anyway."

"Find someone else," I snapped before she could prolong this by just walking away.

"It has to be you." She jumped up and blocked my exit.

"Why?" I demanded, wondering if I was actually going to have to force my way out of the room.

"Because you're the only guy remotely strong enough," she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Oh yeah? Well, regardless of strength, I'm still the crazy sex fiend, am I not?" I wiggled my fingers in front of her, as if I was going to pounce and get her to move out of the doorway. But to my surprise, she just stuck her chest out.

"I dare you," she challenged. Her chest was rather large, even contained in the mauve turtleneck sweater she was wearing.

I let my fingers dangle closer and closer until I decided to call her bluff. My hands clamped down on her chest, fingers sinking into her soft breasts as I gave them a very full squeeze, only for Helen to surprise me as her hands clamped down on top of mine and pushed them deeper.

I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind as I realized she had them bound and they were still as big as they were. "Holy shit, these are… You might actually have a bigger set than your mother."

"Is that what matters most right now?" Helen scowled. "Fucking men," she exclaimed with pure disgust. "And besides, after you did this, how are you going to go back on this agreement?"

She was still pressing my hands to her chest. They'd been stuck there in my moment of surprise, and I hadn't pulled them back yet, which only seemed to encourage her. She grabbed me by the nape of the neck, pulling my face into her cleavage and shimmying her torso and battering my face with them before finally releasing me with a look of pure satisfaction.

"There. Now you're no longer lying so much to my mother," she said, a furious blush on her face. "Just don't get any funny ideas." She pointed a finger at me and spun around, exiting the room while I was still trying to fully understand what had just happened.

The paladin had completely stun-locked me. And holy shit, they had to be bigger than Des’s if she unbound them.

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After recovering from being thoroughly stun-locked by Helen, I went back to the house in Star City, only to find a number of my harem sitting around the table discussing something. I approached, and they grew suspiciously quiet.

Most of them began to sneak glances at Des for direction.

"I already know about the haunted house." I cut right through the tension.

"Dammit, which one of you—" Des stood up, ready to fight the rest of the table.

"Headmistress Marlow," I said, before anyone could get into trouble.

"That bitch. I'll cut her." Des pounded a fist on the table. “Crimson, are you coming with me?” She asked with a hand raised, ready to make a portal.

"Calm down. I don't understand why this is such a big deal," I said, taking a seat at the table.

"Because we're doing a sexy haunted house," Des said, gesturing at the table in front of her and the stack of papers. I paused, glancing over it to see what exactly that meant. There were costume design sketches, and I stared at them in utter disbelief.

"What is this?" I held up one that I thought was supposed to be a mummy, but far more of the mummy's body was on display than covered by bandages.

"I knew you wouldn't get it, Ken." Des threw her hands up.

"Does it have to be sexy?" I asked, only for everyone at the table to apparently be on the same page without me.

"Duh," Crimson said, and even Bun-Bun was nodding along with them.

"Okay, well… for those of us uninitiated in the ways of the sexy haunted house, how exactly does this work?" I asked, turning one of the designs as if it would make more sense from a different angle.

"Well, it's a haunted house, but all the monsters are incredibly revealing." Des pulled out a whole stack of designs to show me.

"And you're all good with this?" I asked, looking around the table.

Every one of them nodded.

"Great. Then let's do it," I said, much to Des's surprise. "What, you thought I was going to stop you?" It wasn’t the worst thing in the world, and I wasn’t so possessive as to stop them from flaunting their incredible bodies.

"Sort of," Des admitted. "After all, we're going up against the headmistress. We're all going to make a thing of this, and of course, you're going to have your own part to play." That last part caught me by surprise.

"Wait, what am I doing in all of this?" Sudden images of me in assless chaps or otherwise revealing outfits made me pause.

"Duh! You're going to be the sexy vampire at the end." Des rolled her eyes and pulled out another design. This one, at least, had full pants. Though my shirt was completely open, showing off my chest and abs.

Des hummed as she looked at it and licked her lips. "It's going to be fantastic.”

“And whoever scares the most people gets to spend the night with Vampire Ken, right?" Crimson confirmed, and I couldn't help but close my eyes. Of course there was a part to it all like this.

"Is that what this is all about?" I asked.

"Nope, but a little healthy competition is fun," Des said and made the design disappear.

"Competition can be good. Right, Ken?" Crimson asked.

"Des. Crimson. I'm watching you two," I said, pointing at my eyes, then back at them.

"We'll be good, I swear," Des said, putting her arms behind her back and batting her lashes at me.

"Why does that somehow make me feel like you're absolutely going to cause trouble?"

"Well, the headmistress is certainly going to pitch a fit," Crimson said, with a massive grin.

"And she's going to blame me for all of this," I pointed out.

"It's a price you'll have to pay," Crimson said. "And we get Vampire Ken. But which one of us would you like the most?" Crimson asked, holding out the ream of designs like a menu. I couldn't believe her.

"What are you going to be, Des? A succubus?" I asked.

"No, I can be that any day," she said, with a completely serious expression. "For this, I get to be something completely different. There's no way I'm wasting it on being some boring old succubus. But don't worry,"

she said, as if I possibly would, "there are a bunch of other ideas for me to have fun with."

I wasn't worried in the slightest. When it came to sexy costumes, I had a feeling Des had no end of creativity and ideas. Well, I wasn’t worried about her lack of ideas; perhaps there was a twinge that she could go too far.

Des slid the ream of designs across to me. "We have extras. You should use this and maybe let your imagination go wild. After all, we're the ones dressing you up as a vampire. Turnabout is completely fair play. You should choose what we each wear."

I stared at the designs for a second before picking them up. "Well, it would only be polite for me to look through them."

"Of course, and if you want to look at this lingerie add-on section, too, that would be fantastic," Des said and stuffed another into my arms. Two more swiftly followed until I had my arms full.

"All right, ladies, it seems we can stop fighting over who gets what outfit. It's all on Ken now." Des beamed, and I couldn't help but scowl at her, feeling like I'd somehow ended up with a live grenade in my hands, especially as they all stared back at me expectantly.

"Yeah, no." I slid them back to Des. "I'm not going to pick for everyone. If you guys want something, just wear it. It's not like any of you could look bad in these."

"You’re so sweet that I think I'm going to get a cavity." Des bounded up and gave me a smoldering kiss. "All right, ladies, you heard Ken. Pick your favorite, and then we have to get back to the design and the script. Now that Ken's on board, there's no excuse to do anything less than our best.”

Somehow, I suddenly felt like I’d played right into her hands.

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Chapter 32

"Hello, Heather, lovely to see you again." I gave a quick, playful curtsy to the Harem Queen, and she threw her head back in laughter. Her red curls danced with her joy.

"Oh, Ken." She laughed at my antics. "Do please spend as much time here as you would like. You're quite enjoyable to have around."

We were in one of her homes. Two of her husbands had let me in and entertained me until she arrived. They were lovely, but at the same time, they seemed to put all their effort into paving the way for the Harem Queen. It was without a doubt an unequal relationship.

"Don't mind if I do. Though we'll see if you still want me here in a moment." I gave her a sad smile, wanting to set the tone for this discussion so I hopefully threw her less.

"I don't like that look one bit, Ken." She tutted and crossed her legs as she leaned back on the luxurious couch that dominated the room. It was a south-facing space with a wall entirely of windows, overlooking rolling hills from the comfort of air conditioning and plush cushions.

"Not the biggest fan of giving it, either," I said.

"Then let's get this over with, shall we? I'd like to move on to lighter topics with you. What seems to be the matter?" She sat up straight and reflexively smoothed out any wrinkles that might have settled on her abdomen with the motion.

"Well, it's that I seem to have lied to you. Though it is a little more complicated than that," I told her. The second half was in a bit of a rush

before she jumped to too many conclusions.

The friendly smile fell from her face, and the room, which had been warm and inviting moments ago, turned rather cold. But she didn’t speak, instead giving me the benefit of the doubt and waiting.

"You see, after our last conversation, Helen went as far as to ask for my help faking a relationship with her," I told her.

The Harem Queen nodded slowly, her eyes suddenly becoming unreadable. For a woman who was usually so overly friendly, the withdrawal stung that much more.

I fidgeted as I delivered the news. "Look, I'm trying to untangle this. She asked, and I agreed. Then it just felt wrong. I told her I was going to tell you, and she threw quite a fit. But I respect you too much to keep lying. I can handle the stress of the dungeon but apparently not holding up a lie."

Heather nodded slowly. I couldn't tell if she was upset or not; her face was an unreadable mask. "And what happened when you told her you were going to come clean?" she asked.

"Well"—I scratched at my cheek—"let's just say she wasn't very happy and tried to force the issue." I decided it was best to avoid telling her mother about the forced groping session. Yeah, that was in my best interest.

"And so you've come here, despite that, to come clean with me. Well, thank you, Ken. My disappointment is immeasurable. However, I do think we have several larger issues." She grew grave and laced her fingers together. "While coming clean to me was the right thing to do, we're now in a rather tricky situation. The world has seen you two together, and a sudden breakup would be bad for both of your images, especially after that press conference you held. I don't think you can take too many more social blows."

Well, at least she wasn’t drawing her sword. That was a relief as I drew in a breath, but it wasn’t deep because I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I'm not against owning up to what I've done. I will take accountability," I said, giving her a slight bow and standing, making it clear I was ready to leave. It wouldn't have surprised me if she wanted to kick me out immediately.

"Hold on, Ken. Sit back down." Her voice was forceful enough that I found myself instantly complying. "I think you and Helen will need to keep the act up."

There were many possibilities that had occurred to me, but this wasn’t one of them. My articulation was elegant as a result. "Huh? We aren't in any way in a relationship." I wanted to make sure she was very clear on what I was trying to tell her.

"No, no, but I don't think you can rush out of this one," the Harem Queen said. "In fact, you should do your best to commit to it, at least for now."

She surprised me, but that was settling, and I relaxed.

"You're not upset?" I dragged the words out, still not sure I wanted the honest answer.

"That you and my daughter colluded to lie to me? Yes, Ken, I am unhappy. But I can understand. I've perhaps pushed my daughter too hard, and I recognize that."

"Oh. Well, that's good.” I was not entirely sure where to go with this conversation, and I let the conversation lull into an uncomfortable silence that settled over me like a punishment.

“I’m glad you understand.” She held up a finger. “But since you have lied to me and share the blame with my daughter, I would ask you to now make it right by not causing a public scene and keeping up the ruse. And please, don't treat me like an outsider. If you would call me mother-in-law, that would make me ecstatic, even knowing the truth."

So, she was concerned with her public image. Of course that was likely something she’d spent a great deal of time working on. At least now everyone knew the situation.

I supposed if it would make Heather a little less upset with me, I could go along with pretending. I needed the Harem Queen in my corner. I sighed, accepting where this conversation was going. "Thank you for your understanding, Mother-in-law. How long do you think we'll have to keep this up?"

She gave a small squeal before settling down. "A while yet, I'm afraid. Like I said, you're going to have to dig yourself out of your current public sentiment pit. Being the face of the UG is no easy task. I don't envy your position, nor the trouble all of this is undoubtedly going to cause. While we may not be a real family, I would still love it, Ken, if you'd let me help with this situation. I have a few husbands who are excellent at PR. They could connect with Bellaire, and I'm certain it would make a difference. Not to mention, using my popularity and my daughter's, we could provide substantial aid in restoring your reputation."

"I deeply appreciate it. Like I said, this wasn't the reception I was expecting when I came here to tell you I'd lied to you." I bowed to her.

"Oh, please. None of that. My daughter's issues aside, I don't hold you to blame for too much of this. It does seem I've pushed her too far, if she's willing to create such elaborate plans just to get me to stop." She waved for me to rise.

"Yes. She's fairly upset over you continuing to try to set her up," I divulged.

"The girl needs all the help in the world," the Harem Queen said, leaning forward. "I suppose, with all this, why don't we count you and my daughter's pretend relationship as practice for her? Perhaps a few dates just to help her along?" the Harem Queen said, with a smile.

"I suppose we can make that work," I said slowly as the image of holding her hand was overlaid by one of her braining me with a mace.

"Perfect. See? Honesty is the best policy, Ken. Now, come. Let's sit over here." She patted the other half of the love seat. "Let's discuss some of my initial ideas. If they don't work, we can of course move on, but it's good practice just to get a few ideas laid out."

The Harem Queen beamed, and I felt better for having come to her to work it out, rather than continuing to lie.

"Now, if you'll indulge me, Ken, on some of my daughter's more positive traits. Perhaps I, too, can help improve her odds in the future.” The Harem Queen leaned on her palm.

“She's really not that bad. Just a little too… passionate," I offered

"I told you we're going to at least be pretending to be family for now. No need to mince words. My daughter is a handful of epic proportions," the Harem Queen said, and I refused to repeat those words back to her.

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"Why'd you bring me here?" Helen stood with her hands on her hips.

"Because Penny's busy, and so is Fayeth," I answered bluntly. It wasn’t like she was my first choice… or my second.

That was apparently not the answer she'd been hoping for, based on her scowl.

"Do you not want a chance to grind at a high-level spot provided by the orkai arbiters?" I asked, cutting off whatever argument she had been about

to start.

She snapped her mouth shut fast enough that it made a click.

"That's what I thought." I didn't bother holding back, gloating openly.

"You're an ass," she said and turned away from me.

"Never claimed to be anything else," I shot back just as quickly and focused ahead rather than on the banter with Helen.

I was antsy to explore this new location. In addition to Helen, I had brought Selene, Misha, and Candice. Helen, apparently, was not overly involved in this whole sexy-haunted-house business, and for whatever reason, my party seemed to be taking on the bulk of the work. I suspected they were handling it because others were still working to get their trial abilities. However, it wasn’t surprising that they were avoiding including Helen. Though I wondered what sort of costume Des was going to manage to stuff her into.

I paused, glancing over at Helen. "You're done with your trial?"

"Absolute Reflect." She nodded, holding up her shield as green static clung to it, sparking out like it was trying to grab me.

"Wonderful," I answered and took a step away from it.

"I've got mine, too." Selene grinned, yellow lightning sparking over herself to prove the ability.

"Consider me impressed." Misha looked down at her hands. "All of you already have trial abilities. I suppose it couldn't hurt if I took the opportunity to try some of them," she spoke hesitantly, flashing a hopeful expression toward me.

"The offer's still open," I reassured her. "With [Eyes of Wisdom], it isn't hard at all to find one. It just takes a little time."

"It boggles my mind." Misha shook her head. "You treat it like a simple favor, but for most people, they're wildly expensive. And that's just to find the location of one, which might even be under competition. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you, Ken." Misha bowed, then turned to glance at Selene, who had gone into quiet contemplation.

"How much information do you have on this boss?" Candice asked.

"Very little. That's the best part," I beamed. Standing in front of us was a large metallic dog statue, tongue stuck out to the side like a little derp. Massive columns were hewn into the stone walls like some ancient vault.

"It doesn't seem that intimidating," Misha stated, doing a small twirl like something else in the room might be the boss. But there was nothing.

"Well, we shouldn't take it too lightly. Candice, would you like the door?" I offered, asking if she'd like to be the one to pull it open and stop the boss fight. It offered some level of comfort.

"No, I'll be fine," Candice said quickly, "just wanting all the information before we kick this off."

"So far, all I have is that it's supposed to have a very large number of adds." I grinned like a loon. Something about testing and trying out a boss without foreknowledge got my heart racing like we were the dungeon divers of prior generations.

"For the sake of this, Helen's going to be in charge of making sure nothing big hits us. Misha, if there's anything smaller, I want you controlling as much of it as you can. Candice, Selene, you're both on healing to start," I told them.

"And you're all the damage we'll ever need," Helen finished with a mocking tone.

"If I can get my [Liminal Speed] stacks up, that's what we're assuming. This is a level eighty-four boss," I offered, knowing they would want that information. "The orkai judge seems to think it's a good spot for our own leveling."

"Probably some old, unused one," Helen said, apparently having woken up on the wrong side of the bed… again.

"Should be, but I'm going to borrow an old phrase… One man's trash is another man's treasure. I hope this is our treasure." I sniffed, and Helen refused to meet my eyes.

"Let's cut the chatter and just see what the dog's about," Helen said. "Do you have enough range to hang by the door?" she asked Selene. Who immediately checked with me before answering.

"Can do." Selene jumped back toward the door, and Helen flung her shield at the large metal dog statue. It struck with a resounding gong that I felt more than heard.

"Loud!" Candice yelled.

We were all no doubt momentarily deaf from the hit.

The statue's mouth opened like a hinge swinging free, and little rolling metal balls came towards us. They quickly unfurled five limbs out of their spherical bodies and began rushing our group.

Helen slammed her mace into her shield, and the ground around her erupted into glowing veins of light.

A second later, the metal balls stepped on them, and the light seemed to burn them slowly. They let out shrieks like grinding metal, setting my teeth on edge even as I stepped forward and began slashing my blades through the little two-foot-tall enemies.

Their size actually made it quite difficult; I had to lean fairly far over with each swing to cut down low at their height. I was thankful the others didn't seem to be having nearly as much trouble.

Candice, rather than healing, had made an executive decision and had begun setting up four runes that regularly blasted shards of ice close to the ground, skimming the surface and shredding the low-lying monsters.

Helen danced around, creating more of the consecrated fields, drawing the little metal spheres to her as she circled the room. The metal balls kept spawning in an endless tide as they continued to pour out of the giant dog statue’s mouth.

Misha was perhaps the least effective on this particular challenge. She created spires of earth to funnel the monsters closer to Helen, occasionally shattering them and spraying shards everywhere.

We occasionally clipped the giant statue in the background, though most of us completely dismissed it as we continued hammering our attacks home. The fragments that hit the massive statue pinged off harmlessly, leaving little more than a resonance in the air, while its mouth kept opening every few seconds to spill out another deluge of adds.

"How is this for leveling?" I asked Helen.

"Not bad at all. You should have told me you had such a good spot," she told me firmly.

I felt my eye twitch in frustration. Of course I believed this was a good spot. That was why we were here in the first place. But starting an argument with her wouldn't have any positive effect on this experience.

"The experience per monster is low, but there are so many," Candice said, checking her CID as she fought. The several runes she'd made in front of her thrummed, continuing to pump out damage even while she checked her device. "Nearly as good as being carried," she said absently.

"Do that often, do you?" I asked.

"My mother's guild sells boosts from time to time. Good money. Can't say I've ever done more than a few levels myself. Obviously, we have no need for that!" Candice shouted over the noise of the fight, sounding a touch defensive despite her dry delivery.

"Well, who knows? Maybe Ken will buy some from your mother. What level's their main raid team?" Helen asked.

"Fifty-five," Candice said.

"We've passed them."

"It's great that you're stronger than your mother," Misha said, punching one of the metal balls. I was surprised her hands could handle the impact. Then again, their exterior wasn't much trouble for my blades either. Perhaps they weren't real metal, just something that looked like it. That would make more sense with what it felt like to fight them.

"Yes, well, it comes with considerable responsibility. Like going up in front of a bunch of news stations and announcing you're taking responsibility for humanity's future in the dungeon." Candice's eyes slid my way.

"That," I said, not wanting to get too deep into the weeds on the topic, "was more of a PR thing."

"So you aren't going to do it?" Candice asked sharply.

"I didn't say that," I practically growled. "However, it's not as if I had too much choice in the matter. Something had to be said. I hope we can agree on that."

"We can." Candice nodded.

"Well, good. So, I said the thing as the person to calm the populace. And apparently, I'm the right person to do that because I took over the UG."

"Because you were targeted."

"Somehow, I doubt people are going to reduce their expectations of me just because I took it for more personal reasons. In fact, I'd say more people would ask me to make up for doing so."

"As if it wasn't already terribly mismanaged." Selene snorted.

I shook my head and decided now wasn't the time to get into it, even if I would have desperately liked to defend myself.

I looked at the group. "Can we make sure we're paying attention?" Our conversation had gone on long enough that we were beginning to get distracted.

"Yeah, careful. You might distract Ken," Helen said, and Candice tilted her head.

"So is it true the two of you are dating now?" Candice didn't mince words.

"Something like that," I answered as noncommittally as I could manage. Helen didn't seem to appreciate that phrasing, and it earned me a scowl.

"Yeah, of course it would be complicated with Helen," Candice said, only for Helen to fling her shield just over Candice's head to hit a particular add, the shield rebounding into her arm.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Helen asked.

"Helen," I snapped, "if you want to get mad, save it for when we aren't in a dungeon."

She looked properly chastised, spinning around to focus on the monsters.

"I see," was all Candice offered after Helen's outburst. "I wish you the best of luck."

"There is no need for luck," Helen said, as if the mere mention of a relationship with me had soured her mood.

"Of course," Candice said.

In all our fighting, we'd done substantial damage to the boss. I had a feeling this setup would evolve into some sort of phase two; we just had no idea how much damage was needed.

"Selene, perhaps you should get closer to the door," I said, watching the boss warily.

"I'm on it." Selene practically skipped over. “As for Helen, I could at least say she hasn't joined in on any of the harem's usual conversations about the more pleasurable parts of things.”

"Yeah, because I'm not obsessed with sex," she snapped.

"Not yet," Selene said, apparently needing to get a few jabs in herself.

Though perhaps I was biased. It seemed far better than Helen and me going at it.

"That makes sense," Candice said. "Of course, Helen's far too much of a prude for that."

"You will take that back this instant. And if you must know, I am in a relationship with Ken, but it's not yet defined," Helen said, getting defensive as they ganged up on her.

"Focus." I worried about us messing up when we got too used to this fight, which had turned mostly repetitive. My own blades were burying themselves in the soft, ball-like monsters one after another. I wasn't necessarily the best at clearing these in AoE, but I was gaining stacks of [Liminal Speed] quickly as I zigged and zagged around the room. I had a feeling I was largely a blur to the others.

They were all using their AoEs, softening the enemies up so that they required fewer strikes from me to finish them off.

"Okay—" Candice started as a loud scraping noise filled the room.

"Door! Now!" I yelled at Selene, but it was too late.

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Chapter 33

Just a moment after the scraping noise, the derpy statue’s face had already turned toward Selene, its eyes glowing bright silver before twin beams blasted out, catching Selene and crushing her body against the far wall in a bloody mess.

Helen cried out and jumped forward, flying across the area to try to save her, but it was already too late. We were well above our level, and the boss had caught her completely unaware.

The head swiveled with a teeth-clenching noise, tracking Helen next as its eyes began to glow again.

In my state of extreme speed, it was like watching in slow motion as the boss's head and eyes tracked its next victim. I rushed over, activating [Sprint] alongside [Liminal Speed].

It felt like I teleported across the room, grabbing Helen as the eyes tracked her movement. As soon as I got into range, I activated [Liminal Space], freezing the world. It shattered and split apart, the silvery beam that had destroyed Selene already reaching partway across the room, the deadly light hovering mid-air. I didn't hesitate. I grabbed Helen and shifted her just out of the way, then ended [Liminal Space] to preserve as many stacks as I could, watching Helen's moment of confusion as she found herself somewhere other than where she'd been moving a second ago.

Then her senses kicked in, and she spun around, yelling at me.

"Door!" she screamed.

"Working on it. You're welcome," I told her. While going for the door was a priority, reducing the number of times your party died was also one. Dying did something to the human mind, even if they came back.

"If you'd gotten the door, we wouldn't have to worry about anything else," Helen pointed out, far less grateful than one should be after having their life saved.

"On it," I said, dashing across the room to the door. A beam cut across the room, trailing behind me as I grabbed it and ripped it open. Thankfully, the beam cut off just short of reaching me, and I could only let out a shuddering breath as I made it to the doorway.

As soon as the massive bronze doors opened, the boss vanished along with the tide of adds into black smoke. Though no loot was left behind.

“Fuck,” Helen cursed and turned to where Selene had been killed as her hands began to glow gold. “Alright, so what was the trigger for that boss?” she asked Candice.

“I think we need to pull the adds farther away so we don’t hit the statue,” the blonde said, her eyes tracking to the massive statue. “Also, the second we hear the head shifting, we go for the door but stay separate. Though we know what to look out for, if we are too close together, there is a real risk of that beam catching more than one of us at once.”

I shuddered at the idea. “Don’t worry, we’ll be careful.”

“The exp is worth it,” Misha said, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“So… who’s ready to go again?” I asked as Selene appeared at Helen’s feet.

“Give me like two minutes,” Selene said, waving a hand where she was still lying down. “That fucking sucked, but I’m not giving up yet.”

***

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Xanthana took several long strides into the room, her pink hair particularly bouncy. She looked me over before shifting her attention to the old orkai.

"Princess Xanthana," the judge said, standing from his seat. "And Lady Frey," he said, turning to the taller succubus with a nod of recognition. At least he got them right. By the way they acted, you’d think Frey was in charge.

"It has been a while since I've interacted with the arbiters," Lady Frey stated. "Our two peoples aren't exactly well known for getting along, now, are we?”

The judge grinned. "We live in two very different systems.” By that he meant that orkai followed the rules, and to demons, the only rule was strength.

Xanthana poked at random objects around the room, clearly taking in all the details without giving the judge much of her attention.

"Curious?" I asked.

"Nah," Xanthana said. "More curious about your reactions than anything actually in the room," she said with a giant smile, as if she hadn't just admitted she was testing the judge.

I held my breath for a moment, unsure really how the judge and Xanthana stacked up. The judge was a retired member of the orkai’s elite policing force. He was ancient and likely powerful for it. Meanwhile, Xanthana was a black box. She acted young and looked like she could barely drink, but for all I knew, she could be older than dirt.

“I see.” The old judge paused. "Well, welcome to my humble abode. I assume the trip was pleasant? Portaling has always made me a little nervous, if I’m honest.”

"They work fantastically," Xanthana said, bouncing on her feet. "Far more comfortable than carrying people around the dungeon, too." She grinned like a loon. “I've lost a few good retainers to an overly tight grip, after all. The jerk from changing direction can really give you some deadly whiplash."

I was expecting a laugh to follow that, but after a beat, I realized it wasn’t coming.

"Anyway"—I cleared my throat—"this is Princess Xanthana, as I promised," I said to the old judge.

"Yes, of course. And I understand you helped Ken out on one of the missions I gave him. While his decision was his own, I do feel some sense of responsibility in helping him cover the cost incurred," the retired arbiter stated, standing up and crossing his hands behind his back.

Xanthana paused in her goofing around and inspecting the room. "He made the decision, and he'll pay the price," she said, her face becoming a cold mask, "and you will not be taking Ken from us."

The judge put a hand to his chest in sincerity, but there was no surprise. "I have no intention of taking Ken from you," he said slowly, a small amount of exasperation bleeding into his voice. Given his age and expertise in managing people, I could only assume that was a very deliberate choice to let his feelings show. "But I do not see a reason for me to be unable to assist him," the judge stated, no small amount of scorn in his voice.

"No, his debt is with me." The little pink succubus crossed her arms under her chest, making them seem far larger. "It does not stop you from assisting him, but it does stop you from playing with things you don't understand. I have assisted Ken because, quite frankly, there is something I want from him. Thus, of course, your actions are far from ideal for me. Now, if you understand, please step aside, and let me continue with the plans I already have underway."

It seemed that they were both interested in supporting me, but at the same time, they were unwilling to share. I felt like a doll being pulled from both sides.

I was paying close attention through this exchange, trying to see where Xanthana sat in the hierarchy compared to the old judge.

Both were incredibly powerful in my eyes, but I wasn't entirely sure how they compared to each other. After all, while I understood quite a bit about the dungeon, the true depths of power still eluded me. Xanthana was already mind-blowingly powerful, and the succubus queen stood even above her. The judge was powerful as well, but it was hard to know how they stacked up against each other.

"Thoughts?" Lady Frey stepped up beside me as Xanthana and the arbiter stared each other down.

"I'm wondering where the orkai sit compared to the demons in power," I admitted.

The old judge heard me. "Not too high or too low," he said, "but very different. The princess is of similar strength to myself, though lower in level."

"What he means to say"—the princess grinned, a great deal of pride bleeding through—"is that demons have higher maximum stats than orkai. I might be level one twenty-three, but I'm as strong as this guy, and he's already level one fifty-two."

I blinked and stared at the old judge. "You've been to the bottom of the dungeon?" Perhaps a few other things should have occurred to me, but that

was what really stuck out.

"Quite," the retired arbiter admitted, "though I must say my desperation to keep growing stronger ended somewhat once I found the bottom."

"Not uncommon. One-fifty is the beginning of the end," she intoned.

The old orkai grunted in acknowledgment.

"So the succubus queen could take on the orkai?" I asked.

The arbiter shook his head. "I'm far from the strongest of my people. There's a city at the very bottom of the dungeon, right before the doors to the final boss, that no one has ever returned from after entering. All seven major cities have representatives down there. Within it reside the kind of people who haven't stopped fighting, who've pushed past level one-fifty, even though it's exceedingly hard to level past a certain point. They are all sort of in a stalemate of various groups and tensions."

"The hundred and fiftieth floor is absolutely gigantic," Xanthana said, eyes wide, arms spread. "A lot of them train down there non-stop. I could probably go down and train, but ruling hell is preferred."

"But in all of this, the whalewyrn are the strongest?" I nodded, and both of them looked like they'd suddenly gotten a foul taste in their mouths.

"The whalewyrn’s leader is exceedingly powerful, so much so that he rarely leaves the bottom of the dungeon. There is a risk that he'd destroy other floors with his presence,” the old judge told me.

Xanthana didn’t seem to want to talk about it and turned back to the judge. "I see you already have a purpose in mind for him."

The judge watched her. "And you're no doubt aware of his remarkable abilities."

"I am," Xanthana said, sticking her chin up. "And I'm aware he's become a demon. Do keep that in mind before you try to overly influence him."

"Of course," the old judge said, pausing before shaking his head and turning back to me. "It seems I wasn't as helpful as I would have liked to be in this situation. I'll have to find some other way to assist you, Ken."

The way he spoke made it clear he already had a plan in his mind for how to help me, but he had no intention of saying it in the presence of the other demons.

Xanthana crossed her arms. "Ken doesn't need your handouts. Do you, Ken?"

"Sounds like they might be nice handouts," I said, earning a look of exasperation from the succubus princess. Then again, I wanted to get

something out of this. If she wasn’t going to let the orkai help, then she should give up something. It was only reasonable.

Lady Frey leaned forward. "You don’t want to come off as unreasonable, mistress."

"Of course not. So it's a good thing I won’t come off as unreasonable, because I have a reward." Xanthana turned slowly, eyeing her.

"Of course," Lady Frey said quickly with a sultry purr.

"As I thought." Xanthana turned sharply back to the old judge and me. "But I suppose they wouldn't fully understand that unless we went through some tension, now would they?" She tapped at her chin.

I stared back at the judge, desperately wanting to shoot Lady Frey a thankful look, but given that this moment seemed to be working in my favor, I held off. I did not want to risk upsetting the balance that seemed to be holding.

Princess Xanthana snapped her fingers and pointed at the judge. "How about this? You were going to offer him some of your time. Offer it to me instead. Later this summer, drag Ken down into the depths of the dungeon and obliterate a few floors for him," Xanthana said with a giant smile.

"Power-leveling does one no good," the orkai intoned, his voice a low rumble.

"He's gained some demonic abilities that should help with that." Xanthana smirked.

The old judge frowned, considering her words for a moment, before his eyes went wide. "You used such precious ability tomes on him?"

Precious? To a level one-fifty orkai? I perked up at that.

His surprise was enough that I looked to Xanthana for confirmation.

"He's exaggerating. They are, of course, valuable," she said, "but not *thaaat* valuable.”

“Only because the number of powerful incubi who could afford them has dwindled to nothing. Before, it was one of the top ten most expensive abilities," Lady Frey said.

"Thank you, peanut gallery." Xanthana scowled at her assistant.

"It is important that Ken understands what exactly was done for him," Lady Frey stated and turned to meet my eyes.

Okay, top ten most expensive… like in the whole dungeon?

"I see," the old judge said calmly. "You've invested a considerable sum into him. It's only understandable that you'd get"—he paused, searching for

the word—"territorial over another's involvement."

"I am not territorial," Xanthana said, and I found myself smiling.

"Well, thank you. That was very generous. Far more generous than I have learned to expect from a demon." I gave her a small bow.

"Don't worry, you'll pay it back to me, I'm sure," Xanthana said with a wave of her hand, yet she couldn’t meet my eyes and found everything else in the room more interesting to look at.

"Of course I will." I nodded, looking at Lady Frey more than Xanthana, understanding her role in the present situation a little better.

"I'm sorry. It seems I won't be able to take up too much more of your time," I said to the old judge.

"It's fine. I suppose I should be glad you're not the kind of man to take advantage of kindness. The idea of power-leveling you is against my better judgment," the old judge said, "but I suppose we can judge whether your stats have exceeded your level for the normal leveling curve. An assessment could be made at that point." He then turned to the princess. "What are the chances the demons would be at all willing to assist with this threadspawn outbreak?"

I suddenly realized there was another reason the old orkai wanted to meet with the demons who had assisted me.

"The politics of it all are utterly boring." The princess cursed. "It's simply too convenient a way for rivals to weed each other out. Wipe someone out and claim it was cleaning up threadspawn by the time the blood has dried."

The old orkai gave her a look that said he was less than impressed with that reasoning. "I'm surprised the demons would keep fighting amongst themselves with a threat like this at their doorstep."

"We tried. We really did. But demonic politics don't grind to a halt that easily," she said. "I think you'll find that there are few outside threats able to stop the political machinations of demons. Perhaps the only event that can bring them together is when one of us does too well. Demon royalty is much like crabs in a pot. The second one tries to escape, the rest will do everything in their power to drag them back down and keep the kingdoms of hell in equilibrium."

The orkai judge gave her a sad, pitiful look.

"Hell is glorious. I do not need your pity." She frowned.

"No pity," the orkai judge said quickly. "Witnessing the unfortunate is never my favorite pastime.”

“There is nothing unfortunate about it. But back to your original question. There can be some assistance, but it's reliant on Ken," Xanthana said, after a moment.

"Me?" I asked, pointing at myself.

"We'll explain more this summer," Xanthana said, with a glance toward the old judge that made clear she wouldn't speak of whatever was on her mind in his presence.

"Whatever could create such a situation must be very personal," the judge said, making a polite excuse for her. "I have no desire to pry, but my personal interest in Ken's growth does make me curious."

"Enjoy your curiosity then." She turned to me. "Ken, if you would?" she asked, already turning on her heel, clearly done with the conversation. It was obvious what she wanted. The orkai’s questions had brushed too close to something she wanted kept secret.

"Of course." I opened a portal, and the two succubi disappeared through it, leaving me with the old judge, who stared at me more curiously than before.

"You have more leverage than you think with those two. Use it wisely. The demons, if they could ever stop warring with each other, would be a strength the orkai couldn't stand against."

"I guess it's a good thing they'll never stop fighting each other," I said with a raised eyebrow.

"Indeed." The orkai chuckled. "But if they want something from you, be sure you get your full value. They will absolutely do the same to you, so feel no guilt in pushing for what you earn."

"I wasn't planning on giving in to their whims for nothing," I said, "but I'll keep your words in mind." I bowed to the old judge and opened a new portal to leave.

"Hold up a second." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Since you're here today, and you never came back for that session with my analysts, please stay a little longer." The smile on his face made my spine quiver with dread.

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Chapter 34

The next few weeks flew by in a blur. We were growing close to the end of the year, and the class had grown increasingly desperate to finish their trials. I understood their anxiety. Getting a trial was the final, and failure really was not an option.

Each and every adventurer in my class had put so much into getting to this point and refused to back out now.

Crimson had not helped the situation when she threatened to bar anyone still working on their trials from participating in the year-end celebration, to which Helen asked if she could get rid of her trial ability, and Crimson nearly destroyed the classroom.

To say tension was high was an understatement bordering on negligence.

My cooperation with Helen seemed to have eased some of the edge between her and the rest of my party, which at least gave me some relief. For the rest of the class, it seemed every day another classmate managed to conquer their trial as they continued to push their stats above average and worked out tactics to defeat each.

And our year-end celebration was coming up fast, which was why class that morning had everyone rambunctious, practically bouncing in their seats.

"Alright, everyone, quiet down. I know we're excited, but that doesn't mean we have to be noisy, too." Crimson was especially grouchy, most likely because the headmistress had pulled her and the other teachers into a

long session of socializing the night before, and by the looks of it, Crimson had found some ways to ease the burden through drinks.

Candice's hand shot up. "Is the rumor true?"

"What rumor?" Crimson asked, easing a pair of sunglasses down to look over them.

"That it's more than just the four other colleges coming this year," Candice said, and that statement certainly got my attention.

Crimson closed her eyes with a pained expression. "They announced it last night, so I suppose it's not a rumor anymore. The headmistress has found schools amongst several of the other races, particularly the orkai. They have decided to invite them as part of some cultural exchange between us." She rolled her eyes as she hid them back behind the sunglasses.

I suppose the headmistress did that with the elves, so it fit her to do it again.

"Do we have a full list?" I asked, not even bothering to raise my hand. I was a little miffed that Crimson hadn’t taken the time to inform me of this before classes. Even Elysara hadn’t reached out.

"If I had a full list, I'd already be reading it." Crimson put her sunglasses back on, a small smirk playing across her face. "Now, I would like to commend us on all officially gaining our trial abilities. Congratulations, Muriel, on finally getting Absolute Reflect. Even if you were last, it’s at least more commendable than having Ken find a quail for you." Even with the sunglasses on, we all knew she was glaring at Harley.

"Thank you." The tank nodded. "I refuse to be left behind."

"About time you got it," Harley said, kicking her feet up on her desk and pushing back against Crimson’s glare.

I squinted at her. "Do you get to be smug about yours?" I asked. No doubt my glare was a mirror of Crimson’s own.

"Of course. I got mine on the first try." Harley was the definition of smug.

I was sorely tempted to wipe the look off her face with a few choice facts, but I also suspected Harley wouldn't respect facts very much.

"Can you tone down the jealousy? I can feel it from here," Harley said, as everyone began laughing at her antics.

"I'll remember that for next time," I replied and turned to the more important things happening. Like the fact that we had a much larger and more important group descending on the end-of-year celebration.

"Remember I did that huge favor for you? That's power in its own right." Harley narrowed her eyes.

"If I recall, you gave me some barely factual information," I said, squinting right back at her.

"You should get your memory checked," Harley said, unable to hide her smirk.

If any of the other members of class were bothered by Harley's words, it was impossible to tell. They had no reaction.

But we were also all used to Harley’s antics. She wouldn’t change, so the options were to accept her, annoying bits and all, or move on.

"Regardless, I think we should focus on the fact that other races will be joining us," Helen snapped before Harley could derail the conversation any further; she was remarkably adept at that skill.

"What do you suggest?" Harley asked, leaning back and crossing her arms.

"At present, there isn't much," Helen admitted, glancing at Crimson, "but knowing who and what we're even talking about would certainly make things easier."

"We've got orkai organizations," Crimson said, "at least two nekorian, and the succubi have offered to bring some of their youngsters as well."

The classroom grew quiet with a growing dread.

"Yes, but it's just a celebration. A cultural exchange," Crimson explained, clearly repeating what she had been told. However, the prevailing feeling in class was that this was monumental. Just having a single elf in their class had been enough to cause the UG and politicians to get involved. What was going to be the scale for this?

"Are there any rules?" I asked.

"Do there need to be?" Crimson raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, Harley's part of all this. We should probably have some rules," I joked, getting a good snicker from the class. But that was just an excuse; the UG would no doubt be watching this event like a hawk given the guests present. There would be rules.

"Oh, and there will be a few reporters this time. To get the UG's help, we had to convince them they could use this for some good press as well," Crimson told us.

I groaned, because I knew exactly what I'd said that had led to this outcome. And while it wasn't exactly what I'd wanted, it was also exactly

what we needed, so I would have to just deal with the fact that the media was coming.

"Wonderful. And you'll be speaking, right, Crimson?" I said, my voice tinged with hope.

"We can do a joint announcement," Crimson said, and I could hear Des mutter that she'd be less helpful than Harley was in group projects. I turned to glare at Des; no doubt Crimson had heard that, too.

"I will remind you that I will be incredibly helpful, Des," Crimson said, leaning on the lectern as it creaked ominously. "Certainly more helpful than Harley."

"Hey!" Harley shouted. "Why am I being used as the bad example?"

"Because you are the bad example," Helen answered for all of us.

"I protest my innocence!" Harley shouted.

There was a faint blue glow behind Crimson’s sunglasses. "Quit disturbing class," Crimson said, her whip cracking across the room and hitting Harley. The moment it touched her, the pink-haired bard exploded. There was a stillness in the room; Crimson hadn't killed anyone in class since the first day. A moment later, a white calming light erupted from Harley's mangled corpse, shining over her and the rest of the room before Harley's body jerked upright and came back to life, gasping.

In the silence, there was a small whisper. “Finally.”

"You fucking killed me!" Harley shouted as she came back.

Crimson was too busy petting her whip with an orgasmic expression to answer. "That was fantastic. What's the cooldown on that again, Harley?"

The pink-haired bard shook her head rapidly and mimed zipping her lips. "Wouldn't want to keep disturbing class."

"Fine, so be it. Everyone, settle down. Harley's not dead… yet." She said the last with a trace of disappointment.

"I'm sure you'll manage, Crimson," I consoled her.

"It'll tide me over for a while," she agreed. "As for all the details of the invite list, I'm not being kept too well informed either. It is almost like they think the second I learn something, I'll spill it all to you. It seems the headmistress has some desire to keep things quiet until the event. So, please, while we work through all of this, have some patience.

While the class was clearly unhappy with that answer, they seemed content enough to quieten down.

"Now, if you'll open our new book to page twelve, let's dive in," Crimson stated, and books flipped open faster than ever before. Apparently, seeing a fellow student be evaporated was good motivation.

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"Do we have to do this?" I asked, as the ladies all stood around me while two of Bellaire's makeup artists worked on me with gleeful smiles and a very uncomfortable twinkle in their eyes.

"We need to do a test run of the whole outfit before we put you on stage," Des said. They were all watching with glee.

"Those are sound reasons," Elysara said, while Fayeth changed her angle and took a picture with her CID.

"Really?" I asked.

"Oh, this is a picture-worthy moment," Fayeth told me while she snapped another shot.

"It really is," Des agreed, watching close by. "You don't want to be trying the makeup for the first time when you actually need it. This is a full dress rehearsal."

I squinted at my harem. "You are all far too excited for this."

"Of course. When else do I get to dress you up as a sexy vampire?" Des said, with a grin.

"We should make sure the fangs they use are strong enough for a good bite," Crimson said, and I couldn't believe my ears.

"Really? You, too?" I asked.

"Yes, really. Do you know how disappointing it is that we've never met a vampire? At least, it's pretty disappointing for me," Crimson said.

Penny glanced at me, a furious blush overtaking her features. I had no idea what was going through her head, and frankly, I thought it was best not to ask. But even without intending to, my brain started swirling with thoughts of the fun she might be having in her mind, playing out a moment of vampire compulsion.

"Fine." I did my best to stay still while they worked copious amounts of powder onto my face, turning me deathly pale. I was already quite pale from becoming an incubus, but they somehow made it even worse.

I was dressed in a slightly old-timey military outfit. Besides the ultra-pale complexion, the makeup artist added some artful splashes of blood, as if I'd

just finished a particularly large meal.

"You look fantastic," Des encouraged from the side.

The two makeup artists putting makeup onto my face were being blessedly quiet about the whole affair, except for the occasional snicker. The whole group just seemed excited to transform me into a vampire.

They were getting more of a glimpse into our group's dynamics than I wanted out in the world, but it was hard to be media-ready all the time. Hopefully, this wouldn't end up in some sort of tell-all book a few years from now. I wasn't sure I could take it.

"A little more blood here"—Bellaire pointed at my face—"and open up the shirt more."

"I think it's plenty open. Any more and you'll see my belly button." I fussed but couldn't do anything.

Des came over and plucked at my top, undoing a few buttons while I was still holding rigidly still.

Charlotte gave me an apologetic smile and held up a drink cup with a lovely bendy straw, which I slurped loudly out of while remaining stone-statue still.

"You look incredible, Ken," Penny said, trying to encourage me. "If I wasn't already dating you, I would be after seeing this version."

"I know! Yes, please." Des pawed at me, and I lifted an eyebrow at her antics.

"Really?" I asked.

"All right, we're done." The two women who'd been working on the makeup practically scrambled out of the way as if they'd been in a room with hungry lionesses.

I glanced at my ladies, hoping they understood the trouble they'd caused. But there wasn't an ounce of guilt in any of their eyes.

"What were you expecting? Something modest?" Des teased, tossing her purple hair and giving me bedroom eyes.

"You designed this," I told Des as she swung her legs over and landed in my lap.

"Oh, vampire daddy, you look so good." She swooned.

My jaw dropped in disbelief. "Vampire daddy?"

"For real," Penny said, and I turned to her, shaking my head.

"You don't get to look like that and then blame me," Penny said. "But I'd consider this a rousing success." The others all bobbed their heads in

agreement.

Selene came down next to me and offered her neck. "Just a little nibble?" she asked, and I rolled my eyes, then bit down hard on her neck. Selene moaned, her breath shuddering and catching, before it came out in a bare whisper. "Yes."

"Good?" Des asked.

Before Selene could respond, I hooked a finger at Des, and she came bounding over happily, taking Selene's spot.

"How are you all this horny?" I asked, grabbing Des by the hair and pulling her down roughly before sinking the prosthetic fangs into her neck.

Des grabbed the back of my head and pushed the fangs in deeper, throwing her head back and letting out a deep, guttural moan that honestly did dangerous things to my body.

"Fuck, yes. All right, ladies, I think the makeup was a rousing success. I'll be borrowing Ken for a little bit." Des was quickly on her feet, trying to drag me out of the chair.

I planted myself, deadpan, before pulling her down swiftly over my lap and delivering a resounding slap across her ass. "Bad Des," I enunciated slowly.

"I'll be a good one for you." Crimson slid up next to me.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a dress rehearsal? I feel like we've gotten a little off topic."

"No." Des kicked in my lap. "I just got a sexy vampire daddy. I don't want to work. Ten minutes?" Des peered around, giving her best pleading look.

"You're going to ruin the makeup if you do that," Crimson told her.

Des spun around on Bellaire. "We have to get the ultra-sweat-resistant stuff for next time. It’s going to really be put through its paces."

"Already on it," Bellaire assured her, and several of them let out a sigh of relief.

"Well, then, I suppose we'll just go through with the dress rehearsal," Charlotte murmured. Many of them looked at her as if she were their mortal enemy.

"There's always next time," Penny offered to the group, which seemed to ease some of their sadness.

At least that strange wave of horny passed. Though, I would be happy to do something a little more after we, you know, actually did what we’d come

here to do.

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Today was the day of the year-end celebration. Even with nearly everybody being involved in preparations, they were still advertising it more than I could have imagined.

Every billboard in the city had this event displayed. And the last few times I had tried to look at anything online, I was simply bombarded with ads. The localization ads were hard at work, I assumed, or my obvious reality as an adventurer had caught the algorithm's attention.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Grandpa appeared at my side, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

"Who let you in?" I turned to him, keeping my face stoic.

"Your incredibly intelligent and beautiful headmistress, of course." He puffed himself up.

"And is said headmistress aware of all the trouble you're going to cause?" I asked.

"Hopefully." Grandpa shrugged.

I shook my head. "I don't always get along with the headmistress, but I wouldn't wish you on anyone."

"All the parents are here. Who'd miss the famed interplanetary Haylon celebration?" He waved his hand wide into the air.

"Please don't tell me that's what they're calling it."

"They are." Grandpa cackled. "But don't worry, I don't think anyone expects you to call it that. After all, for you, it's just the Ken show. At least, what I'm hearing so far is that you have quite the exciting role."

"I'm just working at a haunted house here, Grandpa." I tried to tone it all down.

"Is that so?" he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Well, either way, you're also speaking. That's something."

"Nothing to cause a fuss over," I assured him. Crimson was going to do most of the speaking.

"The question is, am I supposed to bring your grandmother into the haunted house, or would you prefer she never sees what torrid activities you're getting up to?" he asked.

I stared at him, genuine horror surfacing as I considered what Des might have planned. Somehow, the dress rehearsal had ended up being me in full costume, while the rest of the class were just practicing their roles.

"Probably don't let her come." Then I grinned and hooked an arm over his shoulders. "You know, you really are the best grandfather ever."

"It's going to take more than that to bribe me." He held out a hand, gesturing for me to give it to him.

"I have no idea what you're asking for."

"Don't you have some succubus contact stone?" he said, looking at me as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Wait, what?" I stared at him.

"Well, I mean, I know we're not raiding much anymore, but I figure if you can go collecting women from all over the spectrum, so can your grandfather. After all, it's my genes helping you out," he told me and gave another ‘give it’ gesture.

He wanted contact with the succubi? I shuddered at the thought.

"The stone only connects to a single succubus, and somehow, I doubt Lady Frey is that interested." I tried to imagine the stern woman putting up with my grandfather, and really, I only saw humanity's relationship with the demons deteriorating to an unthinkable level if that was ever pushed forward as an option. "In good faith, I cannot give this to you," I told him.

"Well then, find some old succubus, preferably still quite beautiful, and get her stone for me. Promise?" He held out a hand for me to shake, and I reluctantly agreed. That was still a better option than him going off on his own to try to woo random succubus and ending up a husk of the man he was today.

"Knew it. You're my favorite grandson," he said with a shit-eating grin.

"I'm your only grandson," I pointed out.

"Doesn't disqualify you from being my favorite," he said quickly.

"I suppose it doesn't. Still, that competition's rather unsportsmanlike."

Grandpa didn't seem to care much about that, chuckling to himself.

"Well, I'm excited to see your speech with the Harem Queen," Grandpa said, and I gave him a funny look.

"It's with Crimson."

"Well, then they've printed a lot of incorrect posters," he said with enough certainty that I pulled out my CID to double-check. A quick search confirmed he was right. I immediately began furiously typing.

"What is all this? Why's it have to be such a pain?" I groaned.

"No matter what you're doing, organizing this many people never really goes right," Grandpa said sagely.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Well, then I have to apologize for leaving so soon, Grandpa. I'm going to go find Heather and make sure we're on the same page."

Someone had changed the script on me.

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Chapter 35

"There you are, Ken," Heather greeted me. She was even more done up than usual. Her hair was rippling waves of red that caught the light like living fire, and her dress nearly blinded me with how much it glittered. But, as usual, she was beautiful enough to attract plenty of attention.

"Here I am." I stopped in front of her. "Since when, however, was this supposed to be a conference with you and me?" I asked.

"What, you don't like it?" She lifted a thin, manicured eyebrow.

"It's not that I dislike it, in any way, shape, or form, Heather. It's just catching me a little off guard. I thought this was supposed to be with Crimson."

"Well, it's not. Crimson got drunk last night and insulted the orkai. It seems their representative and her had some history? He was hitting on her quite a bit last night until she put his head through the floor. The UG decided it might be best to leave her out of this. Hopefully, that'll be okay," Heather said slowly. "Don’t worry, though. I've made thorough preparations for this meeting with you, and I intend to work on your public image to the maximum."

I hadn't realized that while we were talking, she'd been leading us out toward the crowd until a small army of fans suddenly descended on us.

"Oh, Ken, you are just so wonderful," she exclaimed exaggeratedly, grabbing me and pressing me into her side. Cameras clicked, catching the two of us pressed tightly together.

"And what is this going to do?" I asked her quietly.

"Proximity, Ken. Proximity. I'm letting the halo that surrounds me and protects me from quite a bit of negative news shine on you as well. Smile," she said, gesturing toward the cameras that were pointed in our direction. I kept my smile up as Heather waved at the crowd. As her hand waved, the crowd went absolutely wild for her.

"Is this really going to work?" I whispered to her as my own ears rang from the noise.

"Of course. And you need to be extra nice to Helen after this; otherwise, there will be a bunch of weird rumors," she said, giving me a squint in case I misinterpreted her words.

"Of course. We'll keep it up," I told her. For all that had happened, Heather had been a strong supporter of mine the whole way up. If she asked, then of course I'd make sure not to embarrass her.

"Good." The Harem Queen was all smiles. "Now, a small personal favor for me, if you will. That demon who showed up at the dwarven hive was utterly terrifying. Introduce me to a few male demons sometime, if you could."

"I'll do my best." I nodded. Maybe I could ask my demonic sponsors if they knew any that would be interested without taking over the Harem Queen's harem. Introducing someone more powerful than her to the dynamic would shift things around. Maybe a sloth demon? They seemed rather chill.

"Perfect." She continued to smile and wave at the crowd that was pressing forward like a tidal wave.

A moment later, the photographs seemed to be done, because fans had descended on the two of us, and they fled, holding their cameras high to protect them in the sudden crush of bodies.

I, for one, felt incredibly claustrophobic in the moment. People were shouting, thrusting anything and everything forward. A bra hit me in the face, and I peeled it off only for someone to jerk it out of my hands before I had an opportunity to do something with it.

Heather handled it like an old hand, smiling gracefully as if they were coming forward one by one, very excited to see her. She even knew some of them by name. I supposed those were the regulars, the ones who came to every event.

"Lovely to see you again. Have you met Ken Nagato?" she offered, hugging me close. "He really is incredible. My daughter is beyond lucky. I shouldn't say this, as her mother, but I am a little jealous." She gave a conspiratorial wink that always got the fans worked up. Sure enough, they all nodded emphatically.

Then it dialed up to an even higher level than before as they began shouting questions to follow up her words, but the Harem Queen didn't answer the crowd, leaving me facing down a barrage of questions.

"Lovely to meet you," I said to someone who pushed through and asked me to sign his hat.

"So you're the Harem Queen's son-in-law?" he asked, and instead of wearing the hat, he put it in a sealed plastic bag along with other paraphernalia.

"Uh…" My hesitation was enough, as the man was displaced in the crowd as he waved goodbye to me without much disappointment.

The next wave was, however, far worse. "Ken! Will you sign my copy of 74 Wives?!" A mad rush of young women came forward, their eyes practically filled with pink hearts as they gushed about the book, called me lucky more times than I could count, and I soon had a pocket full of torn pages with various numbers that I would never call.

"Ken, you have five minutes." Sasha stepped up to us as we said goodbye to what felt like the millionth person. I was socially winded from all the abrupt conversation shifts, but Heather seemed completely put together.

"It's a strange kind of stamina," she said, leaning toward me. "But don't worry, you'll get used to it in time. It just takes practice, like anything else. To the stage, then?"

I nodded, numb from handling the crowd.

She turned back to the fans, many of whom had yet to reach the front. "I'm so sorry, dears. I'll be around for the full event, and I'll make it my mission to be available for each and every one of you." She made kissy noises and waved at them; the fans, men and women both, screamed like feral creatures that had lost their minds.

Holy shit. She had them all eating out of the palm of her hands.

She hooked her arm through mine, dragging me toward the stage.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or terrified." I turned away from the crowd.

"I find complex emotions are far preferable," Heather said, as we reached the top, where there was a row of seats in the back for speakers to sit and wait. "Now, you and Helen seem to be getting along nicely." Given that we both knew it was fake, I decided to play along.

"Of course things are going well. We've even been studying together lately," I told her. It wasn’t a lie, but it was my attempt to show that I’d been trying.

"Oh, how lovely. Romance amongst the stacks." The Harem Queen's eyes shone briefly with excitement. "Scandalous," she said as she came back to reality.

"Well, we do have to study and dive the dungeon, after all. We've only got one year left." I ignored her implication.

The Harem Queen snorted, holding back a laugh. "The only reason you're not a full-fledged professional diver is that the UG and Haylon want to make sure you've all matured before throwing you into the guilds and the greater organizations of the dungeon. Being a student of Haylon does offer you a small amount of protection when it comes to some of the more complicated, political aspects of being an adventurer." She winked.

She was likely right, but I couldn’t help feeling like I was chafing at the restraints placed on me. On one hand, I was treated as a full adventurer, sent into the dungeon to fight the threadspawn-infected dwarves, and on the other, I was being treated like a student and subordinate when it came to this year-end celebration. Not being informed of things until the last minute and being sent as the student representative for a speech weren’t things you could demand of a high-tier adventurer like the Harem Queen. That was how you treated a student who listened to authority.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do these things; it was just that the two treatments were incompatible with me. It was a sign that I was straddling two sides of the adventurer world.

On one hand, I was clinging to being a student, going to class and being taught by Crimson. On the other, I was a major shareholder of the UG and one of the top one hundred adventurers in the world.

I glanced at the stage, all the cameras and media stacking up behind the podium on the other side. "Somehow, Heather, it feels like that might not be working out so well for me."

"I think that if you were a full-fledged adventurer instead of a student, the reaction to some of your more recent activities would be even worse. After

all, as a student, some of the fault falls on Haylon or the UG. They have to be held responsible for those under their charge. But if you were a full-fledged adventurer, well, then all the blame lies with you. I think that would have been too much for your reputation to bear, especially this early. It's subtle sometimes, but perception is tricky like that."

I nodded slowly, understanding she was doing her best to coach me through this situation, and she did know her way around being a public figure. I intended to do my best to listen.

Sasha waved to the two of us and stepped up to the podium. She was going to give the introduction. But to my surprise, her first introduction wasn't for us at all.

"And if I may be so bold as to pretend you don't already know the next speaker coming up on stage, I present to you Headmistress Marlow, the woman responsible for Haylon and its many victories," her voice boomed across the space.

I didn’t blink at the introduction. It was bland, and she was likely responsible for shaping much of Haylon.

The headmistress held her chin up high as she stepped onto the stage, a massive smile on her face. "Welcome, one and all," she said, leaning into the podium. "Today is a historic day. For so long, we have tried to better ourselves and better our adventurers as they dive the dungeon, giving them a greater head start.

“However, this year's junior class, and those who follow them, have stepped beyond anything we thought possible in their diving of the dungeon. After the most recent shuffle, we have discovered other races. It is no longer fair for us to constrain our ideologies, our thoughts, and our training to merely what we ourselves have discovered. There are others who are our peers in raising the future generations of adventurers, and so I happily announce our collaboration with Star City, and with the home of the demons…"

I noticed how she avoided saying Hell; to be fair, it had some tricky connotations among humans. Still, I had to hold back a chuckle.

"...but before you're all given full access to these people, I thought it important to let the UG have a word with you all."

President Amatto walked over, giving me a small nod as she passed me and stepped up onto the stage. "Thank you, everyone," she said, and the camera flashes were nearly blinding. "The UG is proud to host adventurers

from all over the world and beyond. However, I remind everyone that there are different cultures at play, both human and non. Be on your absolute best behavior. The UG will police the event to the best of our ability, with people capable of healing and reviving on hand at all times. My deepest hope is that those are unneeded. Remember, behind these walls is the future of humanity, as well as other races. It would be best if we're all able to coexist. Otherwise, you'll find the other races and their powerful adventurers to be the least of your worries." She stared down the reporters. "And now for our final speakers: the Harem Queen and student Ken Nagato."

I felt like I blacked out on the walk up to the podium, because suddenly, I stood with the Harem Queen, shoulder to shoulder on the podium, close enough to share the two dozen microphones clipped to it, all so we could be heard.

"Well, hello. We have quite the crowd," the Harem Queen said, looking out over the sea of people moving into the college that day, many stopping right there to listen.

"Adventuring has never been more popular or more rewarding," I offered.

"No, it has not." Heather beamed right back. "If you're out there, and you're thinking of becoming an adventurer, Ken Nagato is changing the world. You're about to step into something better. He, along with the support of the UG, is making headway with these other races, and it is my true delight to watch my soon-to-be son-in-law go through all of this. I couldn't be more proud." She beamed, and I nearly froze when the "son-in-law" bomb was dropped right in front of the reporters, whose cameras started going absolutely crazy the moment she used the term.

I forced a little chuckle into my words, grinning as best I could. "Well, thank you so much for your approval. I've worked tirelessly for where I've gotten in the dungeon. Though, to be honest, there's some luck to it as well. It's not every day the dungeon shifts on us. Some are lost, and others find a way to survive. The dungeon is a dangerous place. The best option we all have is to prepare, both physically and mentally, and sometimes, that means celebrating our victories and making friends where we can. More than once, both human and other, those friendships I’ve made were the difference that let me walk out of the dungeon another time. Remember, you don't dive the dungeon alone." I smiled at everyone, hoping to convey that we were here to make friends, certainly not enemies.

The cameras flashed, and several journalists jumped forward with their microphones.

"When is the wedding between you and the Harem Queen's daughter?" one of the reporters up front called, shoving a little recorder as far forward as her arms could manage.

"There's no date set yet," I said with a smile toward the Harem Queen I hoped she could properly interpret. I couldn't exactly call her out on the stage, and directly denying her claim would only make the situation look worse.

More reporters tried to rush forward, and I patted the air with my hands. "Everyone, thank you for your questions. However, we must go back and get ready for the events. Please, enjoy Haylon Academy and this celebration to its fullest. And can we get a round of applause for everybody who helped coordinate this event for us?"

I smiled and stepped back, clapping as the audience cheered, using the moment as my exit. The Harem Queen dazzled everyone with her own smile as she hooked her arm through mine and led me away.

"That went quite well," she said, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

"Really? Son-in-law?" I pressed.

"It had a nice ring to it and connected you well to me. If you didn't notice, all they cared about was the gossip, and not whatever sticky situation you've gotten into lately. By the way, where can a woman find you during this whole celebration?"

"We have a haunted house. Something tells me it will not be that hard to find," I told her.

"Oh, I don't know," the Harem Queen said as we walked back through Haylon's gates.

The place was an absolute zoo. The buildings had slow-moving lines shuffling in and through them, while the entire wide-open green space that usually sat between the buildings was packed with tents, and the sidewalks were filled with people moving shoulder to shoulder.

"Well, anyway." The Harem Queen grinned. "It seems you're going to have your work cut out for you today."

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Chapter 36

Heather grinned from ear to ear as she walked through the festival at Haylon. The place was bustling, and there were tents covering the massive green campus. There were adventurers of all types milling around and interacting.

She thought it was a good idea for Haylon to open up their doors to the public. It situated them as a leader in outreach to the deeper depths of the dungeon and showed transparency to the rest of the world.

Haylon’s leadership did butcher it a little when it came to Ken. The poor boy was out of his depth politically, and it was beginning to show.

"Well, hello." The pink-haired succubus popped up next to her, squinting briefly at her figure before ignoring her entirely and staring ahead. "So, what do you make of all of this?" She waved a hand at the Haylon year-end celebration.

It seemed Heather had been chosen by the succubus to be shown around. Perhaps this was a little of what Ken felt normally.

"I think it's a wonderful way for our students to take a break from the dungeon," Heather answered, smiling at the incredibly powerful woman, who certainly didn't put on airs. Heather supposed she was one of the few that the succubus might have recognized, or it was her proximity to Ken that earned her this honor.

"Is that so?" the succubus said and glanced at Lady Frey. The taller, more stately demon was always by her side at least if Ken’s previous descriptions

were anything to go by. She could guess that the shorter one was Xanthana, demon princess subordinate to the Imp King.

"Humans believe that promoting positive cultures is morally beneficial for the continued advancement of their species," Lady Frey offered, with all of the excitement of someone forced to read from a textbook.

"Oh, interesting." The bubbly succubus bounced on her feet. "Do you take this same view?" she asked Heather.

"People try harder when there is meaning behind their actions. Whether it be survival, chasing after their own greed, or any manner of different emotions. Motivation is very important." She stood by her own words with her actions. More than a few of her husbands came to the harem for a variety of reasons, and the best way to keep them all happy was to understand their own motivations.

The princess bobbed her head. "However, you can always create motivation by simply making them realize that to survive, they need to do what you say." The large smile on her face was disarming despite the tyranny in her words.

Heather decided that it was time to change the subject. "I wasn't aware you were going to be here," Heather said, doing her best to be tactful with the powerful adventurer next to her.

Xanthana waved her hand. "This is the end of Ken's school year, is it not? Ken's mine after today, so I thought I'd come and collect." The words were casual, but she was also openly discussing abducting one of humanity’s strongest in the next generation.

Heather smiled at the woman. "If you would be at all willing, don't make it too public. Though Ken has made a deal with you, I wouldn't want the rest of his people to feel like he was abandoning them." She would do her best to smooth things over as he disappeared.

"We understand and will keep that in mind," Lady Frey said, only to get a scathing look from the shorter succubus. The taller one ignored her master. "Though it would be interesting to see his event here. I have heard it has something to do with pretending to be monsters."

"A haunted house," Heather explained. "It's less about pretending to be monsters and more about trying to frighten the people who go inside."

The succubus tilted her head. "Are people scared so easily?"

"They have not been in the dungeon long, my mistress," Lady Frey clarified without needing Heather to step in.

"Well, then we will have to explore it and see if it is as enjoyable for us," Xanthana said imperiously.

Heather squeezed a smile onto her face. She wondered how Ken managed to work with these demons as well as he did, although he also had the patience to deal with her daughter. "There are also many other attractions to enjoy, like delicacies of our various cultures here on Earth."

Heather kept smiling. For better or worse, these demons were a portion of her future son-in-law's strength, and she'd best show them around, lest they cause more trouble here on Earth.

A slight shudder passed through her as she recognized the sheer damage the two demons could do if they grew angry. The two succubi could do more damage than a natural disaster should relations sour.

Xanthana bounced along, following Heather, before she stopped, planted her feet, and let her nose lead her. She walked up and took a plate off the table that was clearly waiting for its customer.

The people running the booth paused, giving the succubus a glance, only for Heather to drop several mana stones on the table and squeeze out a smile. The workers at least knew when to leave well enough alone, and their heads ducked back down to their work.

"Oh, this is delicious," the succubus said, shoving way too much into her mouth in one go. Powdered sugar was smeared across her face.

Lady Frey took a corner and peeled it off delicately. "This is simply sugar," she said, licking a smidge of white powder off her finger.

"Yeah, that's why you can't go wrong," Xanthana said, her tongue coming out and licking up all the sugar on her face.

Despite Heather’s quick attempt to diffuse any issue from the succubus stealing someone’s orders, one of the customers who had been in line confronted them.

Heather did her best to stare him down, warning him with her eyes that he should stop, but too many people in the population were, quite frankly, not the brightest when it came to self-preservation.

"Hey!" He puffed himself up, hanging his arms out wide to make himself seem bigger while shooting Heather a look as he confronted the two succubi. "That was my funnel cake. Get in line like the rest of us." He tried to take what remained of the food, only for it to move slightly to the side before his hand reached the food.

He stood confused for a moment.

"Sorry, they're not from around here." Heather did her best to defuse the moment with a brilliant smile. A batting of her lashes usually did the trick.

This time, however, the man seemed ready to die over a funnel cake and tried to grab it from the world-ending calamity of a succubus again. Thankfully, the princess seemed more amused to play keep-away than grow angry, unlike the man who looked like he was about to blow a gasket as his hand kept not landing on food.

"It's just a funnel cake," Heather coached him, trying to get them to stop.

"Today, it's just a funnel cake; tomorrow, it'll be worse. They need to learn their place!" He was angry enough that spittle flew freely from his mouth.

Heather tried to be patient and give him the benefit of the doubt. He might be going through a particularly rough period, and this was just the straw that broke the camel's back. Maybe he wasn’t a petty asshole.

Lady Frey faced the man, while Xanthana remained completely ignorant of the conflict happening around her, like it simply didn't even register. Then again, for the princess, this was like playing with an ant.

"I apologize. My mistress is unused to your customs here." She handed the man a mana stone that was likely worth pretty much nothing to her, but to the man she gave it to, it was a fortune.

"I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to the pipsqueak." He tried to step around Frey, who simply smiled as the man collapsed to his knees, his throat warbling as he clutched at it. The pressure she exerted seemed to be choking him.

"Please." Heather stepped between the two. "We will get someone to handle this. That is enough."

Frey released the man, staring down at him like a stain on her heel.

He sniffed. "Rich bitch," he said to Xanthana, who finally seemed to register that he was even there.

"Of course I'm wealthy. I am a demon princess. You are lucky that my servant tried to pacify you through compensation. The other option is that I simply turn you into a groveling, empty husk of yourself and then send you to exterminate your entire bloodline because it is clearly a waste of resources." Xanthana stared at the man, her gaze almost a physical force.

The man didn't dare stand up and make himself taller than her.

"If you have learned your place, then please do not sour the flavor of my meal," she said, and about as delicately as she could, she shoved the entire

remaining three-quarters of the funnel cake into her mouth. Her face was now plastered with powdered sugar, but not quite enough to hide the massive satisfaction that spread across her face. Apparently, the princess really liked sugar.

While the man was still stunned, Heather led the two demons away.

"Apologies," she said quickly. "What you did is considered fairly rude to most people here, and they, of course, don't recognize the difference in status."

"It's not like he posed any threat. But he did waste my time," Xanthana said. "Are all humans like that? He seemed rather ignorant of the difference in our power."

The short succubus looked down at her now-empty plate before handing it off to Lady Frey. The level ninety-something demon took it without complaint and went to manage her mistress's trash. The fact that someone stronger than any human was more than willing to handle the princess's trash spoke to exactly what level of treatment the princess was used to receiving. At the very least, it was a level of obedience she would find very difficult to achieve on Earth.

"We have a phrase in our culture," Heather said, leading her along. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

The succubus tilted her head, looking around. "Are we in Rome?"

"No," the Harem Queen said quickly. "However, the phrase still stands."

The succubus considered her words, rubbing her chin. "So you're saying I should stand in line with the others?"

"You have to do nothing," Heather said diplomatically. Realistically, if the demons didn’t want to cooperate, there was nothing she or anyone could do.

Ken might have an idea or bit of leverage, but that was for later. "However, how will you ever understand someone if you don't experience a piece of their life?"

"Who says I want to understand lesser beings?" Xanthana asked with enough distaste that Heather immediately changed tactics.

"How best do you understand the other demons? Their likes, their wants. Not just for living a well-rounded life, but to understand how to negotiate and deal with them?"

Xanthana paused, seeming to consider her words more deeply. "That is an interesting point you make. I'm still not particularly impressed, but perhaps

I can do some of these things, as long as they don't take too much of my time."

"To humans, oftentimes the wait is considered more enjoyable than simply getting something on its own," Heather offered, pulling from every self-help book she'd ever heard quoted.

"That sounds utterly ridiculous," Xanthana stated, tilting her head for a moment and then turning to Lady Frey. "Go wait in the line, and tell me if the funnel cake tastes sweeter after."

"Of course, Mistress." Lady Frey bowed and hurried to accomplish the task without complaint, only for the pink succubus to stare back at Heather with a massive smirk. "So. Your daughter and Ken?"

Heather was surprised by the change in topic but refused to let it show on her face. "My daughter and Ken," Heather repeated and tilted her head. "Why would you bring that up?"

"She seems to be one of his potentials, and given some of the abilities that we have passed along to Ken, I am interested in all of his little incubators. Especially the one that seems somewhat problematic," Xanthana told her.

Heather's smile grew stiff. "I wouldn't call my daughter problematic. And should any problem occur between the two of them, do not worry. It won't interfere with Ken's future."

"Of course it won't. I gather you are a smart enough woman not to allow such a disastrous outcome," Xanthana responded, the threat in her words clear. The succubus clearly did not need or want to be subtle when it came to this discussion.

"I understand," Heather said, wanting to move past this particular topic. "The two of them are confused about their feelings. I do hope some proximity will help them understand themselves better."

The succubus princess smiled widely. "Don't get me wrong, I would like Ken to have as many incubators as possible. It is nice that they have real relationships. Love can be…" Xanthana squinted off into the distance thoughtfully, showing for the first time that she wasn't just going to blow through every potential moment of propriety. "Love can be quite difficult for my people. The emotions closest to love often slowly slide toward obsession. It is just the way of our kind. I enjoy seeing Ken able to explore and enjoy relationships for now," Xanthana said. "But he's also being a

touch too cautious. Your nudges are most welcome." The succubus tapped at her head. "I can see what you are doing."

Heather had to remember, despite her personality, that no one got to Xanthana's level without considerable insight and intellect. Though she was often silly in her approach or bubbly in her delivery, she led a large organization within the dungeon with many who would enjoy overthrowing her and taking her power.

The moment was broken as Lady Frey walked back, munching on a funnel cake. "I do believe it might taste sweeter after waiting."

"Really?" The shorter succubus's eyes went wide. "Then what are we waiting for? We should be waiting!" She bounded forward, snatched the remains of Lady Frey's funnel cake, and folded it, munching on it as they went. "We should go find Ken's event and wait in that line. I'm sure it will be better after the wait." She pulled the other two with her.

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The haunted house stretched out before the crowd. It was easy to say that it might have been one of, if not the most, popular events. Another class was giving out free food, which was certainly drawing a crowd. But still, one by one, the crowd entered the haunted house, and one by one, they exited, groups laughing amongst themselves.

Xanthana and Frey stood patiently in line with Heather, the taller succubus checking on a number of items in the middle distance while Xanthana simply swayed on her feet, humming a tune.

"You're next," Helen said as she glanced up from her station to meet her mother's eyes. "What are you doing here?" she asked stiffly.

"I've come to support my daughter. Would you rather I had not?" She let her motherly judgment flow through her tone. She could not believe her daughter was running the counter and was not more involved. She should be participating with some of the many members that would shape the future of humanity.

"I would rather you not," Helen deadpanned.

Heather scowled at her daughter. *No manners whatsoever.*

Helen huffed and lifted her chin. The girl was so defiant. "Now, are you going to let us in, or should we, as mother and daughter, trade barbs? Perhaps ask why you've been relegated to working the desk? We both know

it shouldn't have been your first desire, nor that of whoever's running this. To put you customer-facing would be like having a dead pig in front of a butcher shop."

"Mom," Helen groaned. "Look, I simply refused to put on the costume they gave me."

Heather lifted a delicate eyebrow. "Well, that's even more unfortunate, that it was simply a choice of wardrobe. You can't put up with some stuffy costumes? I do wonder how you manage to dive the dungeon."

Someone cleared their throat behind Heather's group, and Helen waved them in. "You're holding up the line, Mom."

"So I am," she said, and Xanthana, along with Lady Frey, entered the haunted house ahead of her.

"Better hurry after those two before they cause trouble." Helen hooked a finger toward the entrance and pointedly began ignoring her mother.

"Next," she called out with all the enthusiasm of an overworked employee.

Heather had so much work to do.

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Chapter 37

None of the three entrants knew what to expect. When they stepped inside the haunted house, a fog machine billowed white clouds to obscure their view, and tattered cloth hung as simple but effective mood-setting backdrops in the darkened tent. The whole of it made Heather smile.

Meanwhile, the two succubi walked in, looking around like tourists visiting a city for the first time.

"What's that?" the pink-haired succubus asked.

"A candle. An old lighting device for humanity," Heather answered patiently.

"A mana stone gives off more light than that." The succubus held one up as an example.

"Yes, well, we haven't had mana stones for that long. This isn't exactly historical, but there are often historical elements to a haunted house," Heather explained.

The two demons nodded in some understanding, only for a wolf's howl to pierce the air.

"There are monsters here?" The pink-haired succubus's eyes popped open wide, with a grin lighting her face.

"No, not monsters. I think that's a recording," Heather said, only for another round of howling to sound off.

"I am fairly certain that is coming from a real beast," Lady Frey informed the group.

"Are you certain?" Heather asked, before she remembered there was a tamer amongst her daughter's class. "Ah, right. I believe there was one girl in the class who had a small menagerie of beasts. They must be using her beasts for some of the ambiance."

An owl's hooting filled the air as well. The three of them were all looking around, waiting for what came next, only for a woman wrapped in a few scarce bandages to pop out of one of the tattered walls.

The sudden action caused Xanthana's fist to blur and practically teleport right in front of the scantily clad mummy's face, stopping just short. Still, the motion was enough to cause gusts of wind to nearly rip the bandages off the student.

The girl cried out and covered herself before rushing back behind a cloth.

"I think we're supposed to keep moving," Heather informed the two succubi. "And it's best not to attack them. They won't touch you. It's just to startle you. I promise neither of you is in any danger here."

"Can't help it," the succubus said, slowly lowering her hand. "That's just a natural reaction. But I'll do my best not to kill anyone."

Somehow, Heather was less than impressed with the promise, and they continued through the maze of tattered cloth as fog rolled along the floor. The wolf's howl came again, though this time it was far closer.

"Another one." The two succubi perked up, and Heather found herself ready to protect whoever was about to sacrifice themselves next.

"Boo!" Clad in nothing more than a sheet, Desmonda popped up. The sheet was contoured to her body tightly enough that her curves were blatantly obvious, and the sheet was thin enough to get a tantalizing skin tone underneath the garment.

"Good morning, Des," Heather said, not at all scared. Though she was impressed that the woman wore a single sheet so well. The thought of her daughter working the front desk when this was all a poorly veiled reason for Ken’s harem to strut around him made her more disappointed in her daughter.

"I don't know who this Des is of which you speak." Des warbled her voice in an attempt to make it spookier.

"Of course, oh-so-terrifying ghost. We will speak later. Nice costume, by the way. My daughter said she refused to wear hers." Heather fished for more information.

"Let it be known that I even offered her the prime spot. But since she didn't want it, Misha took the opportunity," the ghost said and then proceeded to ignore them and float back to deal with the next group. "Who dares come here?" She let her voice shake more than anything.

The two succubi appeared confused as to what was going on. "That seemed more arousing than scary," Lady Frey said, tapping her crown of horns.

"Yes, well, I think it's supposed to temper the scariness if you are then slightly aroused afterward," Heather said, though she wasn't quite sure herself. Though their class had done a maid cafe in the past, it seemed they were having fun with being attractive, even in a haunted house. It certainly would entertain many and keep them coming back.

"Nonetheless, an interesting show of human culture," Xanthana nodded, having acquired another funnel cake somehow.

"Yes, that's exactly what it was for," Heather said as they continued through the maze, only for a chainsaw to spin up and a pink-haired lady wearing a mask and a bikini to jump out with the saw in hand and a wild cackle. Then she let out an eep of surprise and held the chainsaw up. "I didn't mean to startle you, Your Majesty."

"Is that not the point of this endeavor?" Xanthana asked, turning back to Heather with a tilt to her head.

"It is. It seems she recognized you and, out of respect, did not wish to concern you." Heather smiled at them.

"Oh, well, in that case, please proceed, young butcher." Xanthana leaned toward the chainsaw, tapping it with her finger. "There's no edge to this blade."

Harley tilted it to the side. "You see this chain? Normally there's a bunch of really sharp blades set in here, and then I hit it"—she demonstrated, turning the chainsaw on again—"which then causes it to spin and, well, in theory, shred whatever you touch it to."

"Ah, but it is a mundane item?" Lady Frey asked.

"Yes, I doubt it would do anything to either of you," Harley answered quickly.

"No, it would not. Still, a fun and curious device." Xanthana tilted her head, studying the weapon. "I can imagine the sheer brutality it would be capable of producing on a normal human, and why it could still instill fear

despite people having now visited the dungeon and faced monsters. Truly an inspired weapon."

"Yeah. But you don't have to worry about anything; it's all safe here. It's just pretend danger. The thrill of the dungeon without any of the danger is enjoyable to many." Harley phrased her explanation in such a way that both succubi seemed to be enlightened.

"Ah, that would make sense." Lady Frey nodded to herself, as if she had finally understood the purpose of the haunted house.

"Something like that," Harley said, sounding more confused than sure of herself and glancing towards the Harem Queen for reassurance.

"Well done, Harley," Heather gave her credit. While the pink-haired bard was often an annoyance, in this she had been helpful.

"All right, back to it." Harley flipped her mask back down and revved up the chainsaw for the next group as she bounced back into place.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Xanthana stated proudly. "A taste of danger in perfect safety. There are many amongst the demons who would like to experience the danger of dungeons but are far too cowardly to follow through."

"Exactly." Heather was happy that they understood at least a little and continued to lead them through.

Other figures, those she remembered and those she didn't, performed their roles, jumping out, each and every one of them wearing less material than the last. The haunted house had a small story to it, but that story was faint enough that Heather dismissed it in favor of just relaxing and doing her best not to be startled by the various jump scares. Each of the pop-ups became increasingly complex as they tried to distract those wandering through from one scare to the next so the participants could not overly relax.

It was amusing, up until the final room.

As they stepped inside, the stage was set beautifully. This was by far the most done-up room they had walked through.

An altar was set in the center with two bodies atop it. One was immediately recognizable as Ken. He lifted himself from where he had the other pressed down on the altar, his face in the crook of her neck. He lifted his head, artfully splattered with blood dripping down his lips, and cradled Misha in his arms before he turned with a look of feral hunger, dropping Misha and jumping at their group with an ability that caused him to appear in their shadows.

“I will drink your blood!” He loomed over Xanthana.

"What kind of monster is this?" Xanthana had blurred out of the way and examined Ken from the side with a hand on her chin, using Lady Frey as a step ladder.

Heather was amused, until she remembered that Misha had taken Helen's spot. The sudden realization of what Helen had given up made her boil with anger. Des had tried to help her, and she’d let it go and decided to perform the role of a turnstile. Her dear daughter was a dungeon-damned idiot.

"I’m a vampire," Ken said, smiling wide and showing off a set of prosthetic fangs. "They were monsters in our stories that drank the blood of their victims. They were super-fast, immortal, and could, by some accounts, stare into your eyes and create compulsions. Oh, and they were weak to the sun and garlic."

Xanthana tilted her head. "I mean, I could do all that. Blood isn't particularly tasty, though, and I have no idea what garlic is." She stuck her tongue out. "If you wanted, you could hit whoever came back here with charm to make it more real."

Ken scratched the back of his neck. "Charming everyone who comes through here is probably not the best idea," he said, only for Misha to lift herself, realizing they had paused to talk. She smiled and waved from where she had been lying on the altar.

"Hi!" she called out, and it was everything Heather could do to keep a smile on her face.

Ken, barely wearing that shirt and showing off the muscle he had built in all his training, was an absolute feast for the eyes. Heather was going to murder her daughter, bring her back to life, and murder her again before she finally allowed her daughter the peace of death that she deserved for passing up this opportunity. Heather barely heard the conversations happening in the room, her own anger blinding and deafening her to most of what was happening.

"All right, well, I appreciate you guys coming and supporting us." Ken waved his hands. "But I do have to get back to it. The next group is coming. Misha, get back in position. And the exit's that way." Ken pointed over his shoulder.

"Suitable," the smaller of the two demons said. "Don't forget that you are coming with us after today."

"I would not renege on a promise," Ken said gravely, and then he grabbed Misha around the waist and shoulders, lowering her gently to the altar and nestling his face against her neck, almost as if it were a tender kiss.

"Let's go," Heather grumbled, having suddenly found herself short of the patience necessary to be a diplomatic envoy, and ready to hand the two demons off to someone more qualified.

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"You understand?" Xanthana smiled at me.

"Yes. Tonight at midnight, I'm all yours," I confirmed.

"Perfect." She clapped her hands together. "Well then, I'll be off." The succubus disappeared, leaving me to question more than a few aspects of life. I had no idea what would come this summer.

"Come on, let's get back in position." Misha was already in place and waiting.

I grabbed her carefully and cradled her as I returned to the altar. The Harem Queen and the two succubi were a distraction, but I needed to get back to work. I would never hear the end of it if Des came by and I looked like I was slacking off. She had put a lot of work into all of this.

"You comfortable?" I asked, my lips barely an inch from her neck.

"Very." She put one hand on my shoulder to give herself a little leverage, so that she practically hovered in our resting position, waiting for the next set of haunted house-goers.

Our act had been mostly rinse and repeat, although we had stopped a few times to talk with friends who were coming through. Several directors from the UG had been hard to shake off, and one reporter had snuck in to try and get a few questions.

"Very comfortable," she said again. "Mostly because this is with you."

I lifted an eyebrow from where we were hovering next to each other, and then the flap parted, a new group entering. I pretended to bite Misha's neck, lifted my head to see who had arrived, and then put Misha down with a small thump. Thankfully, she was tough enough that it was barely a nudge to her. I used [Shadow Ambush] to appear behind the new group.

"Welcome to my lair," I said, with an abyssal laugh to follow, and the group squeaked, startled. Then one of the girls in the group stood confidently, her eyes roaming my body with obvious hunger.

"Oh shit, you're kind of hot," one of the others said.

"Boo," I joked, and one of them jumped as I chuckled. "I hope you enjoyed the house."

"It was insane," one of the guys said with wide, meaning-filled eyes.

"Yeah, we really went all out for it. Glad you enjoyed it. Exit's that way." I waved them on like all the other groups, and they seemed relatively happy with the experience, chattering about it as they left.

"What were you saying again?" I turned back to Misha, having lost the thread of conversation.

"Just that this is nice," she piped up quickly.

"Well, thank you for sticking around for it. After Helen threw a fit about her part, we did need someone to step up."

"Not a problem." Misha blushed as we got back into position. "I'm definitely happy to do this. And also, Helen's an idiot."

"Yeah, she's an acquired taste," I said diplomatically, suddenly remembering when she had forced me to grope her in the library.

"You know," Misha said slowly, "your class should do more raids."

"They aren't that common," I said.

"I'm sure you could find some. After all, those eyes of yours are pretty nifty." Her gaze shifted to stare straight into my own.

"I guess I don't have any good excuses, then. Next semester, I promise to take you on a raid," I told her. "But I think my summer is about to get busier than I would like."

"Well, just spending time with you is enough to make it worth it," Misha said with a grin. "And hey, in a raid I can work to try and fill a few roles. Even now, I'm trying to get a few more abilities to make myself more of a DPS than a pillar."

"Is that adjustment going well?" I asked.

"Oh, certainly well enough." Her head bobbed. "The rest of your party have been very kind to me, especially when I'm trying to sort out any particular issue. Every time they come to help me. I still have some strong instincts to control targets that go for the healers when the tanks are certain that they have them under control."

"Well, I already knew they were supportive of you. I'm just happy to hear that you're feeling it as well," I told her.

Misha smiled and pecked me on the cheek. "Of course I'm feeling it. Fully."

"Will you stick around while I'm off with the demons this summer?" I asked, worried a little for the whalewyrn without a pod.

"As long as your group will let me stick around." She blushed.

"They will.” I’d make them if I had to, but I doubted that Des and the others would be anything but welcoming.

There was a rustle of cloth, and I pretended to bite her again before teleporting across the room and ambushing the next group from the shadows. "Give me your blood!" I said, holding my hands high, and the group screamed like little schoolchildren. I directed them straight to the exit in their flight with just a few subtle moves of my body. It wasn't that different from trying to influence an opponent in a fight. I didn't exactly expect that particular skill to be so transferable, but it did make this kind of fun, like a training drill of sorts.

"You're enjoying this," Misha said.

"It's more fun than I expected," I admitted. "It's not every day I just get to scare people for fun."

Misha grinned and pecked me on the cheek. "Don't worry about me this summer. Just come back as soon as you're done with whatever you'll be off doing with the demons."

I grinned at her. "I promise to come back."

"You'd better. I don’t want to deal with Des if you don’t," Misha said, and this time, when I ducked in to hold myself next to her, I nibbled slightly at her neck, making her giggle.

"No giggling," I teased her, my hot breath brushing across her skin and making it worse.

"Since when? And you're the one causing it!" She squirmed, but her ears were flapping happily.

I nibbled at her neck again, and she wiggled against me, which, to be perfectly honest, did not discourage my actions in the slightest.

"Ken," she whined as her body writhed against me.

"Huh? Who's that?" I asked, letting my breath tickle the nape of her neck, only for the next group to come in. I set her down before doing my spiel and scaring off the next group, then went back to teasing Misha.

"Lunch break!" Des poked her head in, and I pulled away from Misha, who was now blushing furiously. Des's eyes bounced between her and me before a grin that nearly split her face spread across it. "Oh, don't mind me, you two lovebirds," she sing-songed.

"There's no lovebirding happening," I promised, and Des gave me an expression that told me she did not believe me for one moment.

"Misha, don't let him deny it," Des said, with her hands on her hips.

"I have no idea what it is you are speaking about, Des." Misha's expression went blank, which earned me a deep scowl from Des, only for it to flit into a massive smile.

"You've corrupted her completely and wholly, without even an ounce of prompting!" She jumped over to me, grabbing me and beginning to kiss me all over.

"So that's what's happened to me." Misha pretended to swoon. "I've been completely and irreparably corrupted."

"All right, now, playtime's over," I said to the two of them.

"What do you mean? We're just getting started."

"I can and will reserve the right to cancel any antics that get in the way of food," I said to Des, prying her off of me and setting her down. "Also, I'm starving."

Misha tilted her neck toward me. "You must need even more blood, even though you've been sucking on my neck all morning."

I cleared my throat at the phrasing.

"Yeah?" Des asked with a grin. "I didn't think he had it in him."

"Well, then I think you underestimated Ken," Misha said proudly, taking my arm.

The banter continued, but it seemed my disposition on food was shared by her as well.

"Now, I've heard there are many human delicacies to be had here," Misha said. "It would be wonderful if you took me to partake in some of them."

Misha batted her lashes, and Des covertly tried to give Misha a massive thumbs-up, failing as I noticed and squinted at her.

Des immediately pivoted to drop her arms, pretending to be entirely innocent. But Des could not pull off being innocent one bit. She was a temptress through and through.

"Are you coming, Des?" I asked after taking several steps.

"Oh, yes, just let me—" She wiggled out of the sheet she'd been wearing and was suddenly no longer costumed. I squinted at her ability to un-costume so easily, wondering if that had been the reason she went for the ghost.

A nude color on the ground caught my attention, and I realized she'd had the sheet lined to make it look even more like she was nude underneath. I shook my head. Of course Des paid attention to every detail.

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Chapter 38

"Anyone else coming?" I asked Des.

"Go introduce Misha to some wonderful cuisine. I'll shoot Crimson a note telling her where we end up," the demonic mage said distractedly.

I grunted in agreement. It was always a pain to try and coordinate too many people at once. I could appreciate just going to get food and then telling the others to catch up.

We exited our activity, finding Haylon bustling with activity. We were still in our vampire and vampire bride costumes and garnered a small amount of attention, people pointing us out to others. Some had come through and recognized us.

Misha wore one of the more conservative outfits, but it still was scandalous enough that more than a few men paused, and a few more had their partners grab them and pull them away, suddenly upset at the attention Misha was garnering.

"Well, look who we have here." One of the vendors spotted me walking up with Misha, arm in arm. "People have been talking about the haunted house and the vampire in particular."

"Well, thank you," I said with a stage bow. "But it's all a group effort. I just happen to be at the end."

"Well, perhaps I can sneak you some food so you can get back to work," he offered.

"I'd appreciate it." I held out my CID to tap on his little card reader, but he waved a hand.

"Don't worry about it. It's attractions like yours that are giving me the business I have today. What'll it be?" He glanced between the two of us. Surprisingly, I realized he was speaking with Universal Language. The UG must have made that a requirement to work this event, given the number of other races that would be present.

Misha looked at the menu and then turned to me expectantly. It seemed it was up to me to order.

"Two footlongs," I said, "and a fried Oreo."

He chuckled at my order. "Coming right up."

"Only one fried Oreo?" Misha asked.

"It's for you, not me," I explained. There was no need to torture my stomach.

"You don't want any?" she asked, frowning as she turned back to the stall, trying to decide what was wrong with the food.

I shook my head. "It's the kind of thing you have once, and that's enough for your entire life."

"Oh," she said, with deeper meaning than I thought fried Oreos deserved.

The man went back to work, whistling as he did, and our food came out faster than I could believe. Usually vendor food orders at a fair were stacked up thirty minutes deep, making customers wait in the heat the whole time. As I looked behind the counter, I noticed a few UG green vests, and a small smirk played across my lips as I wondered how many adventurers the UG had coaxed into working here, just to make all of this run a little more smoothly.

On the surface, it was just a festival. But beneath that veneer, the UG and Haylon were putting in people far too capable to make sure that Earth’s first invitation to other races went off without a hitch.

Our meals came out, and Misha took her hot dog and went to take a bite. I held a hand up to stop her. "You have to put something on it first." I glanced over at the pumps of ketchup, mustard, and relish, as well as barbecue sauce and nacho cheese, though I figured those last two weren't for the hot dogs. Then the thought of putting nacho cheese on the hot dog hit me as a very brilliant idea, but in the name of social decency, I resisted.

"What do I put on it?" she asked, looking at the options.

"Ketchup and mustard are standard. Relish, if you like pickles. Personally, I think it balances out some of the oily flavor," I told her.

Misha seemed to take my opinion seriously as she put a heavy squirt of relish on top, before sniffing at the ketchup and deciding to add that as well.

I put everything on mine in copious quantities and took a good several inches of it in my first bite. Misha was watching me carefully and then began to mimic my every action in eating it. Ketchup smeared on the side of her face as she hummed in satisfaction.

"This is good," she mumbled. Then she surprised me by opening her mouth wide and putting nearly half of the hot dog in it in a single go before she chomped down and slid the bite into her cheek as she began to chew. "That's really good. Do you think I can get another?" Her footlong had disappeared in three bites, leaving the whalewyrn sucking ketchup off her fingers.

"How about after the deep-fried Oreo, we decide if that's the direction we want to go," I offered before she fully committed to a second footlong.

Misha held the tray of deep-fried Oreos like it might bite her if she held it incorrectly. Unlike the hot dog, which had disappeared near instantly, the deep-fried Oreo was handled with much more caution. Misha sniffed one of the powdered sugar-covered brown lumps and took a small nibble as I polished off the rest of my footlong. She wiggled her nose and went back for a much larger bite.

"This is good," she said around a mouthful of sugar and fried goodness. And then she paused. "It's like someone just put a brick in my stomach." She took another bite and then paused again. "I might need your help to finish this."

"No second hot dog?" I asked.

She gave me a sheepish smile as another of the bricks disappeared. "Maybe," she offered with a twinge of hope. It seemed she had managed to work up quite the appetite.

"We can get you a second. It's not like either of us needs to worry about silly things like calories," I told her.

She beamed and then reduced the rest of the meal to nothing in the blink of an eye. "Let's get one more," she said, glancing over the line. "We can wait in line over here."

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"Oh, Ken, there you are." The Harem Queen stopped me on my way to get napkins, her hand still on Helen's shoulder. "The haunted house was fantastic," she said, and I gave her a small bow.

"Thank you for taking care of Princess Xanthana. I know that she can be difficult." I was happy that someone other than me got that honor. They were really a handful, and I was certain that it wasn't all fun and games to keep them from obliterating anybody.

"Not a problem in the slightest." The Harem Queen beamed. "But I appreciate someone who can say thank you and understand when work is being put into an endeavor." While she spoke, she simultaneously glared at Helen, who seemed completely and utterly unwilling to acknowledge her mother's glare.

"Well, if you two don't need anything else—" I wanted to escape and make sure Misha wasn't left in any sort of awkward situation. Though when I cast a look in her direction, she took it as an invitation to come join and strode over.

"Well, now that I have you here, I did want to apologize for my daughter. She really should have taken the role beside you in the haunted house. Really, it just doesn't look good." She said the last pointedly, each word like a heavy drumbeat while she stared at her daughter.

"Sorry, Ken," Helen apologized to me instead of her mother. "I just wasn't very excited about the costumes."

"I would never force you into anything," I said. "And besides, Misha has been an absolutely wonderful participant." I added the last a little louder than needed to make sure the whalewyrn heard me. And she did, based on the way a smile spread across her face.

"It's been lots of fun. More than a few people have asked about my tail." She slapped the whale appendage on the ground behind her, causing a few people in line to turn and give it more attention. "It's been a good segue to talk about my people. This is really a good cultural introduction."

"I'm glad it is going so well for you," the Harem Queen said with a light grace, but I could hear the heaviness within her voice.

Thankfully, Helen was a tank. And she had spent her whole life surviving her mother's ire. Honestly, that could have been what led her to become a

tank in the first place. It couldn't have been easy being the daughter of the Harem Queen.

"I was thinking, perhaps Helen should take the second half," the Harem Queen added with an overly forced casual tone.

Misha hesitated, and I refused to let her feel slighted or like she'd done a bad job.

"Oh no, it's fine. Misha and I are getting along swimmingly. There's no need to make a change," I told her.

"Is that so?" The Harem Queen's smile became brittle, but she nodded regardless. "Well then, I'll leave you two lovebirds to your own devices." She smiled and then practically dragged Helen away.

Misha looked at me. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. Helen did. And her mother's going to make her pay for it." I wrapped my arm around Misha's waist.

"Ooh." Misha nodded along. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Helen's a big girl," I said quickly. "She can deal with the consequences of her own actions."

"I suppose so." Misha dropped the topic, seeing that I wasn't concerned.

"What would you like to order?" The man at the counter smiled at the two of us.

"She'd like another hot dog." I started to order before Misha piped up.

She held up two fingers. "Two, please?"

I smirked at her, and she gave me a guilty shrug. "I'm hungry," she told me, a spark of a challenge in her eye, daring me to say something. But I was a wise enough man to know to say nothing.

Instead, I held my hands up and surrendered. "Well, if you're hungry, then go right ahead."

The man had already taken her order, but I used my CID to pay, especially given how cute and happy Misha looked as she scarfed down two more hot dogs at the kind of speed that would absolutely put her in the running for a hot dog eating contest.

"What are you doing tonight?" Misha asked as she finished.

"That's between the rest of my party and me," I answered as innocently as I could manage.

Misha tilted her head ever so slightly and thought before her eyes went wide. "Oh! Yes, I do guess that Des would want something like that.

Especially since you're going to be kidnapped by demons for the rest of the summer."

"You bet. Des is going to wring every bit of enjoyment she can out of tonight." I nodded.

Misha bobbed her head emphatically in understanding. "Well then, I won't disturb you tonight." Misha pressed herself to my side. “But I have you for now."

I couldn’t help but kiss the top of her head. "Back to scaring people?"

"Yes. Though the moments in between are generally more fun," Misha admitted with a blush as her ears flopped up and down.

The movement was so utterly sweet that I was going to get cute little whalewyrn-induced cavities. I had to admit, I was really enjoying my time with Misha. It was easy to fall for her and see her as part of the group.

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The Harem Queen put her hands on her hips as she confronted Helen, having pulled her into an empty classroom. "Now, what was this damn costume that caused you to give up a prime spot in the haunted house?"

Helen fidgeted and toed the ground. "It's stupid, okay, Mom? Just leave it alone. Ken and I are just fake dating." It was a plan to get her mother off her back, but now her mother knew and was forcing the whole thing even further. Apparently, it was necessary for ‘PR and optics’, but Helen was not convinced that was the only reason her mother was pushing.

"Yes, but you need to appear to be dating for real. It's good optics." Her mother was such a pain. When she put her mind to it, very little stopped the Harem Queen. The world knew her as a beauty, but Helen knew her as a very intelligent and scheming mother.

Helen groaned. "I don't care. There is absolutely no way I was going to wear that."

"You have still yet to show me anything so that I understand where you're coming from," her mother said, and Helen knew she wasn't going to get out of this one without giving her mother an answer.

"Look at it, Mother. What would be the optics of wearing something like this?" Helen pulled the outfit from her CID, and the Harem Queen just stared at it for a long moment, completely unblinking.

Helen grinned, thinking she had finally managed to silence her mother for once.

"It's fantastic," her mother said as she snatched up the crisscrossing leather straps that could barely be called clothes, along with the horns and the tail that went with the succubus costume. “Too bad the tail only attaches with Velcro.”

***

The back cloth fluttered, and I glanced over to see who had come into the room from the wrong way, only for my eyes to go wide. The Harem Queen was dragging Helen in by the scruff of her neck, though that alone wasn't what surprised me. It was Helen that nearly had my jaw dropping to the floor.

Helen didn't normally wear much in the way of makeup, and her hair was well-kept but simple, messy red curls. But the woman who arrived in the back was lightly and expertly touched up with makeup, her hair artfully cascading around to frame her face. Given who was dragging her in, I had a clear idea of who'd had a hand in this makeover.

Of course, I had seen the costume before. I had assumed that the outfit was Des's attempt to intimidate the woman into not participating. And it had worked.

"Hello, Ken," the Harem Queen said, as if her daughter weren't practically naked beside her.

Two leather cups barely contained Helen's breasts, while straps crisscrossed around her torso, only to hold a leather thong in place to cover the most sensitive bits. And a pair of plastic horns rested on her head.

"I thought you didn't want to do the costume," I said as most other words escaped my mind. It had stalled and rebooted twice on seeing Helen done up by her mother.

"Yes, I'm sorry my daughter was such a coward," Heather said, and Helen turned bright red at the words.

"I am not a coward." Helen puffed herself up.

"Too afraid to wear something revealing." The Harem Queen rolled her eyes. "Just look at Ken. He already has so much media attention, and he can do things like this." The Harem Queen gestured at me.

"Yeah, well, he's—" Whatever was on the tip of Helen’s tongue died an immediate and brutal death with a single look from her mother. "I mean, some of us have different images," Helen quickly corrected herself.

The Harem Queen put a firm hand on Helen's shoulder. "I know roles are already set, Ken, but would you please consider letting Helen take her originally assigned spot? I have some friends who are going through the show, and I might have talked up Helen's involvement. It would be an embarrassment if she was still working the front desk." The Harem Queen asked so sweetly and had been so helpful to me that it was hard to say ‘no’ without being an ass.

I took a deep breath in, suddenly understanding, and glanced over at Misha. However, when I made eye contact with her, the whalewyrn smiled, her ears flapping briefly. There was no way I was going to let her lose out in the Harem Queen’s scheming.

"I'm okay with it, but it needs Misha's approval as well. After all, she's been working here with me, and I won't put her out," I said quickly and gave her the leverage.

"It should be fine," Misha said, staring at the two of them. "Having the Harem Queen owe me something is valuable, I'm certain," she added, firmly making it clear that she was doing both of them a favor.

"Of course," the Harem Queen spoke for Helen, the firm hand on her daughter's shoulder obvious even to me.

"Of course. I owe you one, Misha." Helen had a pained smile at those words.

"You don't have to," I cautioned Misha, and I realized that for myself, I would prefer Misha as a partner for this over Helen.

"No." Misha waved away my concern. "Don't worry about me here. It's been a lovely time with you. But we should all get along like sisters." Her eyes bored into Helen with a meaning I didn't quite understand.

"Yes," the Harem Queen said quickly. "I'm glad to see you're willing to work together with my daughter. Do not worry, Misha. I'm certain she will reciprocate."

"I have no doubt of that," Misha said with a smile that was a little more predatory than I was used to from the whalewyrn. I understood enough to know that there was a secondary conversation happening at the moment.

"Everything is all right?" I confirmed.

"Perfectly fine." Misha patted me on the shoulder as she stared down the other two women in the room.

It seemed like both of them were waiting for Helen to say something.

"Of course," Helen said, a trace of bitterness in her voice.

"Yes, I'm sure we sisters will get along lovely." Misha gave the other woman a bright smile, emphasizing the word "sisters" and waiting patiently.

"Yes. Sister, may I take your spot for the time being?" Helen managed to ask.

And while I might truly be the dungeon head Des often accused me of being, even I was staring at Helen with wide, disbelieving eyes as she acted like she had suddenly been tamed by Misha. The sudden calling of each other "sister" sent alarm bells ringing in my head.

"Perhaps we should—" I began, only for the Harem Queen to run completely over anything I had been about to say as she snatched Misha into a big hug.

"You come to me anytime you need anything. As long as you call her sister, you can call me Mom." Heather smushed Misha's face into her own before dropping the momentarily stunned whalewyrn and turning back to me with a knowing grin. "Now that things have gone this far... well then, I will see you later, Son-in-law." She waggled a little finger wave before she snatched Misha's hand, leading her away and leaving me there with Helen.

"Somehow I feel... your mother doesn't have a bunch of friends here she's actually trying to impress," I drawled.

"Oh no, I'm certain she does. That part is at least true." Helen deadpanned. "How much she actually cares if they're suitably impressed remains to be seen."

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Chapter 39

"Well, if you're done glaring at me, perhaps we should get back into position. Lie down on the altar for me." I gestured to where Misha had been lying while I pretended to bite her neck.

I tried my hardest not to stare at Helen’s body, but I was failing. Those leather straps and cups were squeezing her chest, causing her soft flesh to pinch in a way that was very attention-getting. It was certainly a size too small.

"Eyes are up here." Helen pointed with her fingers.

"It's just a little surprising, is all." I worked to keep my eyes firmly fixed on her green eyes. They were kind of pretty now that she had highlighted them with her makeup.

"Well, get over it," Helen snapped. "It's not like you've never seen a pair before. I'm certain Des wears less than this for you. Besides, we have work to do." Helen huffed and spun around towards the altar, her hips swaying back and forth exaggeratedly.

Was I supposed to look or not?

I heard another group entering the room, and before she could say anything else, I grabbed her and pushed her down on the altar, putting my lips to her neck and pretending to bite her.

She squirmed uncomfortably beneath me but didn't say a thing, which I thought was progress. But I would likely ruin it if I said anything to that effect.

The next group came in, and I lifted myself from Helen, letting her limp form down far more gently, lest I get further complaints from her, and stood up.

"I shall drink your blood," I said in my best Transylvanian accent and stepped through the shadows, coming up behind them and looming. My sudden displacement did wonders for the haunted house. I could get most groups to jump at the surprise.

The one I jumped behind let out a shriek.

Helen took the opportunity to jump through the air, not using any ability, simply her strength, to land on the other side and startle them. The group screamed for the second time since they'd entered the room. Helen let out a small chuckle at her victory, and I gave her a small nod of acknowledgment as we herded them out of the room and reset.

"This isn't that hard," Helen said defiantly as I pressed her back down, getting a full feeling of her warm skin on me, only for both of us to share a moment where I suddenly became embarrassed, and her brow slammed down into a scowl. "Really?"

"It's a natural human reaction," I said quickly as she glanced down between our two bodies, where, of course, a natural reaction had enlarged a very particular part of my anatomy.

"Just keep it in your pants," Helen said, looking away with a bright red blush.

"I guarantee you, it's not coming out, even if you ask for it," I told her.

"What's not coming out?" a familiar voice said as Xanthana and Lady Frey walked back into the room. Before I could even try my jump scare, they had already arrived at our side.

"Oh look, they traded out the vampire bride for a succubus one," Xanthana said, pointing at Helen.

"I thought you were just working the desk," Lady Frey said pointedly.

"It's normal to rotate," Helen defended herself. "After all, this is a long event, and it would be tiring for one person to do it all."

"Ah, that would make sense," Lady Frey said exaggeratedly and clearly not believing a word.

"Still, can we expect you to be bargaining for another vial of blood?" Xanthana asked me, munching on what appeared to be caramel corn.

"No, I'm not going to become another succubus," Helen snapped.

Lady Frey crossed her arms. "You speak of our kind as if we are an insult. Try again."

"Just not my thing," Helen offered as diplomatically as she could, clearly trying to backtrack her snappiness.

I made a mental note that Helen could be polite; she just chose not to most of the time.

"Oh, I was hoping to continue to convert more. Des's transformation was miraculous." The short pink succubus pouted. "Honestly, you'd make a great succubus. You're certainly horny enough to be one," she said, and I did a double-take, staring at Helen, who glared at the two demons.

"You must be mistaken. He's the horny one." Helen snapped as politely as she could manage.

"I think your horns are the bigger ones," Xanthana twisted the meaning and tapped at the plastic horns on Helen's head. "Not to mention, what people deny is always more important than what they embrace," she said, earning more frustration from the paladin beside me.

"And she has all that holy magic," Lady Frey said, glancing toward me. "Do you by chance have a corruption kink you would like to explore? She'd be a wonderful target."

"Ladies," I said, coughing into my hand, "I think you might be making her uncomfortable." I tried to defuse the situation, but Xanthana only laughed. Truthfully, I was the one who was uncomfortable. That, and I could feel Helen's desire to snap my dick in half radiating from beneath me.

"All right then, we'll catch you later, Ken. Midnight," she said, a finger pointed firmly at me.

"Midnight," I agreed quickly. "And thank you both so much for taking care of me."

The more I interacted with the demons and the other races of the dungeon, the more I was coming to realize that, despite the trades and everything being transactional between demons, they had actually taken rather good care of me. They had given me an exorbitantly expensive gift and were using the time I owed them in ways that still massively benefited me.

I had to acknowledge the help they had offered, though I would never accuse either of them of being soft to their face. That was probably a surefire way to lose their support.

Xanthana’s playfulness was absolutely a mask to hide what I assumed was a monster beneath it. Lady Frey, on the other hand, was dutiful to a fault.

"Anyways, I like this version better." Xanthana gestured at Helen. "If you need any tips on how to be a better succubus, let me know. Or if you like costumes, I'm sure we could find more for you."

Helen's face was bright red at this point. "I appreciate your consideration," she said diplomatically.

"Anything for a fellow succubus," Xanthana replied with laughter that drowned out Helen's uncomfortable groan. Lady Frey uncharacteristically laughed as she stepped away with her mistress.

“How do you put up with those two?” Helen asked as they disappeared.

“They require less patience than you,” I pointed out.

She was clearly unhappy at that fact, but she grabbed me by the hair and fell back on the altar, putting my face against her neck. “Shut up. Here I am dating you, and you say things like that.”

“Fake dating,” I pointed out as she pushed my face deeper against her to try and silence me.

“You’ve grabbed my breasts, and now you’re practically making out with me. At least treat me nicely to go with it.” Helen was being stubborn.

“What was that about sisters?” I asked before another group came in.

Helen threw me off of her, and we did the bit, scaring the group away before I came back to the altar.

“So?” I prompted again.

“You aren’t going to drop it, are you?” Helen asked, and this time, she pushed my face into her chest. “Oh, that keeps you quiet?”

“Stunned,” I admitted as my talking must have tickled her, by the way she fidgeted and battered me with her soft chest. “You’re avoiding the question.” I was practically sucking on her skin to get the words out.

“Leave that between Misha, the others, and me. That’s not your place to deal with it. Trust me, I know how harem politics work.” Helen grumbled the last bit.

“Harem? My harem?!?” I struggled, and she suffocated me into her chest.

“Shut up. Don’t talk, you dungeon-headed idiot. Yes, your harem. Since we— we’re dating, even if it’s fake, I need to negotiate with your ladies. That’s it. To keep the facade, I need to negotiate with them. Nothing more.

So don’t get any funny ideas.” She started rambling, and the next group came into the area.

I used [Shadow Ambush] to escape, popping up behind the other group. Helen was a touch late, and her face practically blended in with her hair.

“So, negotiating with my ladies?” I asked as that group also left.

Helen huffed. “Of course. I have enough tact to give them some respect while doing this fake dating. My mother is certain that this is a way to improve your public image.”

“Fairly certain your mother is just doing this to shove us together and hope something happens,” I admitted. While I was a dungeon-head, I wasn’t an idiot.

“Wait, if you knew that, why didn’t you resist more?” Helen spun, her hair flying up as she moved.

“Because I owe your mother. That, and recently, you haven’t been too bad. In denial, for sure, but less actively aggressive and against me,” I stated plainly. “Honestly, sometimes I think you’d be a lot more pleasant if you just got a good dicking.”

I didn’t even see her hand with how fast it moved; I only saw the other side of the room as my neck twisted around. “I might have deserved that. Doesn’t make it untrue.”

“You don’t say something like that aloud, you sex-obsessed fiend,” Helen sputtered, her face bright red.

“Somehow, it feels like you’re mad not because of what I said, but because it might be true.” I decided to dig deeper.

She pushed me down and jumped across the room to frighten a group that I hadn’t heard enter, but in fairness, my ears were still ringing, even as I got up and startled them.

“So,” I said, picking at my ear, “are you going to admit that you’re going along with your mother’s plan to stick us together and see what happens, or are you going to stay in denial?” Helen was off-kilter, and I saw the moment similarly to a fight. I had my opponent on the back foot; it was the perfect time for a decisive strike.

“Shut up.” She grumbled and shoved my head into her breasts again before I could speak. “Just enjoy this while I’m pretending to be your girlfriend. Besides, you’re going away this summer, and who knows what waits for us on the other side.”

I paused, considering if I should continue to push but ultimately deciding that might be the best I was going to get from Helen. If I pushed her any further, she was likely going to lash out, and it would be a very painful afternoon.

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“There you are,” Charlotte said as Helen nearly flung me across the room. We’d gotten quite comfortable with each other, most of the time being in relative silence after her admission.

Still, she couldn’t be seen sharing so much skin with me.

“Thank God that this is over.” Helen tossed her hair and attempted to straighten her leather straps and regain some propriety. All that the movement really accomplished was shifting where her breasts were and pushing them higher. Although I wondered after she was done if that had been part of the point.

Charlotte tilted her pink head, and a dark chocolate Bun-Bun nearly fell out of her hair.

Charlotte was currently in pink from head to toe, skin included. And she also looked like she had been blasted by glitter. Des had called her a slime girl, but I was fairly certain there was another connotation by the way she’d laughed, and Harley had cried upon seeing her today.

“I hope it doesn’t take too long to wash all of that off,” I said, glancing at Charlotte.

“Oh. That’s fine.” She waved a hand. “It was fun to be something a little different. Besides, Des and Bel made sure to get the professional stuff that doesn’t smear. Though, I’m probably going to be a little pink for a few days.”

Helen paused, staring Charlotte down and then dipping her head. “Thank you for the opportunity to do this room with Ken.”

“No worries.” Charlotte beamed. “I’m glad you made up your mind. Misha spoke to me.” Then she turned to me. “But we’re all done, and Des sent me to pick you up, Ken. Hopefully, this wasn’t too bad.”

“No. It was far nicer than being somewhere that people could bother me.” I smiled. Being here at the end of the haunted house had given me a sort of protection against reporters and others who wanted my attention. I had to

shoo them out lest it interfered with the event, which felt like a justifiable reason to be cutting them off and hurrying them out of the room.

“That was part of the plan.” Charlotte smiled wide enough that her eyes crinkled closed. “Now, don’t worry about getting out of costume. We’re going straight home.” The druid immediately ripped open a portal.

On the other side were all the women I loved, still in costume, and by the look on Des’s face, they were ready to stress test the makeup’s sweat-resistant quality.

“Have fun.” Helen slapped my back and then met Des’ eyes. The two of them were staring heavily for a long moment before Helen nodded. “You, too.”

“Oh my!” Des giggled. “Maybe next time, Helen.”

“Don’t count on it.” The redhead rushed from the room.

“Ah, still too flighty. But at least she’s lost a lot of her fight.” Des grinned. “Now come on, Ken. We got all dressed up for you, and if you don’t hurry, Marlow might find you and drop another task on your plate.”

I jumped through the portal immediately at that thought. Hands quickly grabbed me and pulled me into a massive group hug.

“Oooh.” Des purred and parted my shirt with her palms, rubbing my abs with an expression of pure hunger.

“Save some for the rest of us.” A werewolf Felin pounced on my back as the portal closed behind me.

“We agreed to share tonight.” Pink Charlotte tried to pry the nekorian off of me. “Besides, who could ever stop the famed hunter Felin?”

“I don’t look like a famed hunter. I look like a mangy mutt. Why is a mutt scarier than a ferocious tiger? Why must you all fear a werewolf when a weretiger or even a werecat would be more terrifying!” Felin went into what felt like a rant that had been expressed before, based on the faces of the women in the room.

Apparently, Felin had some deep-seated issue that we made wolves the terrifying monsters from horror and not something more feline.

“It’s cute, though.” Lich Selene hugged Felin from behind. “Also, I got you cream!”

Felin was lost to us all with those words. I shook my head at how well Selene was already fitting in.

“We’ll share, but Charlotte is going last. I don’t want him to be all pink,” Crimson said, cracking a beer. “You know? Or, we could all go at once?”

She pulled back the veil she wore to go with her ghost bride costume and started chugging.

“I’m not one to discriminate, but I would also not like Ken to be pink,” Penny said, dressed as an ice queen monster of some sort. She’d been using her abilities to make a chilling fog that she’d spread throughout her room, only to scare people who passed through.

“How about we move it to the shower after we start?” I tilted my head at Bellaire, who hadn’t been part of the haunted house but was in a lacy, witchy black dress.

“Shower sex!” Des cheered.

I scooped her up and threw her over my shoulder before adding Selene to the other shoulder. “Well, I do have a deadline tonight. So there’s no point in waiting.”

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Chapter 40

I let out a sigh as we leaned back on the couch after the celebration. I had been dragged off before I could even consider what I was going to do for dinner. And now, four hours later, we were all lounging around on couches in the living room, freshly showered.

Des was cuddled up to my side, nestled in like a content kitten, her spaded tail curled around my bicep. We still needed to talk about what had changed with her transformation, but that could wait for later.

Penny and Selene had joined us, and I'd been surprised when the elves had made an appearance, apparently not wanting to miss out as I headed off to fulfill my bargain with the princess.

"No!" Feline cried out as Charlotte dragged her out of the shower. The druid was still sparkly pink. Apparently, the color wasn't going away entirely anytime soon. Meanwhile, Felin's hair was all puffed up from the shower, and her tail was at least thrice its normal size.

"You know, I'm happy Ken has enough stamina," Crimson said, walking back into the room with a tray of drinks.

"Ken's stamina is legendary," Des purred from my side. The demonic mage's eyes glowed briefly as she looked at me through her lashes. I knew that Des would likely jump on the opportunity for another round but was holding back for some group time.

"I'm glad it meets your standards," I said playfully with a wink.

"Good enough." Des was unwilling to lose out on a round of banter.

"I mean, he should have enough stamina if he's going to keep recruiting," Elysara said. "Speaking of, it seems you and Helen are getting along better?"

When the whole group got together, there were more than a few times that I was being kept busy by a handful of them, and the others were taking a break, gossiping to the side. It seemed that Helen's recent shift had been passed around.

"Yeah, it seems her mother's really going all out to try and clean things up between the two of us," I said. "Misha and her at least came to an understanding."

"She was cordial," Charlotte said as she plopped Felin down cocooned in towels. I almost mistook the mess of white towels for a straitjacket. "I think she'll finally make an effort."

Des hummed where she was pressed against me. "As long as she behaves, she can have some of your time. And besides, I like the Harem Queen, and I like having her on our side. Wouldn't want her in the harem, but she's a good arrow in our quiver. The real question is, can Ken pull all of Helen's obvious kinks out of her?"

"You know, we don't have an archer yet," Crimson said, thankfully ignoring part of Des's comment. We really didn't need to go down that route.

"The only archer we know is Regan?" I said, half asking, half just keeping the conversation away from Des.

"Arrows suck to manage," Selene said as she got a bottle of Irish cream, put a bendy straw in it, and tucked it into Felin's towels. The nekorian was suddenly as content as a kitten. "Spells are so much easier."

I nodded at her. "She's got a point."

"Regardless of ease," Penny spoke up, "we really shouldn't do things based on what sort of class they are. It's not like we're building a whole raid team."

Her words reminded me. "I did promise Misha I'd try and find some raids next year."

"It would be good practice, and we might have some catching up to do on your stats." Crimson nodded.

"After the shuffle, raids give me a little ick," Charlotte said.

I glanced around the group to see if anyone else had an opinion, but no one was forthcoming. Instead, they all seemed to be doing the same thing:

trying to keep the conversation going when we all knew that soon the demons would join us to collect me.

I wasn't exactly excited for that either. I had picked out these people for my life because, well, I loved them and cared for each and every one. Leaving them for the summer was going to be hard.

"They only have you for the summer, right?" Crimson asked for confirmation. It seemed it wasn’t just me who had that on the top of their mind.

"Yes, though as soon as I understand what they're having me do, I'll try and get in contact. Being AWOL for the whole summer will make Bellaire unhappy," I said, looking at the woman. She'd been ignoring most of the conversation and was on her phone, which I had a feeling was her own defense mechanism, considering the coming separation.

"I can already imagine some rumors starting when you haven't been seen for over a month. It happens to celebrities all the time. People start wondering if they're sick or dead. For you, I should be able to get away with saying that you're in the dungeon, but it won't be perfect," she said, glancing up guiltily.

I blew her a kiss. "If I can, I'll see if I can send a training montage or two," I added quickly after a look from her.

"I know you'll be busy," she said with a sigh, "but do try and send something. Even if it's just a proof of life for Crimson. Really, she's the one I'm most worried about," Bellaire said, with substantial side-eye for said woman.

"I'll be fine," Crimson said. "Besides, soon I'll have little Ken to keep me company." She put a hand on her stomach with a love-drunk smile.

I spat out my drink. “Wait, what?"

"Well, isn't this an announcement!" Des perked up from where she had been content to cuddle me.

"That's one way to break the news." Bellaire sighed.

And with her confirmation, I was left staring wide-eyed at Crimson until a smirk plastered itself across her face. "Got you."

"Would you not joke about those things, Crimson?" I shook my head as I worked to resettle my spiked heart rate.

She gave me a helpless shrug. "From time to time, I do need to remind you of the dangers of how excited you get when Des is all, 'Put a baby in me.'" Crimson batted her lashes.

Several people in the room were blushing furiously, but the one accused just grinned from where she was pressed up against me. "Don't think I missed how absolutely jealous you got when I said that." Des smirked from the safety of my arms.

"I did no such thing." Crimson turned up her nose and looked away before her eyes pinched down. "But we lost our train of thought. What about the Harem Queen and Helen?"

"We'll see next year," I answered quickly. "Right now, I'd like to focus on all of you for the moment."

"Fair," Des said. "We are pretty awesome."

"Des"—Charlotte puffed herself up—"I think your time is over." She managed to stare down the demonic mage.

I was so proud of how much Charlotte had grown since I first met her at Haylon. We all had. Penny had once been in the shadow of her father. Des had been a woman with unfulfilled dreams and more ambition than she ever let on. Crimson, despite all her power, had been waiting for someone who could rise up and be her equal. Fayeth had been hesitant to reconnect with her niece and lifelong friend once their stations separated them. And Elysara, well, she always wanted someone to keep her grounded.

As for Bellaire, I'm not sure what she wanted, save for the fact that she had become famous enough that she couldn't trust any of her existing relationships. Someone always wanted her for her position over her personality. Selene just wanted to be included in a larger family. Then there was Felin, who when she was separated from her own family joined ours.

And though we certainly all took advantage of each other's strengths, we also took care of each other's weaknesses as well.

"Well, if we're going to get all sentimental, then I have a gift for you." Crimson pulled a package out of her CID, dropped it on the table in front of me with a harrumph, and refused to meet my eyes.

I picked up the package, neat little bow on top and all, with a smirk. "Crimson, I didn't even know you knew how to wrap presents. I'd have guessed you'd have just crumpled paper around it and used a whole roll of tape."

"Just shut up and open it." She tried to hide her blush.

I played with a corner. "Just knowing that you managed to wrap it, I think, is already pretty special."

"You keep making that big of a deal. Why don't I just take it back?" Crimson reached out, and I put a hand up to stop her.

"No way. This is mine," I declared and glanced at Bellaire. "Maybe you should be worried."

"Oh, har-har. I tried to do something nice for you, and you're just going to make fun of me for it," she said and jumped out of her seat to try and wrestle it away.

Of course, that wasn't happening, as I used [Shadow Ambush] to disappear from where I was and reappear with my arms wrapped around Charlotte from behind.

"Coward. You're using a cute Charlotte as a shield," Crimson said.

"No, Des's turn was over, and I was just switching, as I was supposed to," I said, chin on Charlotte's shoulder as I hugged her to me and put the present in her lap. "What do you think, Charlotte? Did she do a good job wrapping it?"

Charlotte looked at the package and then back up at me. "If you don't open Crimson's faster, how are we ever going to have time for all of us to share our gifts?"

I blinked at Charlotte. "You got me a gift?" Suddenly, I felt bad for not getting one for each of them. In that, I had failed.

"Of course I did," she said, pulling out her own. "Open Crimson's so I know I didn't actually get you the same thing."

I laid Crimson's tidy box down on the table before me, smoothly sliding off the ribbon and squinting at Crimson. "There's no way you wrapped this, is there?"

"For your information—" She puffed up, before realizing the trap. "Oh, shut up and open it already. Yes, I wrapped it. But I stole the wrapping paper from Bellaire," she admitted.

Said woman smirked. "I wasn't going to say anything until it got to my gift." To prove it, she pulled another out in the same tasteful matte gold wrapping paper.

"Thank you, everyone," I said and opened Crimson's gift first.

It was a neat little picture frame holding one we had taken earlier in the year for a puff piece, but it had our whole class together. This was even one without Harley trying to put bunny ears behind Charlotte.

"Thank you, Crimson." I grinned. This was far more sentimental than I would have ever expected from her.

"Yeah, well, you're going to be gone for a while, and I wouldn't want you to forget us." Crimson crossed her arms, clearly uncomfortable with this soft moment.

"Oh, I got him pictures, too," Des said, though the smirk on her face told me they were at least different in some regard.

"Oh, that's what that was for," Bellaire said with wide, knowing eyes.

"You can open those later," Crimson said quickly. The sudden blush on her face told me I had a fairly good idea of what I was going to find inside them.

"Of course. I can open yours later then, Des?" I asked.

"Yes, you should open them when you're feeling particularly lonely, and no one might be looking over your shoulder." She winked, and that pretty much confirmed that my suspicions of what she had gotten me were correct.

Charlotte slid her own package into my lap. "Me next," she said lightly, though it came across as quite insistent. "It's not that sentimental, though," she warned, even as I opened it.

"That's fine. I'm sure it's lovely." I didn’t tease her but quickly unwrapped it.

Inside her larger package was a very lovely sleeping bag.

"I know you already have plenty for your dives, but just in case it's rough over there, I wanted to make sure you were comfortable." Charlotte blushed.

"Thank you, Charlotte." I pecked her on the cheek and turned to Bellaire.

"Mine is less impressive," she said, even as I tore it open, finding a signal booster for my CID. "You know, in case you'd like to try and send some messages," Bellaire said quickly.

"Oh, that's a good one," Crimson said, snatching the box out of my hands. "Oh, you can even store stuff on this, so he can just dump a few files and pitch it through a portal." Crimson held it up with a smirk. "This is a good one, Bel."

I looked around the room to see if anyone else was going to offer a gift, not wanting to look greedy. Selene slid me a box and shook her head when I went to open it.

"You're definitely going to want to open that one later," she said urgently.

"Will do." I tucked it into my CID.

Penny held out hers. "I feel a little silly now. Everyone else's gift was so sentimental."

"It's fine," I said quickly and opened it up to find a heart guard underneath some wrapping paper.

"You know, to make sure you come back." She beamed.

"Oh, that is so sweet," Des cooed over it. "Not sentimental, my ass. You got the dungeon-head a perfect gift."

Suddenly, a number of eyes shifted to the two elves in the room.

"Well, since we're giving gifts, I suppose I have something." Elysara handed me a small velvet box.

My first thought was that it was too big, and I didn't think about what it was at first as I went to open it. However, some of the ladies in the room had a much stronger reaction.

"That's too big to be a ring, right?" Bellaire said quickly.

"It's not a ring. I would have asked all of you before I did something like that," Elysara chided the others. More than a few looked sheepish at her words. "It's an emperor's seal. Every ruler of the elves has had one, custom-made. It's basically a physical representation of my authority. If, for whatever reason, you meet elves deeper in the dungeon, I want them to be completely aware of who you are to me."

I smiled at all of them just as there was a sudden rush of wind in the room. Xanthana appeared behind me in a flash of pink.

It seemed the time had come.

"Huh. The whalewyrn didn't join you for your goodbye sex?" she asked, sounding disappointed.

"No."

"Well, that's a shame. Either way, we're going to get going." She put a hand on my shoulder.

Silently, Lady Frey had also arrived, the princess's ever-present shadow.

"By the way, Des, because of your successful transformation”—Xanthana eyed her sideways—"I'll give you the option of joining Ken."

"I have no idea what he's even going off to do." Des glared back.

The succubus only smirked. "There's only one way to find out then, isn't there?"

I knew at that moment that Des was going to join me, even before she stood up so hard that she scooted the couch back.

"Tag me in then, dammit." Des stepped forward.

Both succubi grinned.

The room disappeared, the world blurred, and I found myself deposited on hard grey earth. Above, the sky was a dim twilight, and red lightning raced through the sky.

“This is cozy,” I said slowly.

“It won’t be,” Lady Frey said. “This is part one.”

“Part two is better,” Xanthana added. “But part one is necessary.” She moved quickly, and my CID disappeared, along with everything but the clothes on my back.

“You’ll want this.” Lady Frey threw two obsidian daggers down on the ground, one for me and I assumed the other for Des, who was looking furiously at Lady Frey holding her own CID.

“What is this?” I demanded.

Xanthana smiled devilishly. “A demon tradition.”

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Afterword

Hey Everyone,

I hope DD 304 was to everyone's liking! I'm certainly still having fun with it, even if I'm having to learn how to type again. I smashed my finger and its in a cast for a few months so 4 fingered typing has been difficult. Apologies if I've made extra mistakes, but apparently losing a finger won't stop me. Spell check is a fucking blessing though and I'm still doing dictation for the first draft which takes a load off my fingers and I just do the second by hand.

Otherwise things are going well, I'm rolling into EG 3 next and hopefully we get the audiobook situation nailed down soon.

Please, if you enjoyed the book, leave a review.
Review Dungeon Diving 304

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Also By

Legendary Rule – Complete Series

Ajax Demos finds himself lost in society. Graduating shortly after artificial intelligence is allowed to enter the workforce; he can't get his career off the ground. But when one opportunity closes, another opens. Ajax gets a chance to play a brand new Immersive Reality game. Things aren't as they seem. Mega Corps hover over what appears to be a simple game. However, what he does in the game seems to affect his body outside.

But that isn't going to make Ajax pause when he finally might just get that shot at becoming a professional gamer. Join Ajax and Company as they enter the world of Legendary Rule.

Series Page

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In a world where mages and monster grow from cultivating mana. Isaac joins the class of humans known as mages who absorb mana to grow more powerful. To become a mage he must bind a mana beast to himself to access and control mana. But when his mana beast is far more human than he expected; Isaac struggles with the budding relationship between the two of them as he prepares to enter his first dungeon.

Unfortunately for Isaac, he doesn't have time to ponder the questions of his relationship with Aurora. Because his sleepy town of Locksprings is in for a rude awakening, and he has to decide which side of the war he is going to stand on.

Series Page

The First Immortal – Complete Series

Darius Yigg was a wanderer, someone who's never quite found his place in the world, but maybe he's not supposed to be here…Ripped from our world, Dar finds himself in his past life's world, where his destiny was cut short. Reignited, the wick of Dar's destiny burns again with the hope of him saving Grandterra.

To do that, he'll have to do something no other human of Grandterra has done before, walk the dao path. That path requires mastering and controlling attributes of the world and merging them to greater and greater entities. In theory, if he progressed far enough, he could control all of reality and rival a god.

He won't be in this alone. As a beacon of hope for the world, those from the ancient races will rally around Dar to stave off the growing Devil horde.

Series Page

Saving Supervillains – Complete Series

A former villain is living a quiet life, hidden among the masses. Miles has one big secret: he might just be the most powerful super in existence.

Those days are behind him. But when a wounded young lady unable to control her superpower needs his help, she shatters his boring life, pulling him into the one place he least expected to be—the Bureau of Superheroes.

Now Miles has an opportunity to change the place he has always criticized as women flock to him, creating both opportunity and disaster.

He is about to do the strangest thing a Deputy Director of the Bureau has ever done: start saving Supervillains.

Series Page

Dragon's Justice

Have you ever felt like there was something inside of you pushing your actions? A dormant beast, so to speak. I know it sounds crazy.

But, that’s the best way I could describe how I’ve felt for a long time. I thought it was normal, some animal part of the human brain that lingered from evolution. But this is the story of how I learned I wasn’t exactly human, and there was a world underneath our own where all the things that go bump in the night live. And that my beast was very real indeed.

Of course, my first steps into this new unknown world are full of problems. I didn’t know the rules, landing me on the wrong side of a werewolf pack and in a duel to the death with a smug elf.

But, at least, I have a few new friends in the form of a dark elf vampiress and a kitsune assassin as I try to figure out just what I am and, more importantly, learn to control it.

Series Page

Dungeon Diving

The Dungeon is a place of magic and mystery, a vast branching, underground labyrinth that has changed the world and the people who dare to enter its depths. Those who brave its challenges are rewarded with wealth, fame, and powerful classes that set them apart from the rest.

Ken was determined to follow the footsteps of his family and become one of the greatest adventurers the world has ever known. He knows that the only way to do that is to get into one of the esteemed Dungeon colleges, where the most promising young adventurers gather.

Despite doing fantastic on the entrance exam, when his class is revealed, everyone turns their backs on him, all except for one.

The most powerful adventurer, Crimson, invites him to the one college he never thought he’d enter. Haylon, an all girls college.

Ken sets out to put together a party and master the skills he'll need to brave the Dungeon's endless dangers. But he soon discovers that the path ahead is far more perilous than he could have ever imagined.

Series Page

There are of course a number of communities where you can find similar books.

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And other non-harem specific communities for Cultivation and LitRPG.

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