

A Journey Unwanted

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Agatha narrowed her eyes at the blue demon, who soon levitated down onto the ground, a bit of a way away from her and Juliana. The latter shrank in fear behind her, but she did not blame the girl; she could not. The mana radiating from this demon was enormous, dwarfing her own mana capacity many times over.

And the pure, malevolent mana that engulfed its being was downright suffocating. Even the forest itself seemed to groan and shriek, at the surrounding mana.

"Mine apologies; it has just occurred to me that I have yet to introduce myself." The demon spoke, his gaze all but focusing on the timid Juliana rather than Agatha herself. "I am known as Asmodai." He introduced himself with a curt bow.

Agatha's eyes focused on the demon as her mana flared. It may have had more mana than her, but the amount of mana you had did not determine the outcome of the battle. But she had a liability; she spared a glance at the cowering girl behind.

"On my signal, run as fast as you can; teleportation is useless; the wards were activated yet again." She whispered curtly to the horned girl. "I shall hold him off."

"Bu-"

"My, my. How rather uncouth, merely conversing away without me. Tsk, tsk." Despite his words, he did not really seem all that bothered. She would not bother with a retort, but someone else did not share that sentiment.

"You blue sack of shit!" A rather crude and familiar voice shouted out, and Agatha glanced to the side to see none other than Princess Mirabella storm her way towards them. Though there were notable tatters in her uniform and scratches on her body all around, Asmodai's handy work, no doubt.

"Still lively, as well as foul-mouthed." Asmodai commented with a smirk. "I find it surprising that you did not think to use Arcane Ascendance." He murmured lowly, but Agatha still heard him clearly. "Perhaps you are not able to?"

("Arcane Ascendance?") Confusion was evident within her, but she put her questions at the back of her mind for the time being.

"Oi blondie, get Juliana out of here; you'll only get in my way while I pummel this guy to mince meat." Mirabella ordered, and Agatha scoffed as she gave the blue-haired girl a side glance.

"You do not command me, Mirabella. Princess or not, and you cannot expect to beat this obvious Chaosmaw by yourself." Agatha bluntly stated this, holding Mirabella's gaze for a few seconds.

"Get in my way, and you're dead." Another scoff escaped Agatha upon hearing Mirabella's words.

"Right back at you, princess. Now you go." Agatha spoke, directing her attention towards Juliana. "It will get dangerous here, so make sure you run."

"But you two-"

"Don't bother worrying about this. Just get your ass out of here; I don't know about Blondie here, but I plan on winning." Mirabella stated with confidence, unmistakably.

"Quite cocky for someone who was thrown around a moment earlier." Agatha murmured, and she got a dainty middle finger in response.

"R-right." Juliana still seemed hesitant, but she still composed herself. "Well, I can still teleport despite the wards, but please be safe!" The fuzzy-haired girl stated that as a glyph formed beneath her feet.

"Do not worry..." Agatha merely stated as Mirabella continued.

"We'll win for sure." And like that, Juliana blinked out of view with the use of teleportation.

"My, my. Such conviction, or perhaps it is hubris, It matters not, I suppose, but it is passing strange that the spawns of Aragorn and Isadora should battle together." The demon muttered thoughtfully.

But neither Agatha nor Mirabella were in the mood for conversation, as the latter acted first.

With a gesture of her hand, Mirabella's mana flared. Mirabella's magic ignited, and the skies above suddenly darkened as storm clouds billowed menacingly.

In an instance a hurricane came to life, swirling and gathering force with each passing moment. It began as a gentle breeze, only to rapidly escalate into a fearsome force. The wind raged, tearing through the forest, uprooting trees effortlessly.

The eye of the hurricane formed around Asmodai, trapping him in a maelstrom of swirling winds. The gales roared as the winds grew ferocious, threatening to tear him apart with their strength.

Agatha stepped forward, without an incantation, Agatha unleashed her magic on the hurricane. Flames erupted from her palm, surging towards the hurricane. The intense heat mingled with the raging winds of the hurricane, creating a catastrophic fusion.

The fire hurricane emerged, the forest was consumed by this devastating amalgamation of fire and wind. It roared, casting destruction that licked the remains of trees swallowed by the wind.

It seemed as though the flames and hurricane were unstoppable forces, destined to consume everything in their path. But then, as quickly as it appeared, the colossal fire hurricane began to disperse. The intense heat subsided, leaving a trail of dissipating smoke in its wake.

And there, standing seemingly unscathed, was Asmodai. His eyes closed, leisurely, his body untouched by the forces that had sought to dismantle him.

Asmodai's gaze met the two girls, a confident smirk playing on his lips.

"Such power, as expected of spawns." He mused as Mirabella clicked her tongue while Agatha narrowed her eyes.

"Not even a scratch? And with our combined magical prowess." Agatha suddenly saw their chances of winning slip.

"Hope you ain't getting cold feet just because this punk happened to survive that." Mirabella spat out.

"Please, I am just getting started, you oaf." She retorted as they once again sprang to action.

Agatha inhaled deeply as she further steeled her nerves. She knew they had to act swiftly before he could launch a counterattack.

Agatha extended her arms towards the ground. A surge of mana coursed through the area, with a resounding thud, the ground beneath them quivered, and massive roots erupted from the forest floor.

They snaked their way through the undergrowth, relentlessly advancing towards Asmodai. Each root was thick as a large tree trunk, their collective power threatening to ensnare their target.

Asmodai, however, proved to be quite evasive. He moved between the roots, he seemed to anticipate their every move, evading their grasp with the skill of an acrobat. Asmodai's footwork positioned him closer and closer to the two girls.

Sensing the danger of Asmodai closing the distance, Mirabella reacted swiftly. She sprang into action, raising her hand, she conjured a blade of pure mana within her grasp.

He watched her, waiting for her to move.

Mirabella leaped forward, her blade cutting through the air. She aimed for his head, intending to kill him instantly.

But Asmodai was hardly that easy to injure. As Mirabella's blade slashed through the air, aiming for his heart, he sidestepped effortlessly, the slightest of movements allowing him to evade her strike.

She grounded herself on the moving roots, twisting her body as she swung again, aiming for his torso. Asmodai gave a graceful leap, soaring over her. To her credit, the princess reacted as soon as he landed.

Adjusting her grip, her blade carved a large arc towards his shoulder. But then, with a swift movement, his hand collided with her conjured blade, parrying it.

"Ah?"

While Mirabella fought, Agatha still channeled her magic, directing the roots towards Asmodai. Much to their surprise, the roots that had initially targeted him began to deviate, avoiding Mirabella altogether. It was as though the roots themselves recognized her as an ally, only seeking to ensnare Asmodai.

The roots closed in, attempting to trap Asmodai in a tangled web. But with a burst of force, Asmodai leaped into the air, using the roots as leverage to propel himself towards the girls. The forest floor shook as he landed.

"Tch, the fucking bastard is just dodging." Mirabella cursed, and she backed away to Agatha. Asmodai seemed to not advance on them despite the distance.

"He is quite nimble." Agatha, who had stopped her onslaught, agreed. "But he cannot just dodge forever, so..."

"We overwhelm him." Mirabelle continued, a grin stretching onto her face.

The air grew thick with her mana again as Mirabella channeled a spell. Creating an array of a hundred upon a hundred colossal blades. Each blade may as well have been a tool for the most gruesome Death. Jagged and dark.

These blades floated in the air, their weight defying gravity as they awaited their command. Asmodai, unfazed by the spectacle before him, readied himself for another round of combat.

Mirabella sent the blades hurtling towards Asmodai. Their speed was incomprehensible—a blur of steel charging towards their target.

The demon did not look the least bit bothered, Asmodai raised his right palm, conjuring an immense wave of black flames. The flames radiated a malevolent mana, hungry and destructive. With a sweeping motion, Asmodai unleashed the fire, engulfing not only the blades but also the surrounding forest.

The forest was consumed by the dark flames. Trees crumbled to ash, wildlife scattered in terror, and the lush undergrowth wilted under the onslaught.

Realizing the imminent danger, Agatha acted swiftly. She drew upon her magic, forming a barrier around herself and Mirabella. The barrier shimmered with light, warding off the encroaching flames and shielding them from imminent harm.

Within the safety of the barrier, Agatha and Mirabella watched as the blades disintegrated under the black flames. Their efforts, although formidable, fell short against the immense power of this demon called Asmodai.

The destruction subsided, leaving behind a scene of scorched earth.

Asmodai, now with a smirk on his face, approached the barrier. He observed the two girls with amusement. The battle had taken a toll on them, but they refused to back down. That much was admirable.

"Come now; that cannot be all." He mocked, and Mirabella glared ahead.

"Fuck off, we ain't finished yet!" Mirabella barked out. "Familial Arts: Aetheric Oblivion!"

With a surge of magic, Mirabella summoned an enormous orb of light. Its creation was a breathtaking sight to behold, as foreign energy formed into a swirling mass within her grasp. The orb hovered high above them, casting a brilliant glow upon the ravaged landscape.

With a simple gesture, Mirabella released the orb. It exploded into an overwhelming burst of blinding light, illuminating the entire area. The explosion of pure destruction engulfed everything in its path, scattering debris and sending shockwaves through the air.

Trees were uprooted, the earth trembled beneath their feet, and even the air vibrated with the force of the explosion. The radiant light consumed everything, leaving no corner untouched by its overwhelming power.

In the devastation, Mirabella and Agatha remained unharmed within the protective barrier. They shielded their eyes from the blinding light, waiting with bated breath for the smoke and debris of the explosion to dissipate.

As the echoes of the explosion died down, the smoke began to thin, revealing a shocking sight. There, standing in the midst of the wreckage, was Asmodai. Unscathed and seemingly unaffected by the assault, he wore a wicked smile that sent a chill down Mirabella's spine.

"Ah, the magic of God's." Asmodai murmured with a smirk. "Powerful, but incomplete." He commented as he stepped forward. As fun as this was, it was time to end this scuffle.

Chapter 22: Chapter 20: The masked boy

[Luminare Academy]

[Courtyard]

Elizabeth Eudora frowned as she felt the ground shake and as she saw the immense destruction of magic far away. A blinding light that even illuminated the night sky.

("That magic, it is similar to the headmasters, the princess mayhap?") She mused, but she was more focused on the third mana signature; the second belonged to Gregory, no doubt.

"It belongs to a Chaosmaw." A voice to her side supplied, and turning to it, Elizabeth spotted Professor Gregory approach her in the dark and destroyed courtyard.

"Professor Gregory." Elizabeth greeted. "I have found no students here, though the only few left that are unaccounted for would be the princess, your daughter, and..."

"Mikoto Yukio." Professor Gregory finished for her, all but spitting out the boy's name as if it were venom.

("'Tis understandable, Mister Yukio is quite the tardy student.") She mentally agreed as she spoke. "But you said that mana signature belonged to a Chaosmaw, correct?"

"Indeed, we can also assume that it was responsible for this little attack on the academy." Professor Gregory deduced as he continued. "And just when the headmaster is gone, this was clearly planned."

"You are quite right." The two professors heard a new voice enter the fray, as well as the sound of two bodies hitting the floor. Both turned to meet the sight of Mirabella and Agatha's damaged, torn, and unconscious forms on the ground. With a grinning Asmodai standing not far from them,

Professor Eudora's eyes immediately zeroed in on the two downed students, a frown evident on her face.

"Worry not, dear Professor. They still live, for now." Asmodai stated, his grin growing as Elizabeth glared at him. "They were quite powerful, but unfortunately not powerful enough."

"State what it is you came here for, demon, or I shall dispose of you." Professor Gregory stated, his eyes still indifferent and cold despite the state of his daughter.

"We came here for but one reason: spawn of Isadora." Asmodai started, his grin growing. "To take that which remains deep in the academy. And to announce our existence."

"Our?" Elizabeth asked. ("And could he mean Nihil?")

"You shall soon see." He merely said that as he raised a palm at the two, they immediately tensed their bodies as they awaited the attack. "But I suppose killing two professors might help spread the news."

"Hubris is unbecoming, demon." Professor Gregory spoke as he directed a glance towards Elizabeth. "Retrieve the girls; I shall dispose of this cur."

Elizabeth merely nodded her head as a purple hue enveloped the two girls. Asmodai did not seem to care as two people's bodies were dragged her way. Quickly, she retreated with the two in tow, leaving Professor Gregory against Asmodai.

"Creation magic: Azure Wolf." Professor Gregory murmured.

A figure emerged, a resplendent creation, born of pure magic. The enigmatic figure of a white wolf materialized before him. Standing as taller than a horse, its powerful presence emanated from it. There seemed to be a chill in the air due to its presence. Its breath cold as well as its form.

The wolf's piercing azure eyes glowed, gleaming with something that should not belong to an animal.

"Ah, the Gregory's famous Creation Magic." Asmodai noted. "It is rather complex to use, if I recall correctly; hence, blueprints of creation are made and passed down." Professor Gregory said nothing about the man's scarily accurate knowledge.

With a deft wave of his hand, Asmodai summoned his own magic, conjuring a translucent barrier before him.

The wolf, under Professor Gregory's command, lunged forward with feral ferocity. Its form moved with a speed that defied its size. As it closed in on Asmodai, the wolf's icy breath formed tendrils of frost, freezing the moisture-laden air around its maw.

With an impact that reverberated across the courtyard, the wolf slammed into the barrier. Mana rippled outward from the point of collision, with visible tendrils of light falling across the shield's surface. The barrier groaned under the weight of the force, cracks spider webbing across its otherwise perfect integrity. Yet it held steadfast.

Asmodai, sensing the need for a change in strategy, swiftly dismissed his magical barrier with a simple gesture. The barrier dissipated, leaving him momentarily vulnerable. With a savage grin fixed on Professor Gregory and the magnificent wolf, he unleashed another surge of mana.

Asmodai's body levitated off the ground, ascending swiftly into the air. His form appeared weightless, suspended above the battlefield, the tattered ends of his cloak fluttering. A corona of swirling magic enveloped him.

Asmodai summoned forth his dark magic. Dozens of arrowheads, thick and imposing, materialized in the air around him. Each arrowhead was cast in a shadowy color, a darkness radiating from them.

Asmodai released his hold on the arrowheads, launching them towards Professor Gregory and the azure wolf. The air sang with their eerie whistle, as the spearheads cut through it.

The magical wolf sprang into action. Its lithe form contorted through the air, evading the onslaught of arrowheads.

The wolf's ivory fangs and razor-sharp claws meanwhile intercepted the arrowheads, shattering them into splinters before they could reach Professor Gregory.

With each arrowhead deflected and broken, the wolf formed a protective shield around Professor Gregory, preserving him from the relentless assault.

"Quite the impressive creation; this is no mere wolf." Asmodai commented with a smirk. "Though, unfortunately, it is not enough."

"What are you blabbering about, demon?" Professor Gregory's gaze grew sharper.

"I suppose it would not hurt to inform you." The demon started. "You see, my comrade only identified a few potential threats: the headmaster himself and the spawn of Octavia. There are, of course, more, but those two stand out the most." Professor Gregory's eyes merely narrowed upon hearing the information. "There is that **woman**, parading around," His tone seemed to drop at the mention of this woman.

"So you see, Professor..." His grin grew as he continued. "You are no threat."

The professor's eyes widened as his body tensed, while Asmodai's mana flared to increasing heights. He was preparing a spell—an extremely powerful one. One that he might not be able to defend against.

Asmodai, however, found himself suddenly torn away from the ruined courtyard. With an abrupt displacement, the desolate surroundings melted away, replaced by the dense forest. His senses were inundated with the scent of damp earth, the rustling whispers of leaves, and the ambiance woven within the trees.

As he collected himself in this new environment, his eyes locked on a figure lurking just a few meters away. A masked figure emerged from the shadows, clothed in an academy uniform adorned with a striking combination of black and gold. The mask, an eerie face with an impossibly wide grin etched upon his face, would unnerve most.

Asmodai, his instincts aflame for the first time, spoke with an authoritative tone. "Who are you, masked one, and why have you brought me to this place?"

Teleportation magic was involved, no doubt, but the wards he had placed should have prevented any kind of teleportation from taking place. Yet this teleportation was also so abbreviated and quick; all it took was a blink, and his surroundings had changed and he was back in the forest.

"Oh, I'm no one important." The mask boy spoke, his voice muffled and androgynous. "I just had a question."

"A question?" Asmodai was, for lack of better words, bemused. This child had torn him away from his battle for a mere question. "Fine, what, pray tell is this question, boy?" Asmodai played along; he was a curious demon after all, so he would humor this boy.

"How'd you break the wards?" He questioned, and Asmodai raised his nonexistent brow.

It was quite the peculiar question after all.

"I am afraid I cannot answer that." He stated.

The masked boy heaved a sigh.

"I see. Well, bear with me as this is my first real fight." Confusion was quickly made evident, but suddenly the silence was shattered by a burst of speed. The masked boy vanished from his spot, his form becoming nothing but a blur as he closed the distance between them in a heartbeat. Asmodai barely had time to register the movement before he appeared before him, his hand gripping Asmodai's face in a vice-like hold.

Asmodai's muscles tensed, but before he could react, the boy unleashed a surge of absurd strength. It was as if the young boy were possessed by a supernatural force. Asmodai's body was launched into the air, torn from the ground with astonishing power.

The forest seemed to bend and sway with the force of his throw. Asmodai, a mere projectile, sailed through the air. Trees shattered and snapped, their once-sturdy trunks splintering in protest as the airborne demon effortlessly ripped through their defense.

Asmodai's body tumbled and twisted, an object subjected to the whims of the mask boy's immeasurable strength. His limbs flailed against the onslaught of the forest's natural obstacles, his silhouette colliding with trunks and scraping against gnarled branches.

Finally, Asmodai's body came to a staggering halt, crashing into the forest floor with a ground-shaking impact. The once-verdant patch of ground now bore the markings of his violent descent. And yet, despite the merciless barrage and the extensive journey through the forest, Asmodai lay relatively unscathed physically.

Astonishment and shock washed over Asmodai's features, his mind reeling from both the shock of the unanticipated attack and the realization that he had, for the first time, been rendered completely powerless. The sting of his pride being briefly tarnished lingered, his sense of invincibility shattered by this random boy's display of brute force.

"I was merely caught off guard." Asmodai reasoned as he stood up from the ground.

"Come on, don't be a sore loser." He heard the familiar voice of the masked boy, who had already made his way over to Asmodai despite the distance.

"It was a simple lack of attention that allowed you to throw me this way; it won't be happening again." Asmodai's gaze sharpened as he studied the eerie mask of the boy and waited for his response.

"Uh-huh, whatever you say." He merely uttered it.

Asmodai suddenly found himself annoyed.

Chapter 23: Chapter 21: Second Chaosmaw

[Earlier]

Mikoto's eyes glazed over the dozen or so dissipating demon corpses within the auditorium of the academy.

("No luck; these few were just mindless.") There were quite a few demons that had invaded the academy; most professors were out tending to them, while most students were hauled away somewhere. But still, he himself had been out looking for any

intelligent demons. He wanted to ask about the wards and how they had broken them; of course, any demon might not just want to part with said information.

So as he stood there, his mind whirred with thoughts. He dwelled on the wards, also pondering the meaning of the demons just randomly invading the academy. Yet, despite his musings, a certain serenity clung to him, undisturbed by the silence around him.

Suddenly, a thunderous boom shattered the stillness, causing his thoughts to scatter like shards of glass. The main entrance doors exploded inward, splintering and crashing as if struck by an invisible force. In the gaping void created by the shattered doors, a figure emerged—yet another demon of nightmarish proportions.

This monstrous entity stood over twelve feet tall, its body contorted as if torn apart and reassembled with malicious intent. Its form was a fusion of sinew and bone; its skin was cracked and oozing with a dim glow. Thick, heavy chains wrapped its body, linking its limbs together in confinement.

With an unearthly growl that echoed through the auditorium, the demon lunged toward the unsuspecting boy. Its limbs moved with unnatural speed, propelled by a ferocity that could only originate from the depths of the darkest Abyss. Teeth gnashed, sharp as razors, as it extended long, clawed fingers, its intent unmistakably clear—to strike the boy down.

However, the Mikoto remained unbothered, as the demon closed the distance between them. In one fluid motion, he withdrew his hands from his pockets, extending his fingers as if holding an invisible gun. The air shifted around him, charged with mana power that crackled like electricity.

He aimed his invisible barrel toward the demon. A surge of mana coursed through him, a stinging sensation that flowed from the extended fingers down to his core. As he pulled an imaginary trigger, a shockwave erupted, sending ripples of force towards the demon.

In an instant, the demon imploded, its form collapsing upon itself as if sucked into a vacuum. The audacious display silenced the demon.

Mikoto sighed, adding another mindless demon to the pile.

As his fingertips tingled with residual mana, a surge of magic pulsed through him. With not even a whispered incantation, reality warped, and he found himself hovering in mid-air, his body effortlessly suspended above the destroyed courtyard of the once magnificent Academy.

The courtyard lay in ruins, cracked cobblestones lay scattered, scorch marks scarred the ground, it was pure ruin.

From his aerial vantage point, he surveyed the scene below. Two figures stood locked in a confrontation. One was Professor Gregory; Mikoto recognized the prick. To his side was a large, ethereal white wolf with azure eyes.

The other figure, an unknown demon, unleashing a barrage of magical, arrow-headed projectiles. They hurtled towards Professor Gregory, leaving trails of darkness in their wake.

But the wolf moved swiftly, its majestic form nearly a blur. It easily intercepting each arrow head with jaws lined with razor-sharp fangs. The arrows shattered upon impact, dissipating into shards of smoke that dissipated into nothing.

Mikoto's hummed as he observed the battle. The wolf's movements were not the result of mere instinct but of a deep bond between it and Professor Gregory. Their synergy was impressive. A shame Gregory had such a power.

("It's no summon.") Mikoto noted that it was completely comprised of pure mana. It was created, not summoned. That must have been the Familial Arts of the Goddess Isadora, no doubt. As interesting as that was, Mikoto found himself more interested in the demon, who actually seemed intelligent.

"It looks like I found what I was looking for." Mikoto smiled as he raised his hand at the blue demon.

[Forest]

"I dare say I do not enjoy being carried around like a sack of potatoes." Ruby complained from beneath Lucinda's arm.

"S-sorry." Lucinda could only sheepishly apologize as she sped through the dense forest; despite the absurd speed at which she was going, she managed to avoid the trees. Unfortunately, the two of them were also victims of the random teleportation spell invoked. Hence, they found themselves in the forest.

"I suppose it's fine." Ruby murmured, keeping her eyes closed as the wind violently rushed her face. "But you're quite fast; I thought you would be slow."

"How come?" Lucinda questioned as she avoided yet another tree.

"You have a huge breast." The smaller girl bluntly stated.

"W-what!?" The older girl flushed.

"I said you had-"

"No, no! I... uhm, heard...I just..." She was not quite certain how to respond to that.

Well, she was at least certain of one thing.

And that was of a distant, ominous rumbling that began to permeate the air, causing the birds to scatter. It was the sound of something colossal descending.

Suddenly, as if sensing the imminent danger, Lucinda tightened her grip on Ruby and sprang backwards, just as the ground beneath them erupted with a thunderous crash.

As the dust from the collision settled, a towering form emerged. The demon wore a tattered, vermillion jacket that seemed to cling to its lean muscular frame with surprising elegance. Each button on the jacket glinted in the light, gilded accents glimmering. Its pants were tailored impeccably, though now scuffed and torn from the impact.

Its face was surprisingly human though with its skin it was anything but, its mouth contorted into a sinister smirk. Eyes that burned, while jagged horns jutted menacingly from its forehead. Withered, leathery wings stretched menacingly behind its back.

"Ah, there you are." It spoke with a raspy and oddly human voice.

"You're a Chaosmaw..." Lucinda's muscles coiled, and her eyes fixed on the demon. She sat Ruby down, and no words needed to be exchanged as the aqua-haired girl quickly made her exit. Though the demon did not spare her even a glance, only a thought, ("Well thank whatever deity is listening,")

"Spawn of Octavia..." It murmured as it licked its lips with its elongated tongue. "You look even more delicious in person." Immediately, her expression turned to one of repulsion.

("From what I sensed, there was only one Chaosmaw; there's no way I'd overlook this one.") She frowned as she unsheathed her katana and prepared to take a stance. But suddenly, in the distance, a huge pillar of pitch-black flames erupted and pierced the atmosphere.

"My, my. It seems Asmodai is having some fun." The Chaosmaw commented as he turned back to her. "Forgive my lack of manners; I am known as Nybbas." It introduced. Lucinda's gaze, merely held its own as he continued. "But I must say, I look rather forward to seeing your twisted and broken form!" He said it with a sneer morphing into his features.

Suddenly, Nybbas appeared before Lucinda, his body radiating with mana. He channeled his mana to reinforce and strengthen his body, with a faint glow surrounding him.

The moment Nybbas extended his clawed hand toward Lucinda, a shiver of malice rippled through the air. He lunged, his arm a blur, Lucinda's red eyes sharpened, her mind absorbing every micro-movement. The way his shoulder twitched before an attack. The subtle shift in weight before he pounced. The fluid, almost hypnotic way his limbs moved.

Yet, to her, it was all far too telegraphed.

As his claws came for her throat, Lucinda leaned back, the razor-edged nails swiped past her chin, grazing a single white hair that drifted to the forest floor. Before Nybbas could recoil, she twisted on her heel, her form weaving through his barrage of slashes.

("Is that all?") she mused internally, dodging another strike by mere inches.

Nybbas snarled, adjusting his approach. His hands became a blur, carving through the space around Lucinda with terrifying speed. Claw after claw, his strikes rained upon her, coming from every angle, cutting through branches, sending up clouds of dust and shredded leaves. Yet not a single one landed.

Lucinda barely seemed to move at all. Each time his attack neared, she was already gone—a step ahead, a heartbeat faster. A half-turn here, a slight shift of weight there.

She swung her sword. The sound of steel.

For the first time, Nybbas' claws met resistance—Lucinda's sword. The elegant weapon intercepted a strike effortlessly, redirecting his momentum as if she had barely exerted force at all. The clash echoed through the forest.

"Predictable," she remarked, her voice laced with disappointment. Her gaze flickered with something between annoyance and curiosity. "You're moving well, but you're not even trying, are you?"

Nybbas' lips curled into a sneer. "Oh? And here I thought you were just that good."

He didn't hesitate. His attacks grew erratic, more feral. His feet dug into the ground, kicking up dirt and leaves as he lunged with newfound aggression. His arms blurred, striking at unpredictable intervals, aiming for her ribs, her throat, her legs—anywhere he could carve a wound.

Lucinda met him strike for strike.

Her sword deflected each attempt with impeccable timing, she sidestepped a brutal swipe meant to tear into her waist, the air rippling from the force of the attack. As she pivoted, her hair flared around her.

Still, something was off.

Lucinda's keen senses latched onto the peculiar ebb of Nybbas' mana. His strikes had power, but his mana remained suspiciously restrained. He was using magic—but only to enhance his body. With the aura she sensed from him, he should have been capable of casting at least tier four spells, yet he hadn't even attempted to.

("Why hold back?") she pondered.

Nybbas suddenly ceased his assault.

With a smirk, he leapt back, landing effortlessly on the forest floor. The dust settled around him as he straightened, his posture almost relaxed despite the utter failure of his offense.

"You're as skilled as you are beautiful, spawn of Octavia," he mused.

Lucinda's gaze darkened.

She felt it now—the shift in his stance, the gathering of mana. He was preparing a spell.

Her fingers tightened around her sword.

"Why have you demons come here?" she demanded.

Nybbas shrugged, his smirk never faltering. "Me? I'm just here for some fun. Asmodai, on the other hand, is here for business—to fulfill our lord's wishes."

A flicker of insight flashed through Lucinda's mind.

("Their lord... another Chaosmaw?") Her lips pressed into a thin line. ("For Nybbas to follow under them, they must be powerful. And if this Asmodai is involved, this isn't just a minor incursion.")

Nybbas exhaled dramatically, dusting off his nails. "I was looking forward to a proper battle with a spawn of Octavia, but..." He tilted his head, his sharp grin widening. "You're way too strong for me." =

With a wicked grin etched across his face, Nybbas raised his palm towards the skies. Blue flames flickered and the forest trembled as Nybbas thrust his palm forward, commanding the fire to surge forth. It exploded from his hand with an ear-splitting sound, forming an immense wave of swirling blue fire. The destruction was immediate, as if the elements themselves recoiled in terror. Trees were stripped of life and reduced to smoldering skeletons within the destructive path of the sizzling flames.

But Lucinda was already prepared. Raising her free palm, she tapped into an element that would counter those intense flames: water. Her connection surged to life a stream of pure liquid power erupted from her hand, falling forward with a mighty force.

Time seemed to slow as the colossal stream of water surged towards the malicious wave of fire, the elements poised for a collision. The air stilled as they converged, the wave of blue fire sizzled and twisted, desperately clawing at its existence. The water surged and surged, its momentum infinite. Violent hisses deafened the forest as the boiling flames battled against the relentless onslaught of water. Steam erupted, obscuring the battleground in ghostly tendrils and creating an veil of obscured perception.

As the vapor cleared, revealing the aftermath of their clash, destruction draped the landscape. The ground trembled beneath their feet, littered with the charred remnants of trees now reduced to ash. A wide clearing stretched out before them, scorched and scarred by the remnants of an elemental war.

Lucinda stood, uninjured, but there was no sign of Nybbas. He had escaped. Lucinda frowned as she turned her head in a specific direction. A battle was waging on, and she sensed the mana of the other Chaosmaw.

Nybbas was powerful; were anyone else to face him, then they would not be able to win. This Asmodai was no doubt the other Chaosmaw; someone was battling him.

"Sorry, Ruby." She needed to get there fast and put an end to the demons.