

Even though it's the third day we've been in this village, I still feel out of place. As I walk through the market early in the morning, buying various ingredients to prepare breakfast, I can't shake the strangeness of it all. Seeing so many demons around me, acting like ordinary people going about their daily lives instead of the fearsome enemies I imagined, continues to shock me.

"Hey, if you want to try the best bread in town, come here!" I heard a vendor on the side of the street yelling in my direction.

Without stopping my pace, I smiled, ensuring my hood was still covering my eyes, "Maybe later," I replied.

These days, I learned that although Demons indeed look down on hornless demons like I appear to be, it is not like they treat them discriminatorily all the time, or at least not all the demons.

Putting aside this feeling of strangeness, I also feel a bit relieved. Since I left [Riledo], I haven't had a moment to catch my breath. We've been constantly on the move, always looking over our shoulders, unable to stay in one place for long. Even in [Oidao], we had to flee immediately after the incident with Shalia and that idiot who dared to kidnap her. Although staying in one place for a long time is still not ideal, and it was mostly forced since we had to find a new route after discovering that the demon army was using the path Namy had planned, these three days here have provided much-needed rest. Tomorrow, when we leave this place after Namy finally found us a new route, we'll be heading out with more energy—something we'll definitely need since it will be a long journey. Right now, we're on the west coast, just a few hours from the ocean, and since I can sense that Zaine is far to the east, we'll have to cross a significant portion of demon territory. To make matters worse, our first step will be to head further north to reach the city of [Miktlan]. From there, we'll take a path leading east, hopefully avoiding both the demon army and the mountains that would block our way if we attempted to go east from here through the forest.

Even though we finally have a plan and a route to follow, both Namy and Usofra didn't seem thrilled with the idea of going to [Miktlan], where Duke Vanth, the ruler of this region, resides. And I can understand why they feel that way. Staying in this village for several days has given us a chance to gather more information on various matters, especially about Duke Vanth—or, as his full title is known, "Vanth, The Monster Layer."

At first, his title, The Monster Layer, seemed very strange to me, and I only understood its meaning once I started collecting more information about it. It appears that Duke Vanth is a twisted individual who not only can control a large number of monsters but can also transmute them into beings that resemble demons, particularly demon women. Some say he has a zoo in the city where he displays these creatures for entertainment, and even worse, there are rumors that he runs a brothel with those same beings.

That alone is enough to make anyone want to avoid someone like him, but what worries Namy and Usofra even more is Duke Vanth's reputation for cruelty. He was one of the three Dukes

who betrayed Zine from the start, and during the civil war, he was ruthless in annihilating anyone who opposed the new Demon King. Namy and Usofra both get chills just recalling the horrific things they heard about Duke Vanth's treatment of his enemies during the war. Both Namy and Usofra, despite their hatred for Duke Vanth, really don't want to cross his path and risk being discovered by him. It is somewhat disturbing to see two girls who have risked so much and put their lives in danger so many times, so afraid of someone to the point that they are considering the idea of better crossing over the mountains even though that would take many extra weeks before being in the same city as Duke Vanth. All the demons here seem to share that same feeling of fear for him. Every time I asked for information about Duke Vanth, the nervousness of just hearing his name was evident.

I can't help but wonder what would happen if Duke Vanth discovered us. Could I beat him? I have learned that twenty Demons have the title of General. They are supposed to be the strongest twenty demons. Apparently, the task of twelve of them is to be bodyguards and protect and serve the Demon King directly. According to Usofra's words, their level is similar to that of an S-Rank. The remaining eight Generals are Dukes, and each one governs one of the nine areas into which the demons' territory is divided. In theory, these eight Dukes are significantly stronger than the other twelve Generals. On top of that, each Duke commands their own legion, an army with which they maintain control over their territory. All this without taking into account what Namy told me the other day, that each Duke inherits the family relic, which supposedly gives them even more power. Putting everything together, I don't feel confident I can win a fight against a Duke, much less against the Demon King, who is much stronger than any of them.

I instinctively pulled out my adventurer card from my pocket, which I still carry with me. It now shows an "A" under Rank, a far cry from when I was just an E-Rank adventurer. Over time, I've grown considerably, and my skills have evolved as well. Reviewing my skills, I see how they've helped me along the way, and it's clear that I've come a long way from where I started. I focused my gaze on the first skill on the list [Triple Slash], a skill that allows me to make three slashes with my sword so fast that they seem to be happening simultaneously. Below is my next skill [Dual Wield], which lets me perform one-handed physical skills with each hand at the same time. It's especially effective in combination with [Triple Slash], allowing for six simultaneous slashes when used together. Below is my third skill, [Summoner]. Until recently, this skill had been my ace up my sleeve.

My water summon could do all the water skills that I could do, such as a water barrier, water spear, and water spheres. Even more impressive is that now I can make ice summons that are much stronger, not to mention owl. That owl of darkness is really powerful. However, I still cannot control it. That owl has gotten me out of difficult situations many times, but he also ends up harming everything around him. The owl is something I can only use in extreme conditions, at least until I learn to control it. In the magic section, I now have an affinity for three elements. Water, wind, and, more recently, an advanced element that arises when combining water with wind. Ice.

Apart from that, I have two more skills that don't appear on my card. Two skills that I have stolen thanks to the ability that the Goddess gave me. When I first received this power, I couldn't

believe it. I don't just learn someone else's skill. I literally stole the skill from them, making the person I took it from unable to use it anymore. First, I have the rare skill I stole from a bandit, [Harmonic Drain]. This skill heals me to the same extent as the same damage that I physically deal. The second is [Thunderstride]—the skill I stole from the Oblivion member. This skill envelops my body in electricity, making me incredibly fast. [Harmonic Drain] is a handy skill, and I would like to keep it, but on the other hand, if I were to find a better skill, I think I could replace [Thunderstride]. Hopefully, soon, I will be able to steal more than two skills.

However, it wasn't just my skills as an adventurer that allowed me to take on Oblivion, which included two S-Ranks. A significant part of that was due to the demonic energy I possess for some unknown reason. This evil energy grants me immense power, amplifying all my skills considerably. The downside is that using my adventurer skills, which are gifts from a Goddess, alongside demonic energy—its complete opposite—takes a toll on my body. It often results in a severe fever, and if I'm not careful and let the demonic energy exceed what I can control, I lose control of my body and mind, causing me to go berserk. So far, I've been training hard with Namy and Usofra's help to learn how to control my demonic energy. Until recently, I limited the use of my skills and only used demonic energy during combat to avoid the side effects. But thanks to my training, my body can now withstand using ice magic in conjunction with demonic energy without suffering any side effects, as long as it's only for a short period of time.

I wonder if my A-Rank, combined with the limited control I have over demonic energy, will be enough to match the power of a Duke. Most of Duke Vanth's legion should be stationed at the border, battling against the entire army and the human guilds. However, to reach Duke Vanth, I'd still need to face his army of monsters. If we were to fight him, my best option might be to let my demonic power take control, like I did in the fight against Oblivion, and hope for the best.

"Hey, Dox. Everything okay?" I heard Sunshine say from the medallion, "You've been so quiet. What are you thinking so deeply about?"

"Nothing important. I'm just looking for a stall that sells eggs?" I replied, taken a bit by surprise.

"Lier! We passed the egg stand about five minutes ago." Sunshine said with an irritated tone.

"R-Really? I didn't notice." I said, turning around.

"If you don't want to tell me what you're thinking, that's fine, but at least buy me some fruit. I'm hungry!" Sunshine continued, "Look, the stall with the furry guy with the wolf face sells a strange fruit I've never seen before, and I'm intrigued to try it. "

"The furry guy with the wolf face?" I asked, looking around for the booth with the guy Sunshine described.

"It's next to the girl with wings who looks like Usofra," Sunshine said, sounding irritated that I hadn't seen the stall.

"Oh, I see it!" I said after finally finding the fruit stand among the crowd of demons.

As I walked to the stall, it was impossible not to notice the vast difference in appearances between the demons. That made me realize something that's hard to dismiss as mere coincidence. In some ways, it seems that Demons are different versions of the other races, sharing certain qualities and characteristics. For example, Succubus like Namy and Usofra seem to have the same sentence for an incessant and constant desire for sex, just as the Dark Elves. There are also demons, like the one who sells the fruits that Sunshine wants, which have fur in a significant section of his body. Plus, his heads look like a combination of a human and a wolf. Those animalistic qualities are similar to the Beast-Kind. There are also other demons called Imps that are a little larger in size than Sunshine flying around, which makes me think that they are the counterpart of the Fairies. The last ones I have seen in this village are called Finds, and they are pretty similar to Humans, only with horns and a tail. Following this logic, I imagine that elsewhere, there must be Demons that resemble Dwarves and Elves as well. If I'm not overthinking, there must be a reason behind it.

"Excuse me, how much are these fruits?" I asked when I got to the stand.

"Hello, friend! For two Nethercoins, you can grab three of them." The wolf-faced Demon answered me while holding a box full of merchandise in the palm of his hand as if it weighed nothing. He doesn't seem to be a soldier or have any formal training, yet even an ordinary Demon possesses such immense strength. The average Human's strength pales in comparison. Considering that a large part of the Human army is made up of ordinary people, it's clear they stand little chance on the battlefield against Demons.

"I-I'll take the three," I said, giving the two Nethercoins while my gaze continued to observe the ease with which he carried the box.

I felt a slight chill when I realized that the Human army would not withstand the advance of the Demon army for long. Will Shalia, Leona, and the rest of my friends from Midnight Dawn who are stopping the Demon army be okay? Although I still have mixed feelings, I really hope that the Queen achieves an alliance with the other races and sends more adventurers to help; otherwise, it will be a massacre.

After receiving the fruits, I continued walking.

"Dox, you suck at shopping," Sunshine spoke, "Namy would have gotten all three fruits for a single coin."

"Yeah, I think you're right..." I replied, "I just don't have her charm."

"But don't you think everything is too expensive?" Sunshine said.

"From what Namy said, one of the main reasons for the war is the lack of food given the increase in population and the lack of fertile land for farming, so it is normal that it is expensive," I replied while I was looking for a stall where they sold eggs, "Even more so when they cannot trade with other races."

As I observed on the farm, many demons are struggling in their daily lives, clinging to the hope that if their invasion succeeds, they'll be able to seize more land from humans and thereby solve their problems. Come to think of it, this place I'm walking through right now was once human territory before it was lost in the Great War. If the known history is correct, there was a time when Demons and other races coexisted. It is said that demons especially used to frequent the ancient capital of humans called [Zrephia]. Those were moments of peace until, supposedly, The Princess of Calamity killed the Demon King. Then, when the Demons learned of this betrayal, they sent their army to attack [Zrephia], but it was all in vain, as the princess herself destroyed her own city, leaving it in ruins. Unfortunately, that was not enough to calm the anger of the Demons, and that was when they began their attempted invasion against Humans and all other races.

In order to stop the invasion, the Hero Riledo united all the races to confront the Demons. According to Usofra, around that same time, Zaine became the new Demon Queen. It's said that those were bloody times, but ultimately, the alliance stopped the Demons. However, the victory was bittersweet, as the Humans lost a large part of their territory, including the area where [Zrephia] once stood. The Fairies, despite not being involved in the conflict, also lost their sacred forest due to its location between Demon and Human territories. They were forced to flee as far south as possible and now reside in the forests within Dwarven territory. It's no wonder the Fairies harbor a deep hatred for both Humans and Demons. Sunshine is the same, but it seems that at least she considers me her friend, despite me being a Human. Because of that, I also want to help Sunshine reach the Fairy's ancient sacred forest, where she hopes to find clues or answers about the existence of the Fairy Goddess. History may have erased any trace of the Fairy Goddess, but Sunshine is certain she exists.

After buying the eggs, I returned to the new place where we were staying. It is a medium-sized room with a small integrated kitchen, which is not common in human Inns. When I opened the door, I expected to see someone inside, but the room was empty.

"Namy and Usofra aren't back yet?" Sunshine said as she exited the medallion now that we were inside the room, "These two whores don't have-"

"Who are you calling whores, you creeping butterfly?" Suddenly, we heard Namy's voice as the door opened.

"It's not obvious," Sunshine said, flying in front of Namy's worn face, "I'm talking about you two! And how disgusting! You reek of alcohol!" Sunshine said, covering her nose and moving away from Namy.

Both Namy and Usofra had big circles under their eyes and really reeked of alcohol. During the days we spent in this village, the two sisters left every night and returned with large amounts of Nethercoins every morning. I can imagine what they've been doing to get that money.

"I need to sleep for a while..." Namy said, sounding tired, giving me the bag with money, "You do the shopping. Get everything we will need on the trip."

"S-Sure..." I replied.

On the other hand, Usofra seemed embarrassed and just walked to her bed without saying anything, avoiding looking at me. After eating, I did what Namy asked me to do and made the purchases, calculating for two weeks, which is what Usofra said it would take to get to Miktlan. At night, Namy and Usofra woke up and sat at the table next to Sunshine and me to eat something.

"Don't tell me you're going out again?" Sunshine said, covered in fruit juices, as she ate the last of the three fruits we bought in the morning.

"Shut up! It's not necessary anymore," Namy replied, "We already have everything we need."

"Will you two be okay to go out tomorrow morning?" I asked.

"Yes, don't worry," Usofra replied, "We'll sleep a little longer, and we should be fine by tomorrow."

"I see you already prepared everything," Namy continued, looking at the backpacks already packed with what I bought during the day, "If possible, I wouldn't like to stay in Miktlan and just pass through, but we will have to stay at least a day to do more shopping."

"What happens? Are you afraid?" Sunshine said in a mocking tone.

"If you knew what Duke Vanth was capable of, you would be afraid too, fool," Namy replied.

"I know! Dox and I were asking around the village about him, and I'm not scared!" Sunshine continued, maintaining the mocking tone.

"Are you still asking about Duke Vanth, Darx?" Usofra chimed in, "I don't know what's going on in your head, but seriously forget about it. I know you think he's the one who made the monsters attack your village, and even though that's most likely true, let it go."

"My sister is right," Namy added, "I saw how strong you are, but it's still not enough to face someone like him. Let's just pass through Miktlan without attracting attention and continue with our tour, avoiding problems. We can't afford to face someone with such a dangerous skill."

Although a part of me wanted to take revenge, I really wasn't looking to confront Duke Vanth and risk everything, at least until I heard Namy's last sentence.

"W-What did you say?" I said, looking at Namy with a surprised expression.

"Uh?" Namy looked at me, puzzled, "What? That we should avoid being discovered?"

"Not that," I said, shaking my head. "You mentioned we can't afford to face someone with such a dangerous skill."

"Well, yes... that's what I've been trying to make you understand all these days," Namy said, still looking confused.

"What are you thinking, Darx?" Usofra eyed me with suspicion.

"What makes Duke Vanth so powerful is the skill that allows him to control a large number of monsters," I said, pausing briefly, "Then what if I steal his skill?"