

This was the big fight, apparently. This was the end of the line. I doubted I was going to remain here much longer after this expedition, so this was going to be my final act here. The fight with the Demi-spirit, the monster that almost killed Loki Familia.

I'll admit it, I was nervous. Sure, we were going to win. Loki Familia won that fight and they didn't have me, so there was no reason in particular to believe that they were not going to be able to win this time too.

I was still nervous. For all that I launched myself into the Dragon Vase without even thinking, I had a series of advantages in that situation. Namely, a dragon-killing Skill, my armor that made me almost a Level stronger in every category, and my life-sucking blade that could continually heal me as I continued to hack the dragons. By my estimations, based on how strong I was compared to some Level 4 dragons I fought on the way, I determined that I would not die against the dragons. I could get hurt, if only by the Valgang, but not actually killed. I had a lot of contingencies that would have let me escape death.

The battle with the Demi-spirit was different. For starters, I didn't have my Skill boosting my Status, and so right now I was a middling Level 5 at best. Which was higher than the secondary squad led by Raul, but lower than almost everyone in the primary squad, then one with all the heavy hitters. My magic was a little better than that, so I could consider myself a good Level 5 in that department, but the problem was that the Demi-Spirit was strong enough that it could not matter. I lacked the extreme speed that Bete could use to avoid being it, or the innate sturdiness of the Amazon twins that would let them just tank a hit. I was more vulnerable than them, especially since, even if I could compete with them in stamina and general resistance, I was not as impervious to damage as them.

I still had not fully understood why that was. Evidently there was an innate attribute to the Falna that made the Defense Ability more than just stamina and good health. I was not able to replicate that... well, I was if the opponent had non-magical weapons, but most monsters did after a certain point. While it was not a problem for magical attacks, since I had Magic Resistance, it was for physical ones. My armor helped, but a powerful enough impact was going to shatter my bones regardless of how impenetrable my armor was. Like, for example, being smashed by a tentacle the size of a bus.

But fortunately I had a plan. Or, to be more specific, I had an idea on how I could go through the fight unharmed. I just needed to buff the rest of the party so much that they were going to destroy the Demispirit before it could kill me. Simple, right?

So, when we finally reached the final Floor, I spared just a glance at the tropical jungle that had taken the place of the frozen hell described by the Zeus Familia and, apparently without anyone noticing, I got out my enchanted staff.

"What is this place?" Asked someone.

"My Strength for everyone, my Power for everyone..."

"What could change the Floor like this?"

"...with my blessing, you become my shield and my sword..."

"Focus!" Called Finn. "There is a powerful monster here. Keep your eyes open. We don't know where it is."

"... so we can destroy our foes."

"I think I see it, Captain." Said Tiona, pointing at the giant pillar in the middle of the Floor. "And I think there are Violas on the ceiling of the Floor. And those caterpillars are... giving them their magic stones?"

I sent a look over my head. I had forgotten that the ceiling was littered with Violas. Which were... attracted to magic...

Unfortunately, the sudden risk of what I was doing hit me too late. My magic was ready. Not releasing it was impossible.

"*Champion's Might!*" I exclaimed, emitting a pulse of Restoration magic that hit all the allies up to ten meters or so... so basically all the expedition.

Everyone turned toward me.

"That was the most powerful buff spell I could muster." I explained. "You should be at least one Level stronger now. Let's kill that thing and..."

There was a rustling sound, and suddenly, I was intensely aware that *all* the Violas had started to move at the same time.

"Ah, shit." I said.

Fortunately, not all the Violas attacked the group... just the closer ones. All the others dove toward the Demispirit.

Since I was not sure what the plan was, I let them. Instead, I waited until the Violas charging at us were in range, then waved by staff in an arc, emitting a wave of fire that incinerated all the Violas that were converging toward us. The spell I had just used increased both physical and magical might. They didn't stand a chance.

"I didn't expect that." I admitted when the flames died down.

"You didn't know they were there." Said Riveria. "You were right in using such a magic before we started the fight. Are you able to maintain for long enough?"

I nodded. I had used Mora's gift to reduce the cost of the spell to zero, so maintaining it will be easy.

"Then..." Started Finn, probably to start the attack. He was stopped when the Floor trembled.

It was at that moment that I remembered something. A half formed memory, maybe even a false one, but the moment I heard the Floor tremble, something told me that the Demispirit I had seen fight the Loki Familia was... incomplete. Or, more precisely, that that kind of monster counted as an Enhanced Species, and became stronger by eating other monsters' magic stones. If the Demispirit had eaten more magic stones, it would have been stronger.

So, the fact that most of the Violas had launched toward the Demispirit instead of attacking us meant a simple thing. That something had ordered them to feed the bigger monster... to make it more powerful.

Fuck. Even a slight increase in strength of the damn thing could spell death for all of us. I raised my staff to blast the damn thing... and it chose that moment to open up like a flower.

In person, the Demispirit was disturbing. On paper, it looked like a cute anime girl... attached to a giant plant monster, but still, the human part of it didn't look bad. Even colorized, it was all in all a pretty cute creature. Only after it started to speak like an obsessed freak you started to consider it a little creepy.

Seeing the green skin and the solid golden eyes on an otherwise normal human face in real life activated my uncanny valley and I stared at the corrupted spirit for a second too much. The eyes of the monster fell on Ais and a wide, wild smile appeared on her face. "Aria, Aria! I was waiting for you!"

I sent a glance toward Ais. She was frozen, I was not sure if by the mention of her mother's name or some kind of feeling she was getting from the Demispirit. Then I felt the monster's eyes shift a little... right on me.

I looked up to see the Demispirit staring at me, an expression of slight confusion on her face. "Who are you?"

Now that I was looking in the eyes of the monster, I could feel... something. It was like my dragon soul was shivering, not in fear but in... disgust? Pity? A mix of both? Evidently, Dov and Spirit were... metaphysically close, or something like that, because even I could tell that the creature was *wrong*.

That didn't stop me from aiming my staff at her face. "Hellbolt!"

A lance of fire, the strongest attack I could make with pure magic without taking half a minute making a chant on the spot, coalesced on the tip of my staff and then shot toward the Demispirit.

Unfortunately, for all the power that my spell had, the Demispirit was faster. She just moved sideways, letting the bolt pass near her face and then impact uselessly on the other side of the Floor. The bolt melted a good chunk of rock, but it would have been better if it melted the face of the Demispirit.

"You want to play?" Asked the Demispirit. "Let's play!"

"Charge!" Commanded Finn, and the Familia started to move toward the Demispirit, while Riveria stayed behind and prepared to cast a spell.

But the Demispirit anticipated everyone else and started to Chant herself, while enormous tentacles emerged from the ground to create a barrier against the Adventurers.

Immediately, Finn changed tactics. "Retreat! Stay behind Riveria!"

Alright, my idea was not going to work as intended. And, if the Demispirit was stronger than the one I had seen, this time Loki Familia could really get in trouble. I needed to help.

As Riveria started to Chant her own protection spell, I slammed my staff on the ground and focused. I roughly knew what the Demispirit was going to use. Firestorm was the first spell, followed by dropping boulders the size of a house on us. I could deal with the Spirit magic, but everyone else could not, and using Reflect or Absorb Magicka was a huge risk. If it didn't work, and I couldn't be sure that they were going to work, it would mean death for everyone. As I was right now, there was a one in three chance that the spell was not going to be cancelled, and it was an unacceptable risk.

And while Firestorm could be, potentially, be made non-lethal by stacking various protections from magic and fire on top of each other, the meteor shower was not as easily blocked. I doubted that it could completely negate the damage in either cases, but Riveria could help with her barrier against Firestorm, not so much against the other attack.

So, I needed to improvise.

A magic circle appeared under the expedition, over Riveria's one. I didn't really need it to cast the spell, but it helped me define the confines of the magic and direct it by giving a visual aid, so I did it anyway. Meanwhile, I chanted.

"Oh great fortress of the peak of the world, hear my call.

I request the hardness of your walls. I invoke the magic infused inside you.

Carved by the hand of my servants, let your strength return to me."

I had no fucking clue if what I was trying to do would work. Basically, I was trying to... reduce the effort of casting an omni-protective spell by offloading part of the power on another thing. I had sorta managed to do something like this when I tried to invoke Jormungand so he could guide one of my chain lightning spells, and it had worked, more or less. My familiar heard my call and empowered the spell using his own magicka, but that was a thing I was able to do thanks to the link I had with him. Right now, I was trying to strengthen the protective spell I was preparing by calling the mundane and arcane protection that the shadowy Dragon Priests had engraved inside my mansion. Since it was not a creature I was linked to, nor intelligent in any way, the mansion couldn't just answer my call like Jormungand did.

"Raise your walls against the fury of my enemies! Shield us from death and pain!

Fulfill the role you were built for! Protect the weak, defend the just!

The ultimate fortress, the protector of the heart of the world!"

Those were not just sentences at random. The Akyn considered my mansion to be the source of the effect that kept the monsters away from the city built at their feet –and as time passed, on the cliff- of the mountain. It may be just belief they had, that my sheer presence could deter giant monsters and protect them, but belief was a powerful thing on Mundus. It could be exactly what could make this spell a success... or a complete failure.

And, far away from that Dungeon, my mansion resonated with my spell. It didn't answer, because it couldn't, but my magic managed to mimic the same sturdiness and magical protection created by my shadows in the spell. Normally, I wouldn't put the defenses of my mansion against a spell able to incinerate an entire Floor, but I was not aiming to protect the expedition on my own power.

As both the Demispirit and Riveria finished their spell, I raised my staff high and then slammed it back, making my fake magic circle glow brighter. And then called the name of my mansion... which I didn't decide until a second ago, when I felt what it meant for all the people of the Refuge.

"Lotraald Dovah!"

As I said the last words, immaterial walls of grey stone erupted around Riveria's barrier, as the convoluted runes used to make the mansion as sturdy as possible appeared on the barrier itself, reinforcing beyond what power it possessed on its own.

Then the Firestorm hit us.

The force behind the Firestorm was immense. The only time I felt so much power coming from a spell was when I managed to direct the infinite energy of Aetherius into a lightning storm to defeat Alduin. The flames roared as they passed near us, and you could feel their heat even behind two protection spells.

Then the first layer of defense, the walls I erected, started to crack.

“Coming!” I shouted at Riveria, while grabbing my staff with both hands preparing for the impact of the flames against the last barrier.

Not a second after, my walls crumbled and disappeared as the fire raged against Riveria’s magic. I had no idea how much damage I was able to deflect with my part of the spell, I could just hope it was enough.

It was not.

The barrier immediately started to crack. My theory on the Demispirit being stronger was correct. Or my spell was completely useless, one of the two, but I felt that the former was more probable. Although, I noticed how the barrier seemed to hold better where the protective runes were placed. It still was not enough to stop the Demispirit’s spell from tearing it apart.

“Move!” Shouted Gareth, as he jumped in front of all of us wielding two shields.

“Old man!” Called Tiona, but she didn’t stop him. It was the right choice. After all, nobody else here could take a hit like Gareth could.

Still, I didn’t want to leave the dwarf alone. As such, I focused my will and raised my staff once again, fighting the immense pressure that the Firestorm was producing by slamming against the barrier. I couldn’t raise it more than a couple of inches, but it will be enough.

“Ah!” I shouted, slamming it down again and pumping more magic inside the magic circle on my feet, that glowed brightly for a second, partially mending the cracks on the barrier. Unfortunately, I couldn’t repair it completely, but I gained half a second. I could make the difference between life and death.

Then the magic failed and the flames rushed toward us. Or more precisely, toward Gareth, with his shields already in position, ready to absorb as much punishment as he could.

I raised my hand and covered the dwarf in the same magic I had used on Tiona literally an hour ago. A bubble of reddish magic covered the dwarf and his shields, absorbing part of the heat. It didn’t do much good at the shields, since they immediately started to boil, but they didn’t matter. Gareth did.

The dwarf held against the raging inferno, shielding his Familia with his own body. Without the protection of Riveria and my magic, the heat was almost intolerable, even without direct contact. Gareth’s shields gave away, melting between his hands, until the dwarf had to throw them away and open his arms in a last attempt to save us.

But the flames stopped. Gareth’s face looked like he had taken a nasty sunburn, but he was not seriously wounded. The rest of the floor had not fared that well. All that remained of the lush jungle was sterile rock and cinders. The only color remaining that was not dull grey was the vibrant green of the Demispirit.

Feeling light-headed for having used so much magicka in just one go, I fell on my right knee, breathing deeply to make the sensation disappear, then looked around. Aside from Gareth, everyone seemed fine. Unfortunately, this will not last.

Moan, mighty earth. Rise, rise, rise. Husk of the earth.

Sheen of iron. Hammer of the cosmos. May genesis’s pact upheave rock and stone.

The sky shall burn. The earth shall split. The bridge shall rise. Heaven and earth shall become one.

May the axes of the ether rain down and bring about calamity's ruin.

Your envoy beseeches you, Gnome. Incarnate of the land. Queen of the earth.

The moment the Demispirit started to chant, I grabbed a magicka potion and drank it. I didn't have time to raise Lotraald Dovah again, so I had to wing it. I focused all my remaining mental energies in one last, great shield, big enough to cover all the expedition. It would not be enough to stop the attack, but with a little luck, I was going to save them all.

"Protect Raul and the others!" Shouted Finn, as every executive jumped on the weaker members of the expedition to protect them from the impact. Not me, though. Maybe because they could see that I was accumulating magical energy in my hand.

"Meteor Swarm!"

I raised my hand as rocks big enough to flatten a house materialized over us and then fell like meteors, hence the name. As I did, a translucent, vaguely green hemisphere of magic interposed between the missile and the expedition. It was a combination of a common Ward spell, plus several defenses against magic and physical force all rolled into one. We were lucky that the meteors were so big that only one of them could really hit us, but that was not of great consolation. The rock hit the shield... and the shield held.

For, like, a second and half.

Then the barrier cracked like an egg, and so did my arm. Ward spells were extremely useful, but when something broke them, there was no way that you weren't going to get at least some backlash. Still better than being hit at full force.

Then the meteor hit the ground and everything went black.