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THE RETIRED DEMON

of the Maxed-Out Village

◆ The Holy Fist's Vow ◆

Author
Akinosuke Nishiyama

Illustrator **TAa**



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"Sure doesn't
look like we have
anything to
worry about."

"Hah hah hah!
What a bright and
cheerful girl she is."

"Pretty...
Are you a goddess?"

MT. EIRIMT
EIGHT FLOWERS
Zaza



"Not in a million years.
There are plenty of
strong people besides
me out there."

"I want you to
see my growth,
Teacher!"



"I heard everything!
You seem to be in
quite the pickle,
my friend!"

BARD
Gilmeus

Character Introductions



The Duke

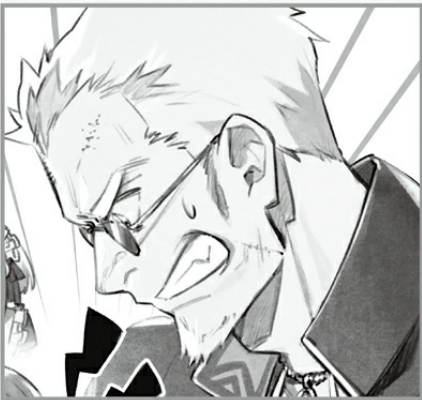
Montt Village's Blacksmith

A kindly greater demon blacksmith. Alive for more than two thousand years, he's a legendary figure hailed as the savior and father of the kingdom in the *Song of Bilegga*.

Yoto

Blacksmith's Maid

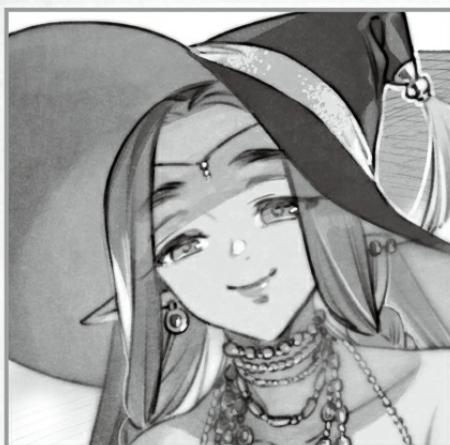
One of the duke's demonic armaments, the Demonic Sword of Frost, Jotunn, in the form of a human girl. She often scolds the duke for being too carefree and takes care of the village children.



Blutgang

Priest

The alcohol, tobacco, and woman-loving outlaw priest in charge of the church. In reality, he's a master of martial arts and a powerful monk who slayed a dragon with his bare hands. Also known as the Holy Fist.



Porion

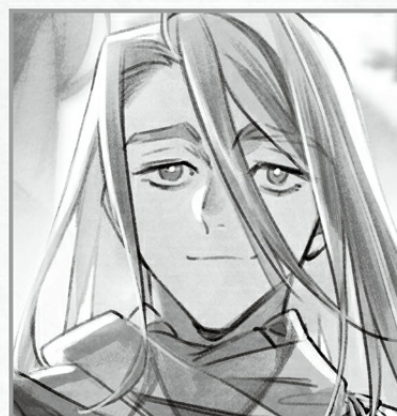
Labyrinth Witch

A former court magician who charmed the entire royal court and a self-proclaimed expert on love. A self-proclaimed expert on love. She's an extraordinary witch who protected the capital from all sorts of danger and is especially skilled with curses.

Gilmeus

Bard

A mysterious young man who shows up in Montt from time to time. He'll brave any danger in order to write a story more famous than the *Song of Bilegga*. His true identity is that of a spy for the royal court.



Zaza

Mt. Eirimt Monk

A monk girl who grew up defending the sacred temple on Mt. Eirimt. She seems to know Blutgang...



Albrea

Knight Commander

A princess knight who is incredibly skilled with the blade. She was saved by the heroes of Montt when a plot by the royal family put her life in danger.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High-Res Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

The spring clouds had passed, and the canvas that made up the sky was a cobalt blue. Summer would soon arrive in the remote village of Montt.

“Oh? The old lady exposed the secret recipe of a famous, century-old store.” The duke yawned as he read the newspaper. A butterfly had landed on his sinister yet inspiring golden horns, but it flapped its wings and flew away.

Next to the duke, a large man wearing sunglasses—Father Blutgang—laughed. “Let’s see... ‘A taste popular with the royal family that you can recreate at home.’ What’s a recipe the royal family likes doing in a rural newspaper? That old woman’s intelligence gathering is scary! Gah ha ha ha!” His laughter turned to a yawn as well, as though the duke had passed it on to him.

The murmur of the stream was comforting, and every time the gentle breeze blew over the duke’s face and down his back, it felt like a wind spirit was using him as a slide. The duke and Father Blutgang were fishing a little ways upstream from the village, with Yoto sitting between them.

The smithy was closed for the day. The duke and Yoto didn’t have any particular plans, so when Father Blutgang showed up with his fishing rod, they decided to spend the day fishing in the river.

Yoto pointed at the end of the fishing rod. “Master, something is pulling on the line!” The duke patted her head, then pulled the rod from his handmade fishing rod holder. The fishing rod flicked, but he couldn’t be impatient. His catch hadn’t bitten down just yet. The duke stared at the end of his rod, and the moment it started to bend, he yanked it upwards. The other end of the rod shook and fought back, a fish seemingly caught on the hook.

“Hmm... Feels like a gold trout. All right, bring it on.” The duke stood up from the rock he was sitting on, then fixed his grip on his fishing rod. With his magic-filled eyes blazing as he ran his hand over his horns, he almost seemed like the Demon Lord.

In reality, the duke was a greater demon—one of the most powerful among the demon race. His claws could slice through boulders, and his dragon-like tail was capable of felling trees. He could cast countless powerful spells without incantations, and if he so desired, it would be a simple feat for him to destroy an entire country.

“Master, aren’t you going to reel it in?”

“Don’t rush it, Yoto. When it comes to fishing, this is where the true battle begins.”

“Oh, that’s a nice pull, Duke. Easy does it now,” said Father Blutgang.

“Leave it to me. Fishing truly is enjoyable. I’ve been doing it for two hundred years and still haven’t gotten tired of it. I never expected to enjoy it so much.” The end of the duke’s fishing rod shook again and began to bend. He grinned as he watched it, his large tail wagging behind him. When the duke slowly pulled on his fishing rod, a golden fish jumped out of the water. It was sizable for a river fish, and even from a distance it was noticeably plump. “It’s a whopper!”

“Careful, Duke,” Father Blutgang warned. “This area’s swarmin’ with ’em, but they’re called the ‘king of the river’ for a reason.”

“I know, I know. Heh heh heh, I can’t get enough of this feeling.” The duke licked his lips. The vibrations coming from his fishing rod set his eyes aflame like the signs of battle. “A thin and unreliable line. The unseen beneath the water’s surface. The terrain is overwhelmingly in their favor. The only way to fight these things is feeling with your hands and watching the waves. Heh heh. Heh heh heh heh.”

Fishing pole in hand, the duke looked as if he were holding a sword. He might well have been treating the fish as a sword fighting opponent. “So that’s how you want to play it?” The duke took a step back, leaning to the side with his rod like he was blocking an oncoming sword. With a splash, a golden fish jumped out of the river. It seemed to be trying to cut the line with its gills, but because the duke’s rod was to the side, it was unable to. The duke skillfully wielded his fishing pole, countering every move the fish made.

“I simply love this tension. The thin line, the fragile rod. It’ll break if I get careless for even a moment and put any of my strength into it. I must refrain

from using my strength, then fight with all my ingenuity. The moment I pick up the rod, my magic and the skills I've honed become meaningless. That's what makes it so enjoyable!" The duke seemed to be having a good time. Had he only wanted to catch the fish, he could have simply evaporated the entire river, but it was the hassle of fishing that made it so entertaining.

The duke spread his wings wide, entering the final stretch. His excitement was evident from the way his mana overflowed from his mouth.

Yoto rested her chin on her hands and sighed. "Seeing Master enjoy himself makes me happy, but fishing seems really annoying."

"That's what makes it so fun," replied Father Blutgang. "The thin line and the fishing rod that's too flimsy for him. With those hindrances, it's like facin' off against a foe who's stronger than you."

"Except one of the rules of battle is that you should never put yourself in an unfavorable position. I've never understood why Master enjoys putting himself at a disadvantage." Yoto scowled, unable to comprehend it, but Father Blutgang just laughed and patted her head.

"Maybe you're too young to appreciate it."

As they were talking, the duke's battle with the fish had entered its climax. Thanks to his mastery over his fishing pole, the king of the river—the gold trout—was gradually slowing down. However, if the duke showed any signs of impatience, the fish was liable to rampage in a last-ditch effort to get free.

Soon it was right under his nose, and the moment the fish's head left the water, the duke scooped it up with his net. "Gotcha!" The flailing golden fish sparkled in the sunlight as the duke held it up. He looked more excited than ever, a big smile on his face. "It's my victory." Meanwhile, the look in the gold trout's eyes seemed to say "I've lost. Do with me as you please."

"Oh, that's a big one. You've gotten better at this," said Father Blutgang.

"Just as you taught me, Blut. Even at my age, I still have plenty to learn."

"Excellent job, Master. Now hand it over so I can prepare it." A tiny bit of drool could be seen spilling from the corner of Yoto's mouth. At some point she had set up a table behind them and already had an open fire blazing.

The duke removed the hook and handed the fish to Yoto, who quickly trotted over to the table. Humming to herself, Yoto placed the fish on a cutting board and debated whether to salt and grill it or marinate it.

“Seeing Yoto so happy almost makes you forget she’s the demonic sword,” said Father Blutgang.

“She’s like a completely different person compared to how she was a thousand years ago. But that’s how it should be. The world is at peace now. I’m sure the Creator will permit even the demonic sword to be a normal girl.” The duke drew a magic circle in the air and thrust his hand inside, pulling out his pipe. While blowing a puff of smoke, he put more bait on his hook and turned to face the river once again.

“Master, I’d like to catch enough to serve the children too, since we’re already here.”

“Not a problem. Just sit tight.”

“If you really want a bunch, then I guess I oughta buckle down.” Father Blutgang set aside his fishing rod, then stood and cracked his neck. Looking at Yoto rather than the river, he walked over to the table and grabbed a few metal skewers. “I’m gonna borrow these real quick.”

“I don’t mind, but I’ll need those to grill the fish. What are you going to do with them?”

“Wait and see.” Father Blutgang patted her head, then turned back towards the river. Staring at the water’s surface, he took a deep breath and leaped towards it. The moment his toes touched the water, he leaped once again, this time off the surface of the water itself. Leaves that were drifting down from upstream were left floating where his feet had just been, undisturbed by his movement.

“Oh! Impressive,” said the duke.

Despite the fact he wore sunglasses and had his shirt unbuttoned in a way unbecoming of a priest, Father Blutgang was still a former master monk. He was known as the legendary Holy Fist, a man who had killed even dragons with his bare hands. Walking on water was no doubt a simple feat for him.

“Hup, hup, hup.” Father Blutgang moved like a water strider across the river. His skill with the technique would have amazed anyone from his old monk temple. Finally, he reached a rock a short distance away, just barely large enough for both his feet to fit on it. “Yep, there’s one. I bet all the ones our rods couldn’t reach are over here.”

Father Blutgang grinned, raising his right foot, then lightly stomped on the rock. It made a high-pitched noise that seemed to reverberate into the river. A moment later, pillars of water erupted all around the priest, taking the fish hiding in the rocks with them. Fish of all different types, large and small, were flung into the air. “I knew they had to be here,” he mused. “Wonder if I’ve got enough skewers.”

Fish rained down before his eyes. They fell like glistening gemstones as their scales shimmered in the sunlight. Father Blutgang took aim at a particularly large gold trout in the center and swung his arm. At first it didn’t seem like anything happened, but a blur had shot out from his hand at high speed. As the other fish fell and splashed back into the river, the gold trout alone went flying towards Yoto and the duke at the riverbank.

One by one, gold trout landed at Yoto’s feet, each skewered lengthwise from mouth to tail. “Nice one, Father!” Yoto cheered. “You got so many!” The bountiful catch looked like they’d be delicious once they were cooked over the fire.

“Let’s keep this between us, if you don’t mind. The guys who fish downstream get mad whenever I do this.” Laughing, Father Blutgang kicked off the water’s surface again and returned to the shore. Then he sat back down next to the duke like nothing had happened, and lit a cigar.

“Impressive. I see your skills haven’t dulled in the least,” said the duke.

“No, no, take a look at that, Duke. I still need improvement.” Upon closer inspection, although three of the skewers were perfectly straight, the skewer in the fourth fish was slightly crooked. That was presumably what he meant by needing improvement, but as far as the duke was concerned, the priest had already performed a superhuman feat. “This takes me back. I used to catch fish like that in the river at the foot of the mountain back when I was active.

Actually, I think this river leads into that one. Doing the same thing at the same river. Kinda feels like fate.”

“You’re talking about Mt. Eirimt, correct? This river goes on that long?”

Father Blutgang chuckled at the duke’s words and gazed up at the sacred mountain, Sanctra Montt. “Yeah. The temple meals weren’t filling enough, so I’d sneak out with my buddies and catch fish in secret.”

The duke smiled at the priest. Father Blutgang laughed a lot more now than when he had first come to the village. Having been friends with him since those days, the duke became emotional at the sight. His gaze was pointed up at the sharp peak of Sanctra Montt, but the duke suspected there was a different mountain reflected in his eyes. It probably reminded him of home.

Chapter 1

The priest was surprised. His favorite pupil had grown so much.

Just as the sun passed directly overhead and began to fall, the duke and the others gathered up their fishing gear and started walking along the riverbank.

“We got a big haul, didn’t we, Master?” said Yoto.

“My apologies for making you carry it all, Blut,” the duke said.

“Don’t worry about it. Not like I’m gonna make an old man and a cute girl carry it.” Father Blutgang was holding a basket filled to the brim with golden fish, all more than thirty or forty centimeters in length. He made it look light, but it was heavy enough that had the duke been holding it, his back would have been in trouble.

“I’ve been wondering, is it all right for a monk to eat fish and meat?” asked the duke.

“Sure is. Despite the name, monks are martial artists. Can’t get strong without eating any meat. We mostly fished, but we’d hunt any bears we ran into along the way too. Good times.” Hunting bears sounded impressive, but among the villagers of Montt, it was actually a pretty common story. Even the duke nodded his head, recalling a time when he had done so on the battlefield.

“You ate bears? But they’re so cute,” said Yoto.

“Cute?” Father Blutgang asked, stunned.

“Yes. I see them a lot when I go to pick mushrooms in the forest. They all roll over and show their bellies when I get close.” Father Blutgang and the duke exchanged wry smiles, trying to fight the urge to tell Yoto the bears were just instinctively afraid of her. The idea of Yoto rubbing a bear’s belly was amusing, but the bears were probably fearing for their lives.

“W-Well, with Yoto around, I don’t think we need to worry about monsters,” Father Blutgang said. The entire area had originally been under the duke’s rule back when he was part of the Demon Lord’s army. The forest between Montt Village and the sacred mountain was dense, and the deeper you went, the more dangerous the monsters grew. However, the villagers were so strong none of those monsters dared get anywhere near the village. If they did accidentally encounter a villager, they would usually immediately submit like the bears had done with Yoto.

“Indeed. And her defensive magic is flawless. Be it bad luck or curses, it all heads for the hills when she’s around,” said the duke.

Despite the duke’s claim that bad luck would head for the hills, trouble seemed to have found them. A voice from above them cried, “So this is where you all were! It’s an emergency!”

A figure riding a broom floated gently down from the sky—Porion. Her slender, tanned arm reached up to stop her wide-brimmed hat from flying away, and her long legs were crossed, letting her pareo blow in the wind. She had probably posed this way on purpose to catch the duke’s attention.

“Hey, Porion! Put on some clothes! Don’t go flying dressed like that!” Father Blutgang’s anger was understandable. The slit in her pareo was already risqué, and the feeling that more skin was barely out of view only added to it. In addition, her chest was only covered by a beautiful, gold embroidered cloth wrap, meaning it was quite inappropriate for children when viewed from below.

As her broom descended, Porion jumped off and gently fell into the duke’s embrace. Careful not to let her hit the ground, the duke caught her in a princess carry. “Now, Porion. Don’t jump off your broom in midair.”

“I just couldn’t help myself when I saw you, Duke.” Porion buried her face in the duke’s chest. She reached up and stroked his valuable horns, a sparkle in her eyes like gold coins.

“What do you think you’re doing?! Get away from my master!” Yoto’s face was red with anger. Porion cast her a sideways glance, then made a show of pressing her cleavage into the duke. An ordinary man would have been stunned by her charm, but the duke was two thousand years old. He just sighed and

looked helplessly into the distance. “Hey! Labyrinth Witch! That behavior is what got you run out of court!” the maid shouted.

“Call it an irresistible force,” Porion sighed. “I simply can’t help it.”

The vein in Yoto’s temple bulged in response to Porion’s teasing. “Get off of him already! Do you want me to fry you?!” Yoto angrily grabbed Porion’s thigh and tried to pull her off the duke. Porion twisted around and clung even closer to the duke in response, making Yoto all the more upset.

Before things could get any worse, the duke tapped Porion on the shoulder. “That’s enough. No more teasing Yoto. Now, why did you come flying over all of a sudden? That’s pretty unusual for you.”

“Oh, right.” Porion let go of the duke and pointed at the village. “It’s an emergency. We’ve got a visitor!”

“A visitor? I take it you don’t mean a merchant or worshipper of the sacred mountain?”

“No, it’s a girl. She was wearing a really tattered hood and smelled like a wild animal.”

The duke tilted his head in thought. Putting her lackluster explanation aside, the fact that somebody had come to Montt Village was curious in and of itself. Montt was located in the far reaches of the kingdom, at the end of the main highway. It was near the border, but it was protected by the sacred mountain, so visiting from other countries was no easy feat.

There was nothing in the village that warranted going out of your way to visit it—it was debatable if it was even worth putting on the map. At least, that’s how it seemed on a surface-level. The truth was that the village was a refuge for heroes, known by only a select few people in the kingdom. There could only be two reasons for visiting—either you had gotten lost, or somebody had told you the village’s secret.

“Hey, Duke, doesn’t this remind you of something?” asked Father Blutgang.

“I thought of Albrea too, but I’m sure it’s just a coincidence, Blut.” Several months earlier, a princess knight by the name of Albrea had wandered into the village. Tricked into thinking she had to exterminate an evil demon, she had

pointed her sword at the duke with the enthusiasm of a mad dog. “Hmm. Well, whatever happens, happens. No getting angry this time, Yoto,” said the duke.

“I beg your pardon, Master, but I am your sword. Whatever happens, my top priority is protecting you.”



“Meow! The duke is back!” When the duke and the others returned to the village, the children all came flying at them. The catfolk Mill jumped and clung to his shoulders, while the kobold Naza climbed up his back onto his head.

“Oh, hello, everyone,” said the duke.

“Meow, meow! Duke, I’m scared!”

“Duke, something’s weird about that girl who just arrived,” the goat-horned Nito said, grabbing the duke’s arm and hiding behind him.

“Stand back, everyone. We’ll talk to her.” The children obeyed Yoto and backed up, anxiously peeking around the corners of shops and houses.

“I wonder what has them so afraid?” the duke pondered.

“They’re the children of heroes. They probably inherited their parents’ intuition,” said Father Blutgang.

“I hope this doesn’t turn into another fight.”

Uneasy, the duke arrived in the village square. It was located in the middle of the village, with large roads extending in all four directions and a beautiful stone belltower standing in the center. It was an impressive structure for such a remote village—one the master craftsmen among the villagers had given their all.

But now, a crowd of people had formed in front of the belltower. There were people of all races, the most conspicuous of which was a large dwarf woman standing with her arms crossed.

“Meikris! I brought them!” said Porion.

“You sure took your time, potion seller. But I appreciate it,” the dwarf woman replied.

As the duke and the others approached, the villagers moved aside to let them through, revealing an unknown figure in the center of the square—and a very suspicious one at that. Despite it being the beginning of summer, she was wearing a coat with the hood pulled down over her eyes.

She was a little over 160 centimeters tall, and from her silhouette one could just barely make out that she was a woman. Underneath her hood, her mouth was shut tight.

“Is this our visitor, Meikris?” the duke asked.

“Sure is. She said a single sentence, then went quiet. I tried to take her to my tavern since her stomach growled, and this is what happened.” Meikris stuck out her stout arm, a handprint clearly visible on it.

“She managed to fight you off?”

“Nah, I pulled back before it became a fight. Still, I don’t know what to do. All she says is ‘Where is my teacher?’ She’s pretty strong, but I don’t get the feeling that she means any harm.”

The duke tilted his head at the word “teacher.” “Ring any bells, anyone?” The other villagers similarly tilted their heads.

“Couldn’t be me. I never had any students. How about you?”

“I don’t think so... My family never even had a maid. Is it you?”

“No, our group never had anyone like her. Isn’t she talking about you?”

“I would recognize her if she were one of my disciples. What about you?”

“I’ve had so many students, who even knows?”

They all had similar reactions. As a village of legends, most of them had taught disciples at one point or another. Almost everyone could be described as a teacher, so they weren’t really getting anywhere.

“Hmm. Could you give us any details?” the duke asked the girl.

“Where is my teacher?” the girl responded in a clear, monotone voice. Though she had replied, it almost seemed like it was simply an automatic response to the duke’s voice.

“Hate to break it to you, but this village is full of teachers. It’d be nice if you could give us a name.” Father Blutgang stepped forward, basket in hand, the gold trout still flopping around.

“Oh, Father Blutgang. He seems the most like a teacher of all of us,” one of the surrounding villagers said.

“And would you mind showin’ your face? The person you’re lookin’ for isn’t gonna recognize you like that,” said Father Blutgang.

“That voice... Teacher?”

Father Blutgang’s eyes went wide. “Huh? Me?”

An aura of fighting spirit burst out from underneath the girl’s coat, prompting gasps of surprise from the duke, Yoto, and the villagers.

“Hey, hey, hey, what are you doin’ out of the blue?” Still holding on to the basket, Father Blutgang slightly lowered his hips just as the girl sprung forward. He immediately tossed the basket into the air, the scales of the fish glittering in the sunlight. The villagers caught a few, but most of them ended up falling and flopping on the ground.

A kick thrust forward like a spear in front of Father Blutgang. The priest took a step back to avoid it, but the girl in the coat had already crouched down and released a punch as though propelled by a spring.

“No way!” one of the villagers cried out. “He caught that?!”

Father Blutgang had caught the girl’s punch with his left hand.

“Even if he’s retired, I can’t believe we’re getting to see a master monk in action.”

“He’s the Holy Fist who ripped out a dragon’s heart. You have to see it to believe it.”

Trembling, the villagers couldn’t believe their eyes. Even Father Blutgang was surprised himself. His opponent was so skilled he didn’t have any time to think—his body just reacted on its own. “Who the hell are you?” the priest demanded.

The girl in the coat didn’t respond, but something felt off. Rather than simply

choosing to remain silent, it seemed more like she had forgotten how to speak.

“Master.” Yoto tugged on the duke’s sleeve.

The duke looked down to see what she wanted, only to find her brow furrowed. “What’s wrong, Yoto?”

“I have a bad feeling.” Rather than step forward like usual, Yoto hid behind the duke. “Something’s wrong with that girl.”

“What? Why is Yoto... Hey, you. Did you do something?” The girl in the coat didn’t reply to Father Blutgang’s question. The look on the priest’s face grew increasingly grim, and then his aura abruptly flickered.

It was at that moment that the girl touched Father Blutgang’s arm with her other hand. It was so automatic it seemed like she might be going for a joint lock, but she made no attempt to twist or break his arm. It was just her hand, soft and cold.

Father Blutgang wasn’t being careless—he was simply watching for her next move. Countless techniques flashed through his head, but the force and hostility that should have preceded her next strike never came.

Then the doubtful priest realized something. What if she completed the preparations for her technique when she touched him? Father Blutgang shivered, goose bumps appearing on his skin as he noticed the golden chakra built up in the girl’s hand. “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me!”

“Revolving Phoenix Palm!”

Father Blutgang quickly backed away and took up a defensive posture as an explosion rang out.

“Father!” Yoto shouted.

“What was that explosion?!” said the duke. Both he and Yoto went wide-eyed with shock.

“What the hell was that?!” said Meikris.

“Meikris! Everyone! Are you all right?!” Porion shouted. Dust and pebbles kicked up by the blast rained down on the villagers, but Porion deployed a magic barrier over their heads like an umbrella. The falling debris bounced off

the barrier and vanished. “Nobody said anything about explosion magic!”

“Blut!” the duke cried out.

“Ow... I’m all right.” The duke looked towards the voice and saw Father Blutgang coughing. He had put a considerable amount of distance between himself and the girl. “I just barely got away in time. But more importantly, that technique was the Balsam Phoenix, wasn’t it?! Are you one of the Eight Flowers of Eirimt?!”

Neither Father Blutgang nor the other villagers expected what they saw when the smoke cleared. The attacker’s coat had been blown away by the explosion, revealing a young girl around sixteen years of age. She had two green ribbons tying up her shoulder-length chestnut hair. Her wide eyes were similarly chestnut-colored and were completely devoid of any life.

The green outfit she had on was from a culture the duke didn’t see very often. It seemed like a combination of martial arts clothing and a foreign dress. She had metal guards on the backs of her hands and on her lower legs, and a beautiful black iron breastplate. The jade green pattern engraved in it seemed to be some kind of spell.

Father Blutgang scowled. “I suspected as much, but that outfit and armor confirms it. You’re a monk from Mt. Eirimt, aren’t you?”

The monk girl didn’t respond and her hands settled into a stance. She lowered her hips, her right hand held back like she was drawing a bow, while her left hand was stuck straight out.

“From Mt. Eirimt? Does that mean she came here targeting Father Blutgang?”

“Seems like it. She’s got guts attacking him in broad daylight, but we can’t let that happen.”

The villagers took immediate action. One drew an aura-clad sword that had been hanging at his hip, while another crouched down with his hand on the hilt of his blade, ready to draw it and strike at any moment. There was an aged cleaver, a spear, an axe, and more. They instantly transformed from mere villagers to experienced heroes.

“Outta the way, Father!”

“We won’t let her lay a hand on you!”

Two villagers stepped forward with their swords drawn. They were both warriors who had made names for themselves as mercenaries. Their usually friendly faces were now serious and prepared for battle. Perhaps because of their mercenary instincts, they were way ahead of all the other villagers.



“Hold on! She’s not an enemy!” Father Blutgang’s warning came too late, as the two had already closed the gap.

Unafraid of the experienced warriors, the young monk simply stared at their approaching blades with her lifeless eyes. Just as they were about to connect, the former mercenaries were blown away by a series of blows so fast they didn’t even have time to register what had happened. One was hit square in the jaw and collapsed, while the other fell to his knees, clutching his head.

“Are you okay?!” asked Father Blutgang.

“Yowch! My head’s spinning, but you know a mercenary always gets results.” The ex-mercenary pointed, and sure enough, there were deep gashes on both of the monk girl’s arms, spurting blood. He seemed to have cut some ligaments, as both her arms were hanging limply.

Even though she could be healed with magic later, she couldn’t swing her fists with her ligaments severed. It was a drastic measure, but an appropriate one to bring a swift end to the conflict. However...

“Her wounds are closing!” The monk’s injuries rapidly healed, and soon she could move her arms again. She made a hand sign and the speed of the healing increased even more. Before long, she was as good as new.

“Classic monk. Auto-regeneration using their holy powers. Guess it’s finally my turn.” Meikris cracked her neck and took a step forward. The villagers’ fighting spirit and mana all surged, and just as they reached their peak—

“Please, stop!” Father Blutgang yelled as loud as he could. “She’s from my hometown. She’s not an enemy. She wouldn’t have called me ‘teacher’ if she was.” The villagers fell back, and the priest silently raised his fists. “Why have you come here? Answer me!”

“Teacher.” The monk repeated her cold, inhuman reply. Before Father Blutgang could voice his concern, miasma began to rise up from behind the girl. It swelled ever larger like a surging wave.

“What the hell?!” shouted Father Blutgang. “That’s no monk technique!”

Being a monk was a sacred profession and they wielded holy power, yet the

miasma she was manipulating was anything but. It formed into the terrifying, screaming silhouette of a skull.

“Be careful, Father! That’s a curse! She’s wrapped herself in cursed energy!” Casting several defensive spells in quick succession, Porion spoke with panic in her voice.

Blutgang looked at Porion in surprise. “A curse?! That’s not possible! She’s wearing holy armor!”

“No doubt about it! And it’s an extremely dangerous one!”

“Ah...” Yoto suddenly clutched her head and stumbled. Taken aback, the duke caught her with one hand.

“What’s wrong, Yoto?!” he asked.

“I-I’m fine...but my head hurts. I can hear screaming coming from that monk.”

However, the duke couldn’t hear a thing. He looked around, and the other villagers shook their heads as well. It could mean only one thing. “Curse energy and a scream only Yoto can hear... Could that *armor* be cursed?”

Still clad in miasma, the monk charged towards Father Blutgang again. Her pace had already been quick to begin with, but this time it was even faster. The moment she got in range, a series of miasma-covered blows came flying at the priest.

Father Blutgang backed up, catching all her blows without counterattacking. They came at him so quickly they were almost simultaneous. Taking a defensive posture, the priest ducked and spun around. Just as he narrowly avoided a horizontal kick, a roundhouse kick came at him like a blade, quickly slashing in the opposite direction.

“Tch!” Father Blutgang clicked his tongue. “She’s too fast! And her blows are heavy! This isn’t natural!” He was on the defensive.

Sensing that the priest was in trouble, the duke cast a spell. A magical wall was deployed in front of Father Blutgang in the shape of a giant shield. The monk tried to step around it, but it stubbornly remained in front of her, collapsing on her to pin her down.

“Duke!” Father Blutgang yelled out.

“Sorry, Blut. Force of habit. Have no fear, it’s only a variant of Kon Shield. Once she’s restrained— Hm?”

The magic shield attempted to hold down the monk, but she placed her hand on the shield, and contrary to the duke’s expectations, simply started pounding away at it head-on. No matter how many times she was repelled, the speed and force of her blows only increased. Her assault grew even more ferocious, and finally, cracks began to appear in the magic shield.

“Wh-Whoa! What power! It’s only a low-level spell, but to think she’d try to break through my shield!”

“Duke, keep it together for just a bit longer!” Father Blutgang took off his sunglasses and made several hand signs.

“Blut, are you going to use *that*?”

“I gotta know for sure. Just bear with me for now!”

The villagers tilted their heads in confusion at the way the duke said “*that*,” which only the duke and Father Blutgang seemed to understand. The priest stomped and a magic circle appeared at his feet, but it was slightly different from the ones the duke created. The golden circle was divided into six parts, with Father Blutgang standing on a hexagon in the center. Golden lines connected the parts, and before long, letters started filling in the space between. They appeared from the outside in, as though someone outside the circle were quickly writing them.

“This is one of my trump cards—the Circle of the Binding Eye!” Father Blutgang’s eyes opened wide, now the same golden color as his magic circle. For a split second, he felt like the flow of time slowed around him. The world turned gray, and he could see the mana running through the monk’s body. “I can see it. The flow of your meridians. The flow of your mana. The flow of your life itself. I know what makes up all things in this world.”

Amid the bright glow of her vast meridians, her breastplate was indeed stained black. It clung to her like the roots of a tree, embedding itself in the meridians that served as channels for her mana.

“The duke was right! That breastplate is cursed! That explains it. Now, where did you pick up this curse of yours, missy?”

“In that case, destroy only the armor! You should be able to pull it off, Blut!” said the duke.

“Consider it done!”

With a crash, the monk girl’s fist broke through the magic shield. Blood dripped from her hand—she didn’t seem to be taking pain into consideration anymore. She stepped forward again without a care and stuck out her fist, her arm suddenly beginning to glow with the same energy of the explosion technique she had used earlier. Even Father Blutgang wouldn’t be able to withstand a direct hit, and he was too busy making hand signs to stop her. Just as everyone had averted their eyes and her fist was about to collide with him—

“Bind!” With Father Blutgang’s shout, the girl instantly froze in place. It didn’t matter how quickly she had been moving or how heavy her blow had been.

The duke and the others looked closer and saw something glowing between the frozen monk and the magic circle. Countless golden threads had emerged from the circle beneath her feet, immobilizing her.

“Don’t act all surprised. Monks are clergy, y’know? And greed is a sin. Don’t let gold tie you down!” Father Blutgang grinned. His threads had completely restrained the rampaging girl. “Give it up. Once you’re bound by my technique, there’s no getting away. This is no ordinary binding. They’re wrapped around all your vitals. Not even an ancient dragon could get out. There’s no way to break free with your own strength.”

At the point that any normal person would have given up, the monk girl continued struggling. She twisted and turned, trying desperately to move. The bones in her extremities creaked as she put all her strength into it.

“You idiot. You’re not leavin’ me any choice. I’ll buy you some candy later, so grit your teeth!” Father Blutgang stomped, a crimson aura welling up around him. It soon took the form of a dragon’s head roaring up at the sky. “The curse’ll probably transfer to me if I touch you barehanded, but with the arm of a dragon, I should be fine!”

The monk girl watched in awe as he lowered his hips and took up a new stance. He brought his right arm up to his temple, and slightly bent his left arm, his palm facing outwards. His presence was so imposing it was as though a dragon had just stomped the ground in front of her. He was one of the legendary Eight Flowers of Eirimt—the autumn bellflower, Dragon Spirit Blutgang.

The monk stiffened up, wrapping her legs in chakra and letting out more cursed miasma. It was the explosion technique she had used earlier. She seemed to have given up on escaping the threads, and was instead going to blow away the magic circle altogether.

“Blut!” the duke cried out.

“Not gonna happen!” Father Blutgang lowered his right hand to his waist. From his shoulder down, he had the blazing red arm of a dragon. “Secret technique: Phantom Dragon’s Roar!”

A dragon dwelling within his right arm, the priest thrust his hand at the monk’s chest. With several pops, her breastplate flipped up and flew off, taking everything from the clasps to the studs with it. The monk was blown away in a wide arc, not letting out so much as a scream.

She landed on her back with a thud, likely already unconscious as she made no attempt to move or catch herself. Her breastplate clattered to the ground moments later, and the miasma it had been emitting faded away.

Father Blutgang took a deep breath. “I call myself a priest, but I don’t know the first thing about curses. All I could do was destroy it. Sorry for wasting your time, everyone.” After catching his breath with his hands on his knees, Father Blutgang put his sunglasses back on and picked up the monk girl.

“You just about gave me a heart attack.”

“Father Blutgang is something else.”

“Guess I’ll go do the laundry now.”

Judging that the situation had been resolved, the villagers let out sighs of relief. They stowed their weapons and returned to their daily lives.

“Are you all right, Yoto?” asked the duke.

“I’m sorry, Master. I ended up dragging you down.” Yoto took the duke’s hand and stood up. She hung her head and stared at the ground, dejected.

“It’s no problem at all. This situation was a little out of the ordinary. Blut, how is the girl doing?” Brushing off Yoto’s apron and shoulders, the duke cautiously walked over.

“Let’s see. I managed to only destroy her armor, but you never know.”

“Owww...”

The duke, Father Blutgang, the other villagers, and even the rarely expressive Yoto were stunned. The monk girl had already opened her eyes.

Shocked by the speed of her recovery, some of the villagers who had been about to return to their lives put their hands on their swords once again.

However, Father Blutgang stopped them. “Don’t get hasty. She’s done tryin’ to fight. Hey, missy. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three... Huh? What’s this feeling? It’s really nostalgic.” The monk stared at Father Blutgang, her eyes growing brighter and brighter. She broke out into a big smile, leaving the priest bewildered by her complete reversal from earlier. Then she hugged him before he could react. “Sir Blutgang Artzalight! It’s you! Teacher!”

“Whoa! Where did that come from?!”

“Teeeeeeaaaacheeeeer!” Tears overflowed from her eyes, and snot dripped from her nose. The change left Father Blutgang and the duke with their mouths agape.

“Blut, who is this girl?” the duke asked.

“B-Beats me. I’ve got no idea.”

“You’re awful!” the young monk pouted. “Don’t you recognize me?! It’s me! Zaza! Zaza Celette!”

“Huh?” Father Blutgang froze and stared at the young monk. That name did in fact belong to his best pupil back on Mt. Eirimt. “Zaza?! That little pip-squeak?!”

“Yes!” Zaza cried. She had missed her teacher so much she was in tears.

Father Blutgang looked at her, dumbfounded. “No way...”

“It must be fate!” she shouted, smiling. “But wait, why am I... Huh? I feel weak...” Zaza passed out again with her eyes wide open.

Scooping up the sleeping monk, Father Blutgang took a closer look and saw that dark bags had appeared under her eyes. “The hell was that? She suddenly wakes up, then goes right back to sleep.”

“Hmm. They say people suffering from curses keep moving without rest until they die. She probably hasn’t slept,” said Porion.

“Sheesh. Sorry about that, everyone. Turns out she’s my disciple after all.” Father Blutgang apologized to the other villagers, who just nodded their heads and muttered things like “That explains why she’s so strong,” before returning to their daily lives for real this time.

“For now, you should treat her, Blut,” said the duke. “I’m more worried about the flow of her mana than her wounds. It’s time for your needles to shine.”

“Yeah. We can ask her what happened once she’s healed.”

“Hey, Duke. You sure we should let her stay in the village?” asked Meikris, hefting her axe onto her shoulder and turning to look at the duke.

“Are you worried?” asked the duke.

“Retired or not, adventurers are always wary. That girl’s pretty tough. Got any proof she’s gonna be sane next time she wakes up?” Even in Montt, there were only a few people who could put Father Blutgang on the defensive. While her fighting style itself wasn’t anything to write home about, her explosive technique made her plenty dangerous. “She probably touched an inscription somewhere and went berserk as a result. Curses aren’t easy to get rid of once they get their hooks in you.”

Meikris’s concern was reasonable. The look on her face wasn’t grim—rather, it was the look of a worried mother. She was concerned for the villagers, the children, and even Father Blutgang himself.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take the responsibility of looking after her,” said

Father Blutgang.

“Doesn’t work like that, Father,” Meikris replied bluntly. “There are children here.”

The duke stepped forward. “Meikris, I understand your concern, but—”

“Stay out of this, Duke. I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking.”

“S-Still, I understand what you’re trying to say,” the duke continued. “I know you’re speaking in the best interests of the village, but look, the armor has already been destroyed...” The duke was by no means afraid of Meikris, but he understood where both she and Father Blutgang were coming from, so he was unable to take a firm stance.

He looked around and saw that many of the villagers, especially the mothers, had a hard time buying into his argument and seemed to be siding with Meikris. Though they were heroes, and if it came down to it they could probably gang up on Zaza and take her down, they still had their children to protect.

“Personally, I think we should send her to the church headquarters and have a high priest purify her,” Meikris said firmly. “*If* she can be purified, that is.”

“I’m tellin’ you, there’s nothing to worry about. She’s not gonna fight us anymore,” Father Blutgang insisted.

“And *I’m* telling *you* that I’m concerned. You’re in for a world of hurt if you take curses lightly.” The two glared at each other, fighting spirit swirling around them.

Father Blutgang was still a priest—albeit an impious one—so he was of the mind to forgive and forget. He might have looked like an outlaw, but he had been a man of good character even before becoming a man of the cloth, and had the reputation to back it up. He was highly regarded in the village, with many of the villagers finding peace of mind in confessing their sins to him or coming to him for advice.

Meikris, on the other hand, was essentially the village’s mother. She was an experienced adventurer who had seen just about everything in her travels. The villagers were aware of her overwhelming strength, so she was the only one who could both scold the foolhardy heroes and also give them love and support

through her food. She'd had countless greetings and farewells over the course of her adventures, and her love for those dear to her was genuine. It was this affection that made the villagers accept and respect her mothering tendencies.

There was much risk involved in accepting Zaza, so both of their viewpoints were understandable. One wanted to forgive because he was compassionate, while the other wanted to protect because she was loving. The other villagers merely held their breath and watched as sparks flew between them.

It was Porion, of all people, who finally stepped between them. "All right, that's enough, you two. Don't make such a scary face, Meikris. You're gonna make me cry." Her playful voice immediately diffused all the electric tension in the air.

"I assume you have a good reason for butting in, potion seller?" Meikris asked.

"Hee hee. Have you forgotten who I am? A former court magician. The Labyrinth Witch. A former resident of the dark elf forest. Surely you understand what that means—I'm a curse expert."

Meikris paused for a moment and scratched her head. "Right."

Porion turned to the priest and peered at Zaza asleep in his arms. The witch made a magic circle that attached itself to Zaza's face, then rotated around her as though searching for something. Eventually it made a pleasant noise and disappeared. "Hee hee. What a cute sleeping face. You have nothing to worry about, Meikris. She isn't cursed anymore."

Meikris squinted at Porion, skeptical. "I have your word for it?"

"Of course! I assure you it's worth far more than some priest's."

The villagers nodded their heads in agreement. Meikris stared into Porion's eyes for a while, then finally shrugged her shoulders.

"Meikris?" Porion asked.

"Fine. If the curse expert insists, I won't object." Relieved, Meikris tousled Porion's hair. "Father, you'd better keep an eye on that disciple of yours. Guess I should go get ready to open," she said, heading back to her tavern.

Relief spread through the other villagers as well. Porion let out a deep breath she'd been holding, as she'd been unsure of how things would turn out herself.

"Thanks, Porion," said Father Blutgang.

"It's fine. I'll be taking my payment in the form of a month of free acupuncture."

"You drive a hard bargain," Father Blutgang sighed. "Anyway, you heard her, everyone. Mind lettin' me be a little selfish here?" Father Blutgang gave a playful wink to the villagers. The crowd around them dispersed, satisfied that Zaza wasn't cursed anymore and that Father Blutgang would be able to handle things.

"Now, what to do with her?" Father Blutgang looked down at the girl in his arms. "Guess I'll stick some needles in her to start."

"Shall I accompany you?" asked the duke.

"No reason for you to trouble yourself, really."

"It's no trouble at all—I'm actually quite curious about the girl. And besides, I'm going to be fixing this thing up, aren't I?" The duke held up the breastplate Father Blutgang had wrecked. Its curse removed, it was now just a hunk of metal, but that didn't stop Yoto from frowning and hiding behind the duke at the sight of it.



"Heh heh heh. That was quite the show." A smirking man was on a roof overlooking the square. He wore a wide-brimmed, feathered hat and a green poncho. Underneath his poncho was a stylish jacket, and he carried a lyre in his arms.

His appearance suggested that he was a bard, and one with the backing of an aristocrat—or possibly an even more influential patron. He had a slender build and looked rather suspicious as he nodded his head, scribbling down notes on something or other.

"My last work sold so well, I figured it was about time I came back for some fresh inspiration. Lo and behold, a battle between two monks: the legendary

Holy Fist versus his beloved disciple. What a find! I must say, fate certainly loves me!”

The bard followed Father Blutgang with his eyes as he carried Zaza back to the church. Making a square with the thumbs and index fingers of his hands, he centered them as if framing a painting.

“Yes, yes, my next work will feature the legendary Holy Fist: the priest who tore out a dragon’s heart with his bare hands, then mysteriously left his temple to live in a remote village—no, wait.” The bard stared at the girl he was carrying. “Maybe I should focus on the monk prodigy who left her temple in pursuit of her teacher and got cursed along the way. Or perhaps she had another reason. What sort of happy ending will she paint for me? I can’t wait to find out!”

The bard stood up and spread his arms out wide like a conductor wielding a baton or a comedian receiving applause. “Now, let the story begin. Now that I’m not the mastermind, I’m more than willing to lend a hand!”

The bard grinned and strummed his lyre, but he wasn’t playing a song. The instrument was his version of a magic wand. Instead of chanting, he plucked the strings to activate his signature magic—the sound-erasing spell Silence, and the deception spell Stealth. Unbeknownst to the villagers, he walked among them completely hidden.

His name was Gilmeus. He served as the court bard, but that was just a cover for his true position as an agent for the kingdom’s intelligence department. He had a habit of mixing his job with his private life and getting the village into trouble in the pursuit of good stories. No matter how poorly these hijinks turned out, he never seemed to learn his lesson, so he was often punished by the villagers.

Whenever his lyre played its soundless tune, trouble was afoot in the village of Montt. He treated even a maiden’s tears as material to spice up his stories and write his own happy ending. He was so skilled in his deceptions that the duke called him a con man.

Of course, the people of Montt weren’t so naive as to let him run free time and time again. He took pride in his stealth abilities, but he was blissfully

unaware of the ninjas lurking behind him in the square.

Chapter 2

The Balsam Phoenix was dejected. She thought she'd get it for sure.

When Zaza awoke, she saw a dim stone ceiling above her. She had apparently been sleeping face up. She could tell she was lying on something thin and bed-like. Judging from the breeze she felt, it seemed like her usual clothes had been replaced with a much lighter garment.

Zaza tried to sit up, but pain ran through her body. She wasn't bruised or cut—she had been pierced by something. Her pressure points were burning up. “Ah... Ugh...” Her voice wouldn't come out. She could tell that her throat was sore and her lips were dry. Before long, a tremendous feeling of fatigue and exhaustion washed over her. She wasn't sure what was going on, but all she could do was lie there motionless.

“Father, this place is a mess because you don't tidy up every day.”

“Thanks for the help, Yoto. You too, Duke.”

“Blut, you need to keep this place clean from now on. It's not fit to welcome a girl.”

The voices sounded distant. One sounded like a lovely young girl, the second was a deeply nostalgic voice, and the last sounded like a kindly old man. The word “Father” suggested that she was in a church, but the medical equipment she saw with her hazy vision seemed oddly familiar, though she couldn't be certain.

It felt like she was in the infirmary of her monk temple. It hadn't even been a month since she'd left, yet it felt like eons. After remaining motionless a little longer, she heard the sound of a door opening. From the dainty sound of the footsteps, Zaza guessed it was probably a woman.

“Ah, are you awake? Master! Father! She woke up!” Zaza heard a clear voice,

and the sound of running shortly after. There was no sign of hostility in their footsteps, so she wasn't sure why she was so on edge. Zaza felt like she had been fighting nonstop, but she couldn't pinpoint the reason she felt that way, and she had no memories to suggest why she might have been fighting.

"Excuse me. Can I take a look at your face?" A beautiful girl peered at her. Judging from the frilly headband and apron she wore, Zaza could tell she was a maid. The girl's pink hair shone in the light from the window.

"Pretty... Are you a goddess?" The girl was beautiful enough to make Zaza genuinely think so.

The maid's face flushed red at Zaza's words. "Did you hear that, Master? She said 'goddess.' She just called me a goddess!"

A friendly laugh filled the room. "Hah hah, how nice. She's not quite back to full strength, but if she can say things like that then I think she's going to be okay. I'd expect nothing less from a master monk's acupuncture treatment."

When her eyes became a little less blurry, Zaza was taken aback by the owner of the gentle voice. He had bluish, almost silver skin, sinister horns, and shining golden eyes. The most striking features of all were his large wings. Zaza recalled the image of demons from the fairy tales she'd grown up hearing.

Zaza had stiffened up upon seeing the monster, but quickly realized it must be a dream. "A demon? Am I...still asleep?" Demons had been wiped out and were thought to be extinct. She stared at him, wondering why a demon would appear in her dreams.

"You're staring at Master really hard," said the maid.

"Y-You're embarrassing me. Am I that unusual?" the demon asked, fidgeting under Zaza's intense gaze.

"Course you are. Demons only show up in storybooks now." Hearing a familiar voice, Zaza struggled to raise her head. She saw a man in priest vestments who was trying to calm her down. "Don't push it, Zaza." Though he was wearing garish sunglasses, he was unmistakably her teacher.

"Teacher!" Zaza wanted to get up and hug him, but her body wouldn't budge. Her eyes darted around in confusion, and she finally realized what was going

on.

She currently had countless needles stuck in her. She was dressed in something resembling a monk's work clothes, and her arms, legs, chest, stomach, and even her toes had medical needles in them. She tried to move her head slightly, but it felt like there were several needles in her face as well. She could tell they were all pretty deep, yet they didn't hurt. The needles must have been stuck between her bones, as those areas did admittedly sting a little, and Zaza's muscles tightened up when she tried to move. "Needles...?" she muttered.

"That's right. They're all over your body right now—anesthetic too. Your meridians were about to break down. Once that happens, even healing magic can't fix you," said the priest.

"What time is it?"

"Don't talk," the priest said, his stern tone enough to silence her. "I'll take the needles out now."

Remaining quiet as she'd been told, Zaza felt the touch of a warm hand. The gentle touch traveled from her head to her neck, her hands to her shoulders, her stomach to her hips, and finally down to her legs. By the end, the metal tray nearby was filled with a mountain of needles.

"That oughta do it. I'll turn around so you can get changed. Can you stand?"

Zaza got up slowly, her vision finally coming into focus. The building she was in was indeed a church, but it looked just like a monastery's infirmary inside. Yoto handed Zaza her monk clothes, which had somehow been freshly cleaned. Given the faint smell of soap and lingering traces of mana, she figured they had probably been washed and then magically dried.

After confirming she had feeling in her hands and feet, Zaza got dressed. She told the priest he could turn back around, and sure enough, she saw her teacher, Blutgang. She wasn't sure why he was wearing sunglasses or was dressed as a priest, but there was no mistaking him. "It's really you, right, Teacher? I'm not dreaming?"

"In the flesh. This is probably the first time you've seen me not wearing

monk's robes, huh?"

Zaza couldn't help but hug him. She figured he'd get mad, but she couldn't stop herself. She held him tight and before she knew it she was crying.

"Teacheeer!"

"Again?! Don't get your snot on my clothes! Here, a tissue!"

"Ah! I-I'm sorry! I-It's just, it's been ten years since you left! Do you have any idea how sad everybody was?!"

"Uh, well... Y'know..." Father Blutgang rubbed his head and looked at the ceiling, wondering how to explain himself.

"By the way, where are we?"

"The church in Montt Village," the duke answered. Hearing his kindly voice, Zaza once again stared at him. "Though I suppose it might be more accurate to call it Blut's clinic."

"Huh?! You're...a real demon?" Zaza tensed for a moment, then strangely enough loosened right back up. Though his appearance was frightening, his expression was gentle and there was kindness in his eyes. He didn't seem to bear her any ill will; he just gave off the atmosphere of being a nice person.

"Y-Yes," the duke stuttered. "Your eyes are so wide they look like they're about to pop out of your head."

"C'mon, you can be surprised, but don't stare so hard. You're gonna make the duke blush," said Father Blutgang.

"Duke?" Zaza asked. "Is he an important person?"

Father Blutgang patted the duke on the back. "You bet he is. Even more important than the king. Go on and introduce yourself to him."

"More important than the king?! I-I apologize for my appearance. My name is Zaza Celette."

"Hah hah hah. No need to be so formal. I'm just a retired old man. It's true that I was once a duke, but I've long since discarded that title. Ah, and this is Yoto."

The maid named Yoto lifted her skirt and gave a polite curtsy.

“Your temperament has completely changed from when you first arrived, Zaza. You were like an expressionless automaton earlier,” said Yoto.

Personally, Zaza felt like the maid was the expressionless one, but something she had said didn’t sit right with her. “When I first arrived?”

The maid gave a small nod. “That’s right. Do you not remember?”

Zaza tilted her head. She couldn’t remember coming here in the first place. The only recent memory she could recall was that of her teacher’s face against the blue sky. “U-Umm, sorry for asking, but what exactly is this acupuncture for?”

“You really don’t remember, do you? You and I fought,” said Father Blutgang.

“Huh?! I fought you, Teacher?!” Zaza was so shocked her hair stood on end. She was confident in her fists and considered herself to be the best monk in the temple after the head monk and current Eight Flowers. She had even proved it by winning several tournaments, but she would never dream of turning her fists on Blutgang Artzalight, the legendary monk said to have torn out the heart of an ancient dragon. The mere thought of it made her go pale. “No, no, no, you’re kidding, right? I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Y’know, even if it weren’t true, you could at least say you’d get in a single punch or something. You’re makin’ me feel kinda bad as your teacher.”

“Even now, you’re probably still the strongest monk. There are still a bunch of people who consider you a hero—”

“Enough of that,” Father Blutgang said, the stern tone returning to his voice. “It’s over now.”

Her teacher’s face grew stiff, and Zaza realized she could have picked her words better. What she had said was true—many people did regard him as a hero, herself included. She’d eventually learned that he had been forced to leave the temple for breaking a taboo, but even in spite of that, he was still considered a legend among the monks.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Zaza finally grumbled. “Anyway, I’m glad to

see you're doing well! But what's with the priest getup? Did you convert to a new religion?"

"Guess you could say that. Some stuff happened, and now I'm workin' here as a priest."

"That doesn't explain anything! Besides, don't you think you look totally corrupt? People are going to call you a gangster."

"Don't sweat the small stuff," the priest shrugged. "I'm in a church, and I'm wearin' a priest's clothes. That makes me a priest."

"No, no, no, that's all wrong!"

The old demon patted Father Blutgang on the back. "Hah hah hah! What a bright and cheerful girl she is, Blut. Seems like I was worried for nothing." Zaza could tell they were close friends, and it made her just the tiniest bit jealous.

"Well, you're right about that," said Father Blutgang. "Sure doesn't look like we have anything to worry about."

The two of them looked relieved, in contrast to Zaza who was staring at them blankly, annoyed that she was the only one out of the loop. They were talking like everything had already been resolved, which didn't sit right with her.

"So, why are you here, Zaza? And what were you doing wearin' the Eight Flowers' armor? You're not ready for that. You didn't steal it and run away, did you?" asked Father Blutgang.

"How rude! I'll have you know I'm taking the trial to become one of the Eight Flowers perfectly legitimately!"

Father Blutgang's eyes widened behind his glasses. "No way, *you*?!"

Zaza was a little happy to see his reaction, but she also felt like she was being made fun of and puffed out her cheeks. "I didn't cheat. I earned my chance."

"I can't believe it. You're a contender to become one of the Eight Flowers."

"Oh? Of the ten thousand monks on Mt. Eirimt, she's closing in on the eight strongest. You must be proud, Blut," said the duke.

"Well, maybe a little."

“Your face is turning red, Teacher. If you’re happy, you can be honest and say so.” Zaza could tell he was trying to stop himself from grinning. If he could have seen himself in the mirror, he probably would have turned it into a nasty smirk, but all he did was try to play it off with a cough.

“Stop it already. Why are you here, Zaza? They didn’t tell you to come defeat me as part of your trial, did they?”

“No, but I *was* looking for you. Somehow I had a feeling you’d be around here.” At this admission of intuition, Father Blutgang and the duke’s mouths hung open, and Yoto rolled her eyes, but despite their reactions, Zaza really did feel that way.

“A feeling, huh?” said Father Blutgang.

“At first I tried asking around, but I wasn’t getting anywhere so I relied on this instead.” Zaza held up the necklace she wore. It was a weathered talisman made of a pearl reinforced by a manastone. Father Blutgang had given it to her when he came back from a trip outside the mountain, so it was her precious treasure.

“You still have that thing? I gave it to you back when you were a little pip-squeak.”

“Hee hee, I held on to it and just got the feeling you were around here. It must have been fate!”

Father Blutgang looked like he wanted to say something, but he just smiled and laughed. He was probably happy she’d kept it all this time. It would’ve been nice if that had been all, but then he let out a big sigh. “We’ll just call it the founder’s guidance. Now for the important part—*why* did you want to find me? I can’t imagine you just wanted to have tea and catch up.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Now that he had heard and acknowledged her as a candidate to become one of the Eight Flowers, she figured it was okay for her to ask. Zaza threw her arms out wide and said, “Teacher! Please give me the Bellflower Dragon armor!”

The church fell silent as Zaza giddily waited for a response that never came. She looked at her teacher’s face in confusion. At first it was blank, but his brow

very quickly furrowed, and finally his veins popped out in anger.

“You dumbass!” Father Blutgang shouted so loud it made her ears ring.

“Wah! Please don’t yell!” Though it felt just like old times, Zaza was taken aback by her teacher’s scolding and puffed out her cheeks. There was no reason for him to get so angry.

“Give you the Bellflower Dragon armor?! What the hell do you take the Eight Flowers’ armor for?! Besides, aren’t you already undergoing your trial with the Balsam Phoenix armor?! You’re supposed to venture out into the world to understand salvation and earn the armor’s recognition!”

“Why not?! The temple hasn’t had a Bellflower Dragon all this time because of you! So give it to me! I’ll put it to good use!”

“And what might that ‘good use’ be?”

“I’m going to give it to the person I like! The one I’m tied to by fate!”

“You knucklehead!” This time his shout was so loud it made the glass door rattle.

Normally Zaza would have cowered and apologized, but not this time. This was the whole reason she had followed her intuition and come all the way here. “Stop yelling! I’m serious about this, Teacher!”

Her earnest explanation seemed to only anger him further. “Am I supposed to care? Are you stupid?! You want to use the Eight Flowers’ armor for your little love affair?!”

“I’m not stupid! Because I took the Balsam Phoenix, my senior disciple Alma doesn’t have a spot anymore! I want to make him the Bellflower Dragon! Please! If you’re not using it, just give it to me!”

Rather than getting angry this time, Father Blutgang put his hand on his head and sighed. She wasn’t saying anything particularly offensive, so why was he getting so upset? Now it was Zaza who was fuming with anger.

“Zaza, was it?” the duke interjected. “I’m not quite following. Once you give the armor to your beloved, then what?”

Zaza smiled wide at the duke. “We travel the world together!”

A shock instantly struck her forehead. Father Blutgang had flicked her, though it felt more like a full-on punch. “Owww! What if I get brain damage and really do turn stupid, Teacher?!” Her forehead throbbed with pain. She wondered why she hadn’t been able to avoid it, but more than that, she wondered why he was so offended. She had clearly just been injured, so what kind of teacher was he to hit her like that? But before she could complain, he let out his deepest sigh yet.

“You always were cheerful and unruly, but I never thought you’d grow up to be this stupid. Travel the world? Is this Alma guy really that great?”

“He’s amazing. Tee hee hee. Personally I’d rank him second only to you, hee hee.” Zaza couldn’t say enough about how great Alma was, and she always blushed when she remembered his face. Leaving him behind at the temple had been hard. Unsure what to do with her fidgeting hands, she grabbed the edge of her monk’s robes. “But obviously I haven’t confessed yet. That comes after he becomes the Bellflower Dragon. That’s why I need to get the armor from you! I’ll see him off on his own trial, and when he comes back, he’ll be the Bellflower Dragon! Then I’ll confess! He’ll say yes with tears running down his face, and be like, ‘Zaza, this was all because you brought back the armor.’ And then! And then...!”

“She really is a maiden in love. What do you make of this, Yoto?” said the duke.

“Don’t ask me,” Yoto replied. “But it’s like she walked straight out of a romance novel. I’ve never seen someone so direct.”

“She’s hopeless... If only I’d been a better teacher...” Father Blutgang hung his head as the duke laughed and patted him on the back. The two were clearly close friends, but they also felt somewhat like grandfather and grandson.

“Is it so bad, Father? Being in love is just proof that she’s doing well. I was born as a result of the love between Master and Mother, the Demon Lord,” said Yoto.

“Yoto...” Father Blutgang sighed. “Maybe this is just part of the flow of time.”

“Blut, what did she mean by traveling the world?” the duke asked.

“The Eight Flowers are permitted to leave the mountain to spread the temple’s teachings. Most countries’ governments regard the Eight Flowers highly, so it’s basically a free pass through the border to anywhere you want to go.”

The duke clapped his hands together in understanding. The eight people who sat atop the peak of Mt. Eirimt—the Eight Flowers—were essentially treated as goodwill ambassadors when they left the mountain.

“Are you seriously... No, I don’t have the words.” Father Blutgang’s voice trailed off.

But Zaza wasn’t going to give up so easily. “Look at how you’re dressed, Teacher! I bet you haven’t worn the Bellflower Dragon armor in years! You’re disrespecting the founder! So let me return the armor to the temple!”

“Don’t make it sound like you’re in the right. I’m not givin’ it to an idiot full of worldly desires.”

Being called stupid so many times had brought Zaza to the verge of tears. She was the youngest Eight Flowers candidate in the temple’s history. She was called a prodigy and the second coming of the founder, so she thought her efforts were being recognized. Yet when she finally reunited with her teacher after so long, instead of praising her, he yelled at her and flicked her on the forehead. Didn’t he know how hard she had worked?



“You’re not even using it! Give it to me!”

“Absolutely not!”

“But why?! Come on! Teacher! Why won’t you support my love?!”

“Quit movin’ so much! You’re supposed to be resting!”

Zaza puffed out her cheeks and pouted again. “You’re so stingy!” But now that she’d calmed down a bit, she realized something. Her own armor was nowhere to be seen. She had wanted to show it off to her teacher when she found him.

The armor used in the Eight Flowers selection trial was said to be the Eight Flower itself. One passed the trial when they were acknowledged by the armor, but just wearing it was enough to command respect within the temple. In addition, it was a critical part of her being able to travel the world with Alma.

“Why’d everyone get quiet all of a sudden?”

“Teacher, do you know where my armor is?”

Her teacher wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Urgh... A-Armor?”

“Yes, though it’s really just a breastplate. It’s the Balsam Phoenix armor. The black iron breastplate with the cute cloud pattern. Do you know where it is?”

An uncomfortable atmosphere came over the room. The duke and Father Blutgang exchanged looks when Yoto suddenly grabbed Zaza’s arm. It wasn’t clear whether she was trying to reassure her or hold her back.

“Stay calm when you hear this, okay?” Yoto said. “Master, Father, I think this is something that’s better handled sooner rather than later.”

At Yoto’s encouragement, the duke and Father Blutgang tentatively glanced at each other. Zaza had a bad feeling.

“Guess there’s no avoidin’ it.” Father Blutgang nodded his head, and a moment later the duke snapped his fingers, the sound ringing ominously through the room. A magic circle appeared on the medical table, with a crushed piece of iron at its center.

Zaza stared at it in confusion, gradually turning pale as she made out the

familiar pattern and shape. “I-Is this...?”

“Yeah. That’s your Balsam Phoenix armor,” said Father Blutgang.

“What happeeeeeeeened?!” Zaza’s shriek echoed through the room. She started shaking, her face growing even paler. “It can’t be! The Eight Flowers’ armor was destroyed?! How?! I can’t go back to the mountain like this! I’ll be disqualified! What about me seeing Alma off?! What about our journey?! What’s going to happen to our love?!”

“Listen, Zaza. It was unavoidable. You were cursed and going on a rampage.”

“Waaaaah!” Still screaming, tears rolled down Zaza’s cheeks. Crying like a baby, her screams got louder until they started rattling the glass.

“C-Calm down, Zaza. As Blut said, it was unavoidable,” said the duke.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Neither the duke nor Father Blutgang succeeded in soothing her. Unable to accept that her armor had been destroyed, Zaza fell over and sobbed, Yoto still holding on to her arm.

“It must be quite the shock,” said the maid.

“Well, the Eight Flowers’ armor gettin’ destroyed is unprecedented. She probably thinks all her dreams have been crushed.” Father Blutgang turned to the duke. “Think you can repair it, Duke?”

“Hah! I thought you’d never ask. It seems to be of the same structure as magic armor, so it should be doable.”

“Then please fix it. I’m beggin’ you.” Father Blutgang apologetically bowed to the duke and Yoto.

The duke smiled at the crumpled armor. “Very well. I’ll fix it up as good as new. You don’t come across fine works like this too often. I’m too old to be getting so excited.”

“Nothin’ to worry about, then. Hey, Zaza, you thank him too. The duke here’s also a blacksmith. He says he can fix it.”

“Really?! Thank you so much!” Tears were still streaming out of Zaza’s eyes. Yoto wiped Zaza’s face with a handkerchief, unable to bear the mess any longer.



As the village's only bar, the Chimera Tavern was always busy, and today was no exception. Zaza's stomach had growled the moment she finally stopped crying, so the duke and the others went to the tavern for dinner.

After the back-and-forth with Meikris, the villagers would obviously want to know how Zaza had gotten cursed. However, with the armor destroyed, the curse's power had dissipated, making it difficult to determine its origin. Meaning they had to come up with a lie.

"Dah hah hah hah hah! You ate mushrooms growing in an ancient mausoleum?! You know you're not supposed to eat that stuff! Dah hah hah hah hah hah!"

For the time being, they went with her having eaten something she wasn't supposed to, which was extremely amusing to the heroes who had made their names as adventurers. Judging by their reactions, it was quite the common story among beginners. In fact, it was the most common way to be cursed.

"I-I'm ashamed. Sorry for the trouble I caused..." Zaza looked dejected, so the other villagers offered her some words of consolation.

"You look smart, but you're surprisingly careless!"

"You learned a good lesson. I had something similar happen to me once!"

"Don't worry about it! Guess even monks can't beat curses!"

"Go on, eat up!"

The villagers opened themselves up to her and treated her to a meal. Zaza felt guilty for lying to them. "Teacher..."

"It's fine. Just a little white lie." Father Blutgang chastised her softly, since she was sulking.

"Indeed. Sometimes underhanded means are necessary. It's my treat, so eat up," said the duke. "The food here is excellent."

"Thank you..." Zaza muttered.

"What's with you? Why'd you turn meek and quiet all of a sudden?" asked

Father Blutgang.

Zaza hugged her legs to her chest. “Because! Nobody told me the Sacred Black Sword was here!”

The duke and Yoto had revealed their identities on the way to the tavern, and Zaza had been so shocked she completely forgot about her armor and prostrated herself before them. The *Song of Bilegga*, which described the hero’s battle against the Demon Lord’s army a thousand years ago, had naturally been passed down on Mt. Eirimt as well. She never would have imagined the legendary figure who had given a demonic armament to the founder was friends with her teacher.

Zaza turned to Yoto. “And you’re really the demonic sword, not a goddess? But you’re so cute.”

“It’s true. Of course, now I’m just a maid,” Yoto replied.

“Not a goddess...”

“You really can’t let that go, can you? Though I can’t say I mind.” Yoto was sitting on the duke’s lap, her cowlick happily bouncing and hitting his beard.

“Here, I steamed up those gold trout you guys caught.” Meikris brought over a large plate piled high with steamed golden fish. The duke and the others had given them to her as an apology.

“Wow! Gold trout! We only get to eat them on special occasions!” said Zaza.

“Eat up. It’ll send that curse packing,” said Meikris, placing a special helping of beef stew in front of Yoto, making the maid’s eyes sparkle just like Zaza’s. Yoto clapped her hands together, then brought her spoon to her mouth with such fervor she seemed possessed.

“It’s delicious!” Zaza said happily. “There’s so much meat, and it’s so tender! I’ve never eaten anything like this!”

“Your beef stew is the best, Meikris!” said Yoto.

Meikris patted them on the head and shot Father Blutgang a knowing wink, laughing as she headed back to the kitchen. “She definitely knows it’s a lie,” Father Blutgang muttered to the duke. “Wonder if we made her worry.”

“She laughed it off so the other villagers would be at ease. Now, Zaza, make sure you chew your food. It’s not going anywhere,” said the duke.

“Kay. It’s jusht sho good!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. Eat slower,” Father Blutgang said.

Zaza nodded her head, taking time to chew her food. However, she bit off too much, and when it came time to swallow, it got stuck and she had to pound her chest and wash it down with water. “Ahh, I feel alive again. I can finally relax.”

“That’s good to hear,” said the duke.

“But it was still a shock to see the Balsam Phoenix armor like that. The head monk told me multiple times not to break it.”

“What’s done is done, so don’t sweat it,” Father Blutgang said, waving off her concern. “Hey Duke, mind lettin’ Zaza stay in town until her armor is fixed?” asked Father Blutgang. “She’d probably be expelled if she went back to Mt. Eirimt now. Best to keep the armor getting destroyed a secret.”

“That’s perfectly fine.” The duke nodded. “The other villagers have accepted her. Zaza is our guest now. Please, enjoy yourself, Zaza. I trust there are no objections?” The villagers all raised their mugs in response to the duke’s question.

Their kindness made Zaza curl up even tighter. “I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality. You’re even fixing my armor.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s been a while since I worked on such a masterpiece. I’m quite excited.” The duke laughed as a hand reached out from beneath his face and lightly slapped him on the cheek. “What is it, Yoto?”

“Make sure you actually return it to normal. I know how you are. You altered the royal family’s sword without permission last time.”

“N-No need to worry. I’ve reflected on my actions. I promise to restore it exactly as it was, but there *is* something I’m curious about.” The duke looked around, then motioned for Father Blutgang and Zaza to come closer as he spoke in a hushed voice. “It may be gone now, but I’m concerned as to what exactly that curse was.”

“Oh, right.” Father Blutgang leaned back in his chair and looked into his mug. “It’s odd that the armor got cursed in the first place. It’s sacred armor. You didn’t *actually* eat somethin’ weird, did you, Zaza?”

“Rude. I learned what is and isn’t edible at the temple, and I wouldn’t go near any place that seemed evil.” Though she had a tendency to lose herself when it came to love, Zaza otherwise wasn’t the type of girl to make such mistakes. The villagers hadn’t been entirely wrong when they’d said she looked smart.

Monks were about more than just brute strength. Managing their techniques as they fought required a great deal of concentration. Zaza had read the founder’s teachings so thoroughly she could recite them from memory, and in mastering her monk techniques, she had received the same level of education one would get from a magic academy. She even had a decent number of survival skills, as she had said.

“Was it really even cursed? That armor has the founder’s power inside it, Teacher. It shouldn’t be possible.”

“I know that. That’s why I’m wonderin’ if it could be somethin’ else. Maybe you really did eat somethin’ weird without knowin’ it.”

The duke gave a wry smile. It would be quite ironic if the lie they made up on the spot turned out to be true. According to Father Blutgang and Zaza, the armor had some sort of holy protection. It had belonged to the founder of Mt. Eirimt, so it should have been able to repel any run-of-the-mill curse. Monks were still clergy, and they lived in temples fortified by evil-repelling barriers, so their resistance to curses should have been above average.

“Enough of this! You’re the one who broke my armor, Teacher!” Zaza shouted.

“Hah hah hah,” the duke laughed. “I can tell you’re a smart girl, Zaza, so I was just curious. If you can’t think of any possibilities, then that’s all right. Once a curse has been removed it won’t come back. When I fix up your armor, you can return to the temple and they’ll be none the wiser.”

“Thanks, Duke! Now I just need Teacher’s armor and everything will be perfect!”

“Not gonna happen,” Father Blutgang said flatly.

“Why not?! You broke mine!”

“That has nothin’ to do with this. Give up already.”

Father Blutgang and Zaza repeated their earlier interaction as the duke watched with a smile, patting Yoto’s head and sipping from his mug.

Chapter 3

The duke was overjoyed. The armor was so high quality that he lost track of time.

“Are you excited, Master?” asked Yoto the next morning.

“Can you tell? No matter how old I get, I always enjoy working on new pieces of armor.” The duke had an early breakfast and headed over to his smithy with a skip in his step.

Zaza’s broken breastplate was on his workbench. It was called the Balsam Phoenix armor, but now it was nothing more than a mangled piece of scrap iron. Given the choice between fixing it and buying a new one, it would have been far better to simply buy a new one, even if it was expensive—that was how badly it had been mangled.

Next to it was a beautiful, olive-green wrapping cloth with a scrollwork pattern the duke had received from Father Blutgang the day before. Unfolding it, he found another breastplate, about one size larger than Zaza’s. The basic design was the same, but this one depicted a dragon flying above clouds.

“This is magnificent. I simply borrowed it for reference, but my word.” The breastplate was impressive enough to make even the duke sing its praises. He could see his reflection in the black iron like a mirror. It had likely barely ever been worn—it showed no sign of deterioration. The duke contemplated picking it up and getting a closer look, but he hesitated. It was so well-made that even the engravings and clasps were like works of art.

“Take a look at this, Yoto. It’s incredible.” The duke got no reply. “Yoto?” Normally she would have been watching nearby, yet she was nowhere to be found. Looking around the smithy, the duke found her peering at him from the entrance, her brow furrowed. “What’s the matter, Yoto? Why are you so far away?”

“I still don’t feel comfortable near that thing. Maybe it’s lingering traces of the curse from yesterday. Maybe it’s contaminated.” Yoto stared at the workbench.

“Hmm? I don’t feel a thing.”

“Regardless, I’d rather not come inside the smithy right now. And make sure you wash your hands well before coming back inside the house,” Yoto said before returning to the house herself.

“Lingering traces? Hmm, I don’t see anything on Zaza’s armor.” The duke picked up the breastplate and looked at it long and hard, tilting his head in confusion. It had become an ordinary piece of scrap iron. He couldn’t even feel any sacred power in it, let alone a curse. “Well, Yoto is a bit of a neat freak. I suppose these things happen.”

“Good morning!” A loud voice echoed through the smithy, and the duke found Zaza standing at the entrance in a monk uniform. “Pardon the intrusion.” Zaza stepped inside and began curiously looking around.

“Oh, Zaza. Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“I slept great! It was my first time sleeping in a church. Thank you for letting me stay in the village despite all the trouble I caused.” Zaza was energetic, but she still remembered to be polite. The duke smiled. Perhaps that was just how monks were. “I thought I’d go around today and do some volunteer work. Is there anything I can help you with, Duke?”

“That’s the spirit. I was planning on fixing your armor today.”

“Wow, already?! Thank you so much!” She spotted the other breastplate on his workbench. “Is that Teacher’s armor there?”

“Indeed. I’m borrowing it for reference, but it’s so superb I’m hesitant to even touch it.”

“Teacher wouldn’t even show it to me!”

“Don’t say that. Blut recognizes how much you’ve grown. I doubt he’s serious about keeping the armor from you.” It was just a feeling, but the duke truly believed it. The look he’d seen on Blutgang’s face yesterday had been that of a father. Though he wouldn’t admit it, he was surely proud of her progress. “He’s

just a little awkward when it comes to that sort of thing. I suspect he'll change his mind."

Zaza's face lit up and broke out into a big smile. "Really?!"

Seeing her excitement got the duke fired up to repair her armor. "Now, volunteer work, you said? In that case, why don't you have Yoto show you around the village? Hey, Yoto!"

Yoto ran over and poked her head through the entrance. It seemed she really was against getting any closer. "What is it, Master?"

"Zaza wants to go around and see if there's any work she can help with. I'm sure there's somebody in the village who could use a hand. Go with her."

"Yes, my master." Yoto beckoned to Zaza, who cheerfully thanked the duke and left the smithy. After she came out of the smithy, Yoto gave Zaza a handkerchief. "You're not allowed to hold my hand until you wipe your hands off." Confused, Zaza did as she was told and nodded. "This way," she said, taking Zaza's hand.

After watching the two disappear around the corner, the duke put on his work apron and thick leather gloves. Pulling a magnifying glass out of his pocket, he drew a magic circle with his finger and tapped on the frame. Glowing letters then appeared on the other side of the lens.

"Ah, so the black iron was, in fact, adamantite. And there's mithril ore mixed in as well. Its mana conductivity must be quite high." Alongside orichalconea, adamantite was one of the rarest ores in the world. Most legendary weapons and armor were made from at least one of those two metals.

"My word, look at this layering. I can tell the creator poured their soul into their hammer when making it, over and over again. They even chanted a ritual to maintain the mithril's purity throughout the process. I'm amazed." The duke was greatly impressed. Peering through his magnifying glass, he saw between thirty and forty thousand layers of metal. The duke had tempered metal before himself, but this went beyond devotion to the craft and approached fanaticism.

At any rate, it was an impressive piece—not only as armor, but as a work of art as well. "I get the gist of how it was made now. This is definitely going to

require the dimensional furnace. Now, the ritual was— Ah, no. That won't do."

After flipping the armor over, the duke sighed. The underside of the armor had some sort of spell written on it in the strange characters used by monks, and it was completely crushed where Father Blutgang had hit it. The duke picked up Father Blutgang's armor for comparison and looked at it closely. "It's difficult to read, but far from impossible. At least it's much easier than deciphering ancient texts."

The duke remembered a time when he was young. Before he had become a duke and before the Demon Lord had become the Demon Lord, they'd read a nearly undecipherable grimoire together. It was slight, but even a thousand years later, he still had a lingering attachment to the memory.

"Hah hah. It's all in the past now. If this brings back fond memories, then so be it." The duke fixed Father Blutgang's armor in place, then took off his gloves and pulled a parchment scroll and a decoration quill pen and ink from the drawer of his workbench. "When it comes to analyzing spells, nothing beats a good old quill and ink."

The duke became absorbed in reading through the spell and copying the characters onto the parchment. Around the halfway point, he looked over at the entrance and saw the children who had been playing in the yard peeking inside the smithy.

"Duke, it's lunchtime!"

"Yoto left a sandwich for you!"

"Let's eat together!"

The duke looked outside in surprise and found the sun already high overhead. "When did that happen? I really lost track of time."

The duke scratched his head. He had a habit of getting lost in his work, but he hadn't expected to get quite so carried away. Putting his quill down on his workbench, he stepped outside and stretched, spreading his wings wide. He patted the children clinging to his wings and tail and headed to the well to wash his hands.

After taking the sandwiches from the basket left on the wooden deck, the

duke and the children all clapped their hands together. “Thank you for the food.”

When he took a bite, meat juices spread through his mouth. Apparently Yoto had added thick strips of bacon to their sandwiches. The duke’s was covered in mustard, giving it a delightful sour taste. The bright sun warmed his skin. He was doing work he enjoyed, and was surrounded by happy children. Just as he was thinking how lucky he was while watching Mill lick sauce off her hand, her tail stood straight up.

“Meow? Meow, meow, meow?! Duke! Over there! It’s an emergency!” The cat girl tugged on his sleeve.

Turning around in surprise, the duke saw purple smoke rising out of the smithy. “Whoa?! What’s going on?!”

“Meow! It’s a fire!”

“Duke, I’m scared! What’s that smoke? Is that a skeleton?” The smoke indeed seemed to take the form of a screaming skull.

The duke was stunned. He hadn’t even lit the furnace, so where could the smoke be coming from? Telling the children to stay away, he cast a Kon Shield around himself and entered the smithy. “It’s not hot. Does that mean nothing is burning?”

Pushing his way through the smoke, the duke arrived at his workbench. There was a pale blue fire at the end of his quill where it was touching Father Blutgang’s Bellflower Dragon armor. He picked up the quill, but he felt no heat coming from it despite the flame gradually growing larger.

The duke panicked and blew on it like he was trying to extinguish a candle. He was so flustered that he accidentally infused his breath with wind magic, and by the third puff, all the tools on the shelf opposite him had been destroyed by the wind and scattered around the smithy. However, he did succeed in blowing out the blue flames, and the smoke subsided.

The duke was relieved to see that the armor was unharmed by the mana-filled wind. The Eight Flowers’ armor was certainly resilient. The duke stepped outside to check on the children “That was a shock. Is everyone all right?”

The children raised their hands at the edge of the yard in response. “We’re okay!”

“Good. Now, I know it’s a little early, but I think you all should head home for the day.” The duke snapped his fingers and a basket of sweets appeared in front of the children. “I’m sorry for frightening you. Take whatever you like.” The children’s fear melted away as they each took something and said goodbye to the duke.

After he saw them off, the duke returned to his smithy. He tried touching Zaza’s armor with his quill as a test, but there was no response. That was only natural given that Father Blutgang had reduced it to scrap.

Then he hesitantly brought the quill up to Father Blutgang’s armor, and once again it began to catch fire, purple smoke rising out of it. It resembled the miasma that had surrounded Zaza. “This quill is a harpy feather. It’s clearly acting as a catalyst, but what does it mean? Is Blut’s armor cursed as well?”

The duke shivered. If he or Father Blutgang had put it on, they might well have been cursed like Zaza. Zaza could have picked up the curse somewhere along her journey, but how could Father Blutgang’s armor have gotten cursed? The duke was perplexed. “Is it contagious? No, it can’t be. Never in my two thousand years have I heard of a contagious curse.”

Even if it were, the only connection between the two breastplates was that they were both Eight Flowers’ armor and they originated from the same place. It was too flimsy a basis to conclude that the curse was contagious. “Perhaps there’s a curse user somewhere? No, that’s not realistic either. Nobody would be able to place a curse without Yoto or Blut noticing.”

Yoto had surrounded the village with a kilometer-wide ward in all directions. She would instantly detect any malicious magic. And even if someone had slipped through, the armor had been in Father Blutgang’s possession. It wasn’t realistic that somebody would find a time when he was away, search his belongings, curse the armor, and then get out without a single soul noticing. Not in Montt Village.

“This is beyond me. I should consult an expert.”



“Beats me.”

“No clue.”

“What even is this?”

The fairies tilted their heads in confusion. They had bodies the size of children's, with sparkling jade and gold wings on their backs and flaming red hair. Their faces were so perfect they were almost doll-like. Fairies lived in elven forests inhabited by mythical creatures and had an eye for identifying rare items.

The duke had come to Fairy Equipment, the only weapon and armor shop in the village. There were surprisingly many benefits to selling equipment in such a remote village. The fairies focused on wholesale business, selling only to merchants who had earned their trust and people with certificates from the kingdom to buy in bulk for senior military officers.

The duke sold the weapons and armor he made in his free time to the fairies for cheap, then the fairies turned around and sold them at a high markup. They respected the duke's wish not to be named as the creator, but his creations were still quite popular.

“Even your trained eyes can't identify it?” he asked.

“Sorry, Duke.”

“I've never seen such a weird curse.”

“The curse was exorcised, but it's still inside. It's inside the exorcism. It's contradictory.”

The fairies sat on the duke's shoulders, clung to the back of his head, and hung from his wings. Perhaps because they were floating, they weighed next to nothing. “Hmm. Inside the exorcism, you say?” the duke mused.

“The curse itself is simple.”

“It's people's dark emotions. Maybe one of the deadly sins.”

“Very simple. But why is it in sacred armor?”

“Can you remove it? I'm no good at this stuff.” The duke asked, but the fairies

all shook their heads.

“Nope. It’ll just come right back.”

“It’s being continually cursed, so where’s it coming from?”

“Uncursing it would make us money, so I wish we could.”

“Hey, don’t say that!” another fairy interjected. It seemed like they heard those sorts of remarks a lot.

“You should ask Porion, Duke. She’s a curse expert!”

“The Labyrinth Witch is the number one curse user in the world. She’s basically a big bundle of curses.”

“She should know the answer. Give her a spanking if she doesn’t!”



“What is this? I’ve never seen anything like it.” Porion immediately gave up.

After leaving Fairy Equipment, the duke had headed to Porion’s workshop. It was a strange building even for Montt, and looked just like a witch’s hut. In a village of white walls and wooden pillars, hers was the only fully wooden house with round, stained glass windows.

Porion had compared Zaza’s destroyed armor to Father Blutgang’s, but before long she threw up her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

“You don’t know either?” asked the duke.

“I may not look it, but I *am* an expert,” said Porion. “I protected the royal palace from curses, but this... I think you have to ask the one who made the armor if you want to get anywhere.” Porion tried everything she could to help, pouring chemicals on the armor and casting identification magic to no avail.

“The fairies said the curse was inside an exorcism.” The duke recalled something the two monks had said at the tavern: the armor was sacred and had the founder’s power inside it. It shouldn’t have been possible for it to get cursed in the first place.

“Maybe they’re right. To be completely honest, I have no idea what the fairies mean by that.” Porion headed into the backyard, and some rustling could be

heard a moment later.

In the meantime, the duke looked around Porion's workshop. The untidy shop served as the village's pharmacy, so medicines of all sorts were lined up by the entrance. There were potions, elixirs, and other medicines that were useful both on adventures and at home. She had ointments, medicinal herbs, and even the high-quality fertilizer Mordan often took during her punishment sales. There was a glass counter in the back with magic items laid out on it, and even farther back there was a shelf with special potions she had mixed herself. Scattered in the backyard were suspicious jars and catalysts.

"Blut's not any better, but you should really clean up more, Porion."

"What's wrong with a little clutter? This is how a witch's shop is supposed to be. Ah, found it! Here, the Curse Knife!" said Porion. The knife with the very straightforward name had an ominous atmosphere about it, even in its sheath. Though it seemed to be an ordinary leather sheath, the faint expression of a person screaming seemed to be floating out of it.

"What in the world is that?! It looks like the sort of thing you would use to stab your rival in love." As though to prove his point, a strange voice could be heard coming from the knife, saying things like "How dare that woman," and "This hatred will never fade." It was without a doubt an exceedingly dangerous item.

Porion giggled as the duke recoiled in fright. "It's fine. It only has a tiny bit of cursed energy left. I won't even take it out of the sheath."

"What are you planning on doing with it?"

"Curses have progressed a lot in the past few hundred years. They're very convenient for making magic items. Curses contain powerful emotions, after all. Perfect for cutting through mana and putting it back together." She seemed to be saying they were used like a sort of glue.

Porion brought the Curse Knife up to Father Blutgang's Bellflower Dragon armor. The blade sizzled and let out a golden glow. It must have been getting purified.

"See, the armor isn't affected by other curses," said Porion.

“You don’t mean to tell me this armor is creating curses from inside it, do you?” asked the duke.

“Not possible. Curses are people’s thoughts manifested into calamities, though it’s possible monsters or dragons might be able to create them too.”

The duke had thought there might have been some technological advancement with the use of curses over the last millennium, but the curses themselves seemed to have fundamentally remained the same.

“Hmm... I suppose Zaza must have gotten cursed, then it got passed to her armor, then it got passed to Father Blutgang. She seems like one to attract the unsavory type, doesn’t she?” said Porion.

Although the duke wasn’t entirely certain what Porion was getting at, he assumed it was something along the lines of a complex love affair or unrequited love. “Well, Zaza certainly seems to be head over heels for someone.”

“Hmm, close, but that’s not quite what I meant.” Porion giggled, leaving the duke with those ambiguous words. “Unfortunately, that’s all I can say.” It wasn’t clear if she was just pretending or if she had actually figured something out.

The duke folded his arms and groaned. If she couldn’t tell him about the curse, there was nobody on the continent of Malbenita, let alone in the Kingdom of Bilegga, who could give him anything precise. It was possible Zaza had eaten something and ended up cursed as a result, but that didn’t add up with the fact that Yoto had been uncomfortable around the armor rather than Zaza herself.

“Hmm. I have the feeling this is going to be quite troublesome,” the duke muttered.

Suddenly the front door slammed open. “I heard everything!”

“Hey, who is that? Be careful! The fitting on that door isn’t very good!” shouted Porion.

“It’s you...” There was only one person the duke would refer to with such displeasure in his voice. “Gilmeus!”

“Hello, my friend! You seem to be in a pickl— Baaaaaaah!” Gilmeus abruptly collapsed to the floor. “My body’s so heavy! This is Gravitea!”

“What are you doing now? You just got here,” said the duke.

“Oh, did you trigger the crime prevention device?” Porion stepped over Gilmeus and examined the door, then burst into laughter. “The doorknob came loose, so it determined that something had been broken. If you’d just asked ‘May I come in?’ before barging inside, it would have acknowledged you as a guest. Unlucky for you.”

“Gaaaaaaah!” Gilmeus continued to shout.

“Is this also a curse, Porion?” the duke asked.

“It sure is. Whenever a house gets burglarized, lingering emotions dwell in the doorknob. Utilize them properly, and this is what you get.”

“Make it stop before I’m crushed!” Gilmeus pleaded. Porion poked the doorknob with her finger, and the magic affecting Gilmeus immediately stopped.

Gilmeus panted and picked himself up. “That was awful. Can’t say I expected the doorknob to be a cursed item. Though I suppose I should have, given it’s the Labyrinth Witch I’m dealing with.”

“You did it to yourself. Now, why did you suddenly barge in?” asked Porion. “Yours isn’t a face I see very often.”

“Your timing is awfully convenient. I don’t suppose this curse is your doing, is it?” the duke asked accusingly.

“Certainly not, my friend. It’s pure coincidence. I swear on the kingdom.” Gilmeus brushed off his jacket and took a breath.

“Why are you even here? You’re a best-selling author after publishing your book on Albrea, aren’t you?” said the duke.

“That’s past glory. I left the capital and came here in search of new material, only to find the priest’s favorite disciple on a rampage. Her armor had been cursed, and much to everyone’s surprise, so had the priest’s. The experts are at a loss, and you’ve hit a dead end. Thus, I determined it was my time to shine, so

here I am.”

The duke hung his head. Gilmeus had seen everything, and now one problem had led to another. All the duke could do was groan and prepare for the worst.

Seemingly unaware of what the duke was thinking, Gilmeus chuckled and continued. “Don’t look so glum—you’ll make me sad too. What do you say, how about you leave this one to me?”

“*You?*” The duke sounded doubtful.

“Do you remember what the Labyrinth Witch said? The only way we’re getting answers is to ask the one who made the armor. So I’ll head to Mt. Eirimt myself and do just that!”

Chapter 4

The Balsam Phoenix went pale. How did someone know their secret?

Yoto was at Ogre Produce in the village square. She was looking up at a young orc man standing on the roof—the shop’s owner, Mordan. Wearing his usual straw hat, he was the very picture of a farmer. His body was slender by orc standards, and his muscles toned. He had a country twang to his voice, and was a good-natured young man, albeit one who was extremely passionate about vegetables. “Preciate it! I always screw somethin’ up when I try to do this by myself.”

“Don’t worry about it! Volunteer service is my duty as a monk!” Zaza poked her head out over the roof. In her hands were a plank of wood and a hammer. When she crouched back down, a satisfying pounding began ringing out through the square.

Accompanied by Yoto, Zaza had gone out to perform volunteer work in the village. At first the villagers were reluctant to allow a guest to do their work for them, but once Zaza explained that volunteering was a part of her duty, they gave her odd jobs and chores that she completed quickly and efficiently.

She weeded gardens, chopped wood, fixed fences, and even cleaned mud from the roadside drains. Even when she was given an optional task, she still completed it effortlessly. Yoto had only watched at first, but eventually her competitive spirit got the best of her and the two started working together. After finishing the lunch they’d been given for their trouble, they began fixing the leak in Mordan’s roof.

“I can’t thank you enough. I was tryin’ to make do with my earth magic, but the leak just wouldn’t stop,” said Mordan.

“So you can even fix roofs. I’ll have to reevaluate you, Zaza,” Yoto said playfully.

“I did it a lot at the temple. The monks are all about self-sufficiency. All right, done!” Zaza leaped off the second-story roof, landing softly on the ground like it was nothing. She then did some stretches and dusted herself off.

“It’s real nice havin’ a monk’s help. Hold on just a sec.” Mordan went inside his shop to get something. The sound of a kitchen knife could be heard for a while, and he came out with a plate of assorted pickled vegetables, from roots to leaves. “Father Blutgang always buys these as snacks to go with his drinks. Please, take some.”

The two girls stabbed the vegetables with toothpicks and plopped them into their mouths. Zaza’s face instantly lit up. “It’s so good! What is this?! It tastes like home, but even better!” With each crunch, the salty taste of the vegetable spread through her mouth. It was a familiar taste, but enhanced and elevated.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” asked Yoto. “Mordan’s vegetables are the best.”

“Pickling vegetables is hard. How did you get so good at it? There’s barely anybody back home who can do it this well,” said Zaza.

“I hear the soil on Mt. Eirimt is miraculous. The ground there is full of mana, so I tried to recreate it in an experimental field. Seems like it worked,” Mordan said with a carefree smile.

“Wow, you must really like to research. Why do you know about Mt. Eirimt’s soil? Have you been nearby?”

“On a trip long ago. Y’all get power from Mt. Eirimt, don’t you? I borrowed some of the dirt to see if I could get the vegetables to absorb some of the mountain’s power, but it didn’t work. Guess only the monks who train there can access that power.” Mordan chuckled and Yoto nodded her head, tossing another vegetable into her mouth. Zaza, however, completely froze.

“Zaza? What’s the matter?” asked Yoto.

“Did somethin’ taste funny? Do you not like it?” Mordan seemed concerned.

Zaza’s face went pale. “Why do you know that?”

Mordan was puzzled for a moment, then clapped his hands together. “You can tell from the flow of the mana veins. The fertility of the soil. The sound of

the trees and the grass sprouting from the ground. They all told me. And the monks themselves told me that they receive the mountain's blessing."

"N-No way! That secret is the source of our power as monks! The only ones who know are us on Mt. Eirimt and the sage who identified the earth's blessing!"

For Zaza and the other monks, their secret getting out was fatal. They preached the founder's teachings and wielded their powers for salvation. If the source of their power were seized, it would be lost to all monks in an instant.

Zaza couldn't believe that their secret had been spoken out loud so casually, with no warning, in such a remote place. She immediately put her guard up, unsure who this Mordan character was, but Yoto just laughed and patted her head. "Yoto?" she asked in confusion.

"Calm down, Zaza. Mordan is the sage you speak of."

Zaza was so stunned she dropped her toothpick. "Huh?! No, no, no, I heard the earth sage disappeared at the end of his journey. There's a record of him being invited to the temple once, then he left right after."

"Yup, that was me. The head monk invited me to do a geological survey. I was the one who set up the field at the foot of the mountain," said Mordan.

"Huuuuuuuuuh?!" Zaza cried out in astonishment, her hair standing on end. "How could you know about that field?! You can't see it from the road! Are you *actually* the sage?!"

Mordan shrugged. "I've been called one, but I'm really not that great. I just stood out a little too much on my travels. I wandered from place to place before finally settlin' here. This village is full of people who stand out just like me. I'm tired of traveling, so it's perfect!" He laughed as Zaza stared at him, still half in shock. She couldn't believe the agreeable orc youth who had just revealed their secret was actually the revered sage who had once been invited to the temple.

It was the same with the duke and Yoto. Zaza's head was full of questions. What were such amazing people doing way out in the country? They would be treated with respect in the capital, and likely even granted an audience with the king. Why had they given up that honor to live in a remote village?

Mordan just smiled at her. It wasn't clear if he had any idea what was racing through her mind. "Anyway, I'm just a farmer now. Make sure you eat a whole bunch of my vegetables while you're here."

Zaza was still in disbelief as she and Yoto left Mordan's produce shop behind. Yoto tried to bring her to the next place, but Zaza had an expression on her face like she was deep in thought. "What's the matter, Zaza? You're zoning out. Did Mordan remind you of something?"

"N-No! That's not it. Well, actually, kind of."

Yoto looked at Zaza in confusion.

"U-Umm, you and the duke are like him. Does this village have a lot of incredible people?"

"Yes. Everyone has mastered one thing or another."

Zaza crossed her arms and nodded at Yoto's words. "I was wondering what Teacher was doing here, but I think I'm starting to get it now." Something Mordan had said made her realize it.

This village is full of people who stand out just like me.

Even before she asked Yoto, Zaza had suspected the villagers weren't ordinary people. Everyone she met had traces of diligent study and training on their hands and feet. And it wasn't ordinary training—they looked like they had nearly worked themselves to death. Some were clearly strong just judging by their appearance, while others had a more subtle prowess about them. Yet each and every one had accepted Zaza with open arms and a smile. As a monk, Zaza knew that was something only the truly strong could do.

"Are you curious?" asked Yoto.

"Of course I am! I have no idea what Teacher's been doing for the past ten years. I tried asking him yesterday, but he wouldn't tell me much."

"That sounds like him. With your sudden reunion, he probably hasn't had time to sort out his feelings. I'm sure he'll tell you soon. He seems pretty happy you're here."

"Huh?! He is?!"

“I’m certain of it. Watching you two together is heartwarming. You’re like father and daughter.”

The comparison made Zaza feel a little uneasy. He was certainly a father figure for her, but it wasn’t quite the same. She wasn’t his daughter, but she didn’t want to be distant either. “You think he’ll tell me what happened?” she asked.

“Of course. But Master and I probably shouldn’t be there when he does. Our presence would make it even more embarrassing. Or rather, I would get embarrassed, so I’d prefer to not be there.”

“Huh?” Zaza wasn’t following.

“It’s nothing. Now, shall we call it a day here? You worked hard today. Good girl.” Yoto stood on her tiptoes and patted Zaza’s head.

Being patted by someone smaller than herself was an odd feeling, but Zaza didn’t mind it. It reminded her of when her teacher was still at the temple. She basked in the memories of how happy she had been to get patted as they came flooding back to her.



“I’m back...huh? What happened here?!” After dropping Zaza off at the church, Yoto returned to the smithy to check on the duke, only to find the workspace in a disastrous state. Tools were scattered and shelves had collapsed as though there had been an earthquake.

“Oh, Yoto, you’re back. Did Zaza do well?” asked the duke.

“Of course she did, I was with her. More importantly, what happened here?” The duke explained what had occurred earlier in the afternoon, leaving Yoto’s mouth agape. “Father Blutgang’s armor was cursed? Is that even possible?” Yoto put on gloves and began helping the duke clean up the mess, carrying the wreckage outside.

The duke sorted through the wreckage and lined up the tools that were still usable on the floor. “Who knows?” He shrugged as he sifted through the clutter. “I gave his armor to our resident curse expert, Porion. It’s best that it remains under the supervision of a specialist so the curse doesn’t spread any

further.”

“That’s a relief. To be honest, I haven’t wanted to come inside the smithy since this morning.”

“She agreed to take it, but Porion gave up on trying to remove the curse. Our only option is asking the creator themselves how it got cursed.”

“And that’s where Gilmeus comes in?”

The duke sighed. “It was a last resort. There’s no one better than him when it comes to investigating. He already set out, so he should arrive at Mt. Eirimt tomorrow or the day after.” No matter what was said about him, Gilmeus was still ostensibly the court bard. He had a free pass into any country to gather material, and he could take full advantage of that privilege now. That said, the monk temple isolated itself from the rest of the world, so he would still have to smooth talk his way inside.

“I understand the situation, though it seems like the issue at hand is only going to grow.”

“You think so too? I have a bad feeling about this, but we’re out of options. I’ll go tell Blut later.”

“I’m sure he’ll be shocked that his armor was cursed too. Worst-case scenario, it might have to be destroyed like Zaza’s.”

“I’d rather not do that. I don’t need any more problems popping up while I’m in the middle of repairing Zaza’s armor.” The duke glanced over at his furnace. The inside was glowing and the roar of the fire could be heard, but the flames were blue rather than red. In the center was a gaping hole.

“You’re using the dimensional furnace again?”

“I wanted to conduct some research while I made the repairs, but no such luck. I may mess up the ritual if I use magic to assess it.”

Yoto peeked into the opening in the furnace and found an uncanny sight within. Several copies of the duke were sitting side by side in multiple worlds, all working at the same time. “It always reminds me of a kaleidoscope.”

“It should be finished soon, but...” Making Yoto step aside, the duke put on

his blacksmith mitts and thrust his arms inside the furnace. Zaza's armor emerged shiny and polished, seemingly as good as new. Even the cloud pattern and the ritual engraved on the inside were perfect. However, the duke looked at his work and sighed. "As I thought. We have another mystery on our hands."

"But it looks complete to me," said Yoto, puzzled by his reaction.

"Here, try holding it."

Yoto accepted the armor and immediately understood. "Its power is gone. It's just an ordinary, well-made breastplate now."

"Indeed. There isn't a trace of sacred power left within the armor. Naturally there's no trace of the curse either. I tried to accurately recreate the ritual written on the inside, but perhaps I messed something up." The duke tilted his head, and Yoto, also at a loss, did the same. "How did this armor get its magical power in the first place? There's no cardinal direction written, nor is there any mention of a star to link it to. Hmm... If it comes down to it, perhaps I should fill a gem with my own mana and use that to power the armor."

"No, Master. Are you trying to 'improve' it, like you did with Albrea's sword?"

"I'm only kidding. At any rate, I suspect this question will also be answered by whatever information Gilmeus brings back."

"Then let's just wait for him to return. How about you take the rest of the day off, Master? Your eyes are bloodshot."

The duke looked into the mirror Yoto provided him and saw reddened eyes staring back at him. Perhaps it was the result of overusing the dimensional furnace, or perhaps he was just tired from all the work he had been doing. "You're right. I suppose I got carried away."

"Oh, Master. I'll cook you up some more meat. I got an excellent cut for helping clean Sagulga's butcher shop."

The duke immediately perked up upon hearing the word "meat." By the time he finished cleaning up, the sun had set and the moon had begun to rise. The remains of the broken shelves had been gathered outside and covered with a sheet, and the dimensional furnace had been shut. Hanging a "closed" sign on the door to the smithy, the duke returned to his residence.



Gilmeus opened a door that led to a back alley in the capital of the Kingdom of Bilegga. “My goodness, the Labyrinth Witch certainly is impressive. I didn’t expect her to have a teleportation circle set up in the capital of all places. It’s definitely illegal, but I’ll keep it to myself since it came in handy.” The bard looked up and saw “Labyrinth Magic Item Shop” written on a sign above the door. He was in Porion’s shop’s second location, though it barely functioned as a store. It mainly served as a front for the teleportation circle that allowed her to travel to and from the city. “She said she’s going to start charging me next time. I’m sure it’ll be exorbitantly expensive, but I’ll just send the bill to the kingdom.”

Gilmeus waltzed right into the royal knight headquarters. Citizens normally weren’t allowed through its fortress’s gates, but he was the court bard—he had permission to go wherever he pleased. Strolling through like he owned the place, he asked if the commander was in and was guided to the wyvern stables in the courtyard. “It’s been a while, Lady Albrea. Pardon the sudden request, but may I borrow a wyvern?”

“What are you plotting this time, bard?” A female knight turned to glare daggers at Gilmeus. She had beautiful golden hair that shone in the western sun and had been petting one of the wyverns before he came over. Clad in silver armor with the upgraded royal sword Carnwennan at her hip, she was the commander of the royal knights—Demonic Armament Knight Albrea.

“No need to be so hostile. I’m doing my utmost for the people, the kingdom, and even the world.”

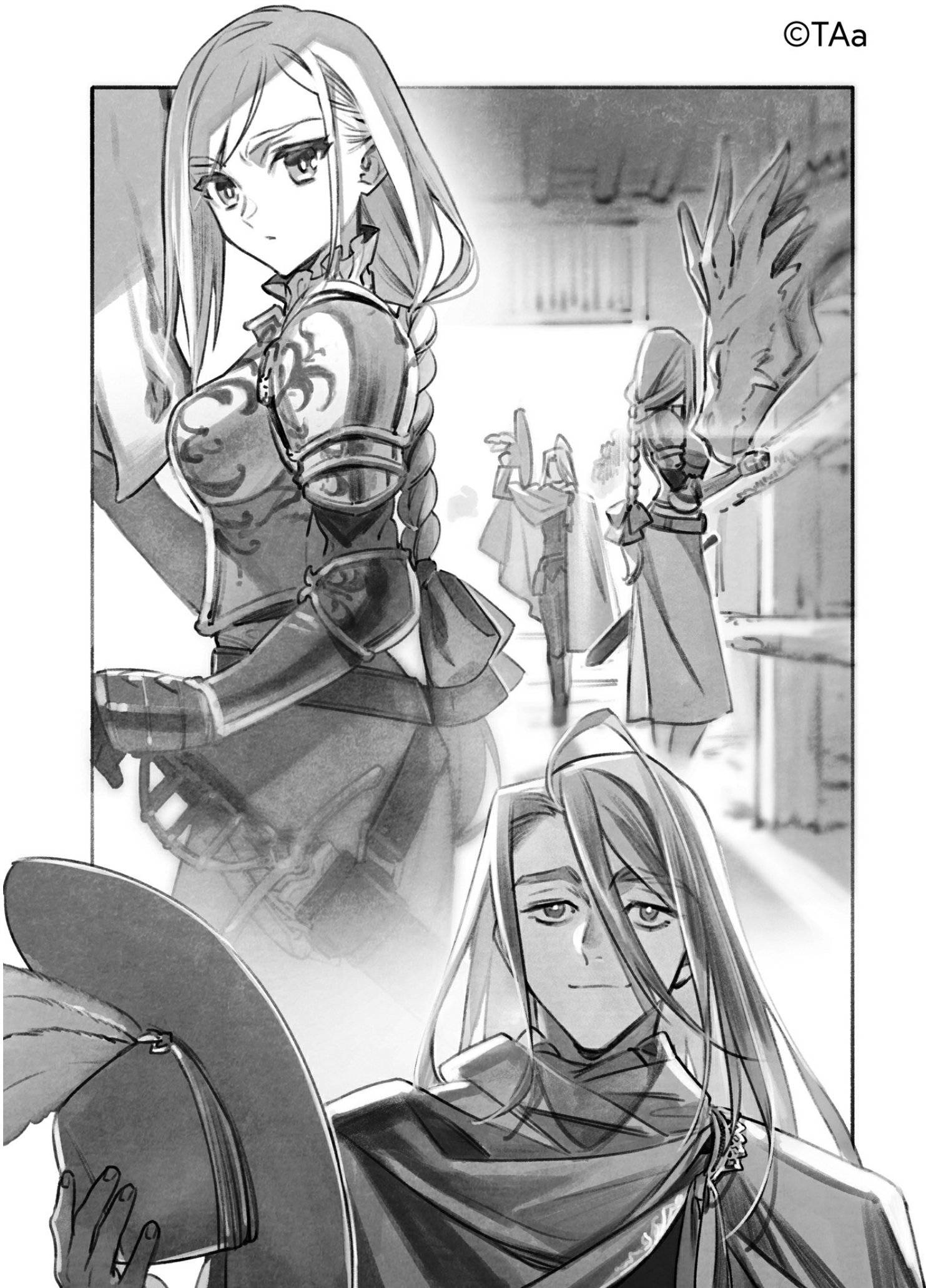
“I acknowledge that, but that doesn’t mean I have to like how you go about it.”

A few months ago, she would have called his methods dishonorable and an affront to the very concept of chivalry, but now she was actually evaluating people with nuance instead of immediately rushing to judgment. *She’s come a long way*, Gilmeus thought to himself.

“You just thought something rude about me, didn’t you?” Albrea said accusingly.

“Certainly not. I was simply happy.”

“Huh? Well, whatever. Why do you want a wyvern? I don’t mind lending you one, but you should know they’re just as strict as I am. I don’t care how smooth a talker you are, if you start plotting something malicious, they’ll bite your head off.” The wyvern she had been petting growled at him to accentuate her point.



Gilmeus nervously chuckled and cleared his throat. “Let me just be honest, then. I need to make an urgent trip to Mt. Eirimt. Getting there with wind magic would be tricky, even for me, and going by horse would take several days.”

“Is your business that pressing?”

“It’s actually the duke’s business, not my own,” said Gilmeus, handing Albrea a letter from the duke.

“This better not be fake,” Albrea replied as she accepted the letter and looked inside. “Egmort.”

A demon boy popped out from behind Albrea. “No worries, Master. This is definitely Papa’s handwriting. You really don’t trust Gilmeus, do you?” He was the duke’s son and the demonic armament Albrea had made a pact with—Egmort, the Fortress of Seclusion. “What did Papa write?”

“Apparently he’s stumped, so he wants Gilmeus to go to Mt. Eirimt.”

“It’s related to the monks? Didn’t we just get a weird report about them from the scouting party?” asked Egmort. Gilmeus raised an eyebrow in response.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Albrea. “When the merchant with exclusive rights to trade with the monks went with an envoy from the kingdom, the monks wouldn’t open the gates. The envoy said they heard strange voices on the other side. Good job remembering that, Egmort.” Albrea patted Egmort on the head, and he responded by wrapping his hands around her waist in an embrace.

“I’m glad to see you two have grown so intimate,” said Gilmeus. “Taming one of the demonic armaments is an impressive feat, Lady Albrea.”

“He’s all over me now. He even stopped going to the red-light district. He’s thoughtful, smart, and always makes sure to protect me.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but may I ask if you’ve taken any measures regarding Mt. Eirimt?”

“No, the monks generally live in isolation, so I’ve been hesitant to send any forces lest we lose their trust and they cut us off. Would you mind checking things out? I’ll consider us even for the trouble you caused me.”

Gilmeus stared at her in astonishment. The old Albrea would have forgone

scouting altogether and rushed straight to battle, regardless of how disastrous it might have been. She wouldn't have even considered asking someone else to do it. Perhaps becoming commander had made her grow as well.

"What are you grinning at?" she asked. "Are you going or not?"

"Ah, my apologies. I certainly am. Please, lend me a wyvern."

"Good. You have permission to take one, but do not under any circumstances allow it to get hurt. Got it?" Albrea handed Gilmeus the reins of a bright blue wyvern. It had a name tag with "Benjamin" written on it hanging from its neck. Traditionally, wyverns had only been called by numbers, but Albrea had felt sorry for them and named them all.

"I appreciate it. I'm sure the duke would be happy to see how much you've grown."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Now get a move on."

Before Gilmeus left, Egmort mumbled something that confused him. "The monks' mountain, huh? Why's Gilmeus going all the way there when there's someone who knows everything about them in the village?" He was presumably referring to Father Blutgang, but since he didn't give any details, Gilmeus assumed it wasn't important and climbed awkwardly onto the wyvern's back.



That night, a man camped alone on a dry riverbank somewhere in the Kingdom of Bilegga. He was bald, dressed in a dark blue martial arts uniform, and wearing a pure white breastplate. The man seemed slight, but the wind blowing into his sleeves revealed lean, powerful muscles.

He sat before a fire, meditating with his eyes closed. After a short while, he heard the sound of clanging metal. Given the number of footsteps, he estimated it to be around five or six people. They were all armed with machetes or axes, which at this time of night, could only mean one thing—bandits. The meditating monk slowly opened his eyes. They were hollow and had lost all their luster.

"Hey, monk." A large man with a protruding gut and a deep voice was standing in front of the fire. He must have been their leader. The (most likely

stolen) goods adorning his chest and belt jingled discordantly. “Don’t you know you’re supposed to make fires underneath big trees? Otherwise you might attract unwanted attention.”

The monk heard coarse voices all around him. They had already drawn their weapons.

“Since you didn’t know any better, we’ll at least spare your life. Now hand over that fancy breastplate,” the leader said.

However, the monk didn’t move, or even so much as make a sound. He didn’t react at all.

“He must be scared outta his mind,” the bandit leader sneered.

The monk’s dim eyes remained open. “Where is Zaza?”

The moment the bandit leader pointed his sword at the monk, something strange happened. “What the hell?! My sword!” Pulling his blade back in a panic, the large man looked at it and grimaced. It had been bent. “What did you just do? Was that magic?” The monk didn’t respond. “Forget it. Attack him all at once!”

At their leader’s command, the bandits who had surrounded the monk swung the blades of their crude weapons at him. Just as it seemed like his neatly shaved head was going to be crushed like a pomegranate, the weapons stopped before they made contact. With a terrible creaking sound, they were forcibly bent and destroyed.

“B-Boss!” one of the underlings cried out.

“Raaaaaah!” The bandit leader swung his blade downwards, trying to cleave the monk’s skull in half to no avail. The sword shattered to pieces, the shrapnel piercing his underlings. “What the hell is this guy?!”

Ignoring the stunned bandits, the monk stood up. “Where is Zaza?”

“I-I don’t know! Wh-What’s wrong with your face?!” The man panicked as the monk’s face was quickly covered by a smooth, black film.

The monk was entirely covered in darkness, becoming a silhouette of his former self. He was pitch black in defiance of the moonlit night, his white

breastplate shining even brighter from the contrast. Miasma oozed out of the monk, swirling around him in the shape of a screaming skull.

“Wh-What the hell are you?! A devil?!”

“Nay. I am an envoy of salvation,” the monk said flatly. “And you are evil. Now, fall silent. Forever.”

The men surrounding the monk were all blown away in an instant. Some had their skulls split open, some had their throats torn out by a kick, and others had been pierced through the chest by his bare hands. They had all died on the spot.

“Wh-What are you?!”

The monk stood before the bandit leader, emitting a light like a halo. Perhaps the bandits had picked a fight with a god. The last man was struck with a technique that killed him instantly.

“God help me,” the bandit leader muttered, his last words sinking into the darkness.

Chapter 5

The Balsam Phoenix finally understood. Her teacher truly was a hero.

“Wow! It looks exactly like it used to! But why hasn’t its power returned?” Zaza asked.

“We don’t know either, but rest assured, Master will get it figured out,” said Yoto.

The next morning, the duke and Yoto had come to the church to deliver Zaza’s armor. They had hoped its power might return when Zaza put it on, but alas, it was never that easy. Zaza was disappointed, but she was still happy to have the armor repaired.

“What?! Mine was cursed too?!” Father Blutgang shouted.

“Indeed. Gilmeus is headed to Mt. Eirimt as we speak to ask the armor’s creator directly.”

A short distance away from Yoto and Zaza, the duke and Father Blutgang were sitting on a bench in the church. As the duke explained yesterday’s events to the priest, Blutgang crossed his arms and groaned. “Gilmeus, huh? I just hope he doesn’t reveal too much about the mountain in his writing. Him aside, how is this even possible? I’ve had the armor stowed away since I came to the village.”

“I couldn’t say. The sacred power not returning to Zaza’s armor is also a mystery. Do you have any ideas?”

“No clue. Askin’ the blacksmiths at the temple is probably the fastest solution.” Porion had said as much as well. It was possible the breastplates were having the same issue, or that they could take precautions to prevent it from happening to them.

“All we can do is wait for Gilmeus to return. It’s not glamorous, but the situation is beyond our control now. By the way, I left your armor with Porion. Is

that all right with you?”

“Yeah, I woulda done the same thing. Thanks for the concern.”

“Think nothing of it. My job’s only half complete.”

“Teacher! Come spar with me! I feel like I’m moving way better than before!” said Zaza.

Seeing his disciple come hopping over, Father Blutgang cracked his neck and stood up. “If I have to.”

“Well, isn’t she full of energy? I’m going to look into the curse a little more. I’ll let you know if I learn anything,” said the duke.

“Thanks, Duke. I’ll treat you to some good booze next time.”

“I’m looking forward to it!” With that, the duke and Yoto left the church.

Though Father Blutgang was a little worried, there wasn’t much he could do, so he walked over and stood before the impatiently waiting Zaza. “Sorry to keep you.”

“Come on! Let’s spar! I want you to see my growth, Teacher!”

“I experienced it firsthand the day before yesterday, but all right, if you insist. Let’s see what you’ve got.” They got into position opposite each other. Father Blutgang raised his fists slightly, while Zaza extended her left hand out, her right leg bent and ready to launch her forward.

“Hiyaaaaah!” Zaza was the first to move. Her body lurched forward, but she still kept her guard up—an impressive feat, even if it was just a sparring match.

“I see why you’re a candidate to become one of the Eight Flowers.” Father Blutgang didn’t move. He waited for Zaza to get closer, raising his right fist up to his face and taking a half step back to avoid her strike.

Zaza immediately pulled back her fist, replacing it with a kick so swift it was like a blade being swung upwards. However, the priest simply craned his neck back and avoided this blow as well. Zaza turned on the spot and leaped into the air, rotating horizontally and unleashing a spinning kick with the speed of a thrusting spear the moment her back was turned. It was aimed right at Father Blutgang’s collarbone, and the priest waited until the very last second before

dodging a third time.

Landing on the ground and adjusting her footing, Zaza stepped forward and unleashed another flurry of blows. “Hiyayayayah!” It was a sudden shift from her first attacks—a more freeform style of fighting, almost like a dance.

She thrust out her fist, then promptly pulled it back, shifting her weight to her back foot and launching a light kick. When it missed, she stepped forward once again and unleashed an elbow strike. When that missed, she pivoted and delivered another kick...and so on, and so forth. Each strike was deliberate, with little break in between—not even enough time to catch her breath.

Father Blutgang was impressed. Not only had she mastered what she had been taught, she had also mixed in techniques of her own creation. “I’d say you’ve earned your chance to take the Eight Flowers’ trial.”

Zaza giggled. “Right? Haven’t I?” Despite her bashful statement, her assault didn’t relent. Anyone besides Father Blutgang would have taken her innocent smile as something to be feared.

Father Blutgang tried not to categorize his disciples as gifted or ordinary, but if nothing else, Zaza certainly had a natural talent for having fun. For her fellow disciples and rivals, that was a frightening thing. She saw intense training and the frustration of being a novice as something to be enjoyed. As a result, even when she hit a wall, she would quickly overcome it and continue to improve. That was how she could earnestly motivate herself with lofty goals like traveling the world with Alma. Maybe it was people like her who would bring salvation to the hearts of others.

“Now take a look at this!” Zaza reached down and made sure her shoes were secure, then a small explosion rang out at her feet. Her speed accelerated rapidly, and before Father Blutgang knew it, she was already in range to strike.

“Whoa!”

“Gotcha!” The priest didn’t miss a beat, putting his strength into his stomach and taking a step forward. That was all it took to throw off her attack and turn her speed against her. “Huh?!” Unable to stop herself, Zaza crashed headfirst into Father Blutgang’s abs. “Owww! My nose!” Zaza rolled on the ground in pain, her will to fight completely gone.

“I’m impressed. You’ve mastered almost all the Balsam Phoenix techniques, but your practical application might need some work.”

“You’re so childish, Teacher!” Zaza pouted. “You could at least let me land a single hit!”

“Not in a million years. There are plenty of strong people besides me out there.”

“No way, there aren’t *that* many.” Zaza counted on her fingers. “There’s the duke and Yoto, then maybe the owner of the tavern, the head monk, and the Eight Flowers. Actually, I feel like this village is full of really strong people.”

“Oh?” Father Blutgang held a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. “You noticed, huh?”

“I realized it when I was going around the village with Yoto yesterday. It was really surprising. What is this village exactly?”

“Just a village the duke built. Everyone’s got their quirks, but they’re all good people.”

“By quirks, do you mean the fact that everybody’s a master of something?”

Father Blutgang narrowed his eyes at Zaza’s words. “If you already know that much, then we can make this quick. Yeah, this village is a place renowned heroes flock to and call home. Try not to pry too much. Most people don’t like having their past dredged up.”

“Does that include you?” Zaza’s face suddenly turned serious. She looked straight at Father Blutgang, as though peering into his heart.

At a loss, he scratched his cheek and took a puff of his cigarette. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

“Teacher, I know it’s a little late, but another reason I wanted to meet you was so I could ask you something. Is this village related to why you didn’t come back to Mt. Eirimt?”

Internally Father Blutgang slumped his shoulders. He had gone to bed early yesterday to dodge the question, but there was no avoiding it now. “What will you do when you find out?”

“Am I not allowed to know?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then just tell me. This might sound dumb, but I’ve always wondered why you never came back to the temple. I think you could have if you’d wanted to.”

Father Blutgang was stumped. Was Zaza angry because he had been absent for the past decade? When he looked into her eyes, what he saw was not anger, but rather genuine curiosity. He was happy to see that, but it also made him feel somewhat distant.

He didn’t regret leaving the temple. If he had any regrets, it was only that he had left her behind. He didn’t think they would treat her poorly just because he had left, and he wasn’t the only one who cared for her, so he had been able to mask the feeling until now, but her sudden appearance had made him react immaturely for someone his age.

“You know I left the temple because I went against our doctrine, right?”

“To be honest, nobody would tell me much about it. The head monk always looks sad whenever I ask.”

Hearing that made Father Blutgang chuckle. He didn’t realize that hard-ass was capable of looking sad. “You know the monks’ doctrine, right?”

“The founder’s teachings, and the cycle of reincarnation. That all living things die and are reborn in an endless loop.”

“Right. We’re envoys of salvation. We protect the cycle from any who seek to destroy it. That means rulers and even countries if it comes to it, as I’m sure you know.”

“That hasn’t happened in hundreds of years, but I learned it occurred in the past.”

As Zaza said, the monks’ doctrine boiled down to the preservation of the cycle of reincarnation. They protected all life from those who would threaten it. That was what “salvation” meant to them. Those who sought to destroy the cycle tended to be greedy tyrants—those with little regard for life. Outsiders would deliver their pleas to the monk temple, and their tightly shut gates would open.

Ten thousand strong, the monks would strike down any enemy of the cycle.

“Natural disasters, on the other hand, do not fall into that category, no matter how many people die,” Father Blutgang said. “Things like floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes.”

“Umm, and dragons too, right? Since they’re the ultimate form of life birthed by the earth.” Zaza’s words suddenly turned hesitant, but Father Blutgang just chuckled and continued speaking.

“As you well know, I plucked out the innards of a dragon. So there you have it.”

Zaza still looked like she wanted to ask something. “Umm...”

“What? That’s all there is to it.”

“Why did you go against the doctrine? The Kingdom of Bilegga and other countries should have had dragon countermeasures. It would have been resolved within the cycle without us having to make a move, right?” Monks defended the cycle from those who would destroy it. As dragons were natural disasters, they existed within the cycle the monks sought to protect. Therefore the proper procedure was for them to not intervene and let the issue be resolved by the people who also existed within the cycle.

“Right you are. Perfect answer.”

“So why did you do it? That’s what I really want to know.”

“The dragon’s first stop on its rampage wasn’t too far from Mt. Eirimt.” Zaza was once again speechless. She finally understood why her teacher had disregarded the doctrine and torn out the dragon’s heart—it was because he couldn’t wait. He went to face the dragon without waiting for the arrival of the kingdom’s antidragon squad or any adventurers famed as dragon slayers. “You probably don’t remember it, but the temple was a mess back then. The young folk were pleading to be allowed to go out there and help.”

“What about the head monk and the Eight Flowers?”

“Naturally they all said it went against the doctrine. The dragon might have been within their reach, but they wouldn’t extend their hands.” What had been

going through their minds at the time? It was moments of crisis that truly tested one's devotion to their doctrine. Maybe they had wanted to help, but the doctrine Mt. Eirimt had been preaching for one thousand years stood in their way. "People were begging and crying at the gates. I couldn't take it. I knew that with my magic eyes, I could handle a dragon. I could win, yet I was told to ignore it. To wait until someone else arrived. In the end, I..."

"You went to fight the dragon. Alone." Tears rolled down Zaza's cheeks. She felt like her heart was being squeezed. She finally understood why the head monk had looked so sad—her teacher had given up everything to stand before the dragon and save lives. He did it all for the salvation he personally believed in, not any doctrine.

Word of his accomplishment spread to every corner of the continent of Malbenita, and ironically even won him the respect of Mt. Eirimt. Zaza had always thought he was incredible, but she had no idea he was hiding such a story. Although she was proud, she couldn't help but feel a little ashamed of herself.

Father Blutgang scratched his head and took a drag of his cigarette, then sighed and let out a big cloud of smoke. "Anyway, when I went back, I was turned away at the gates for acting against the doctrine. I knew I would be, but it was still a shock. I went through a rough patch after that."

"Of course you did! I would've locked myself up in my room."

"That's cute," Father Blutgang chuckled. "When it comes down to it, I guess I just wasn't ready for the consequences of my actions. I vented my anger and unsteadily wandered from place to place, before finally reaching the village and meeting the duke."



Montt Village, ten years earlier.

He'd sworn to himself that he'd defeat her this time, but he didn't stand a chance. After being expelled from the monk temple, he had given up on himself for a while. He had wandered around picking fights with anyone who looked strong, not headed anywhere in particular. When he'd heard whispers about a remote village in his wanderings, he figured he'd check it out, though he hadn't

expected the rumors to be true.

“Ah, Master! Look, he’s back again! I’m tired of fighting him!” The adorable young maid wore a troubled expression, but he wasn’t fooled. He knew she was a demonic sword, a weapon who had weathered all too many fierce battles. Last time he had finally landed a punch. He had a shot at winning. He wouldn’t go down again.

A formidable demon walked up next to the maid. “Oh, it’s that shell of a monk. Look, I understand full well how strong you are by now. Can’t we give this a rest?” What was with that casual attitude? He wasn’t even the one who had been fighting. His nonchalance made it clear that he was far stronger than the demonic sword.

“Can’t do that. I’m gonna beat you.”

“Finally able to talk, are you? There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you. What will you do when you beat me?”

“Dunno. I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

The demon scratched his chin. “Hmm, I don’t think you truly mean that.”

“What are you tryin’ to say?”

“I know who you are. You’re the famous monk who defeated an ancient dragon with his bare hands and tore out its heart—Dragon Spirit Blutgang Artzalight. Am I wrong?”

Blutgang felt like his own heart had just been grasped. How did someone so far out in the country know who he was? He should have been presumed missing since he’d been expelled from the temple.

Blutgang shook his head. It didn’t matter if this demon knew who he was. “So you know my name. Doesn’t change what I wanna do.”

“As you are now, I imagine not. But it’s not what Blutgang Artzalight would do. He abandoned his teachings to protect the people, saving countless lives. His achievement became a beacon of hope in the people’s hearts, inspiring courage in them. I’m proud to have met such a man.”

Blutgang didn’t understand what the demon was saying. How could he be

proud to meet a bloodthirsty man who did nothing but swing his fists? Blutgang Artzalight was no more. That was what he had decided, and he had sworn to live his life for himself. That was what he wanted.

But Blutgang's vision gradually blurred. He put himself on guard, thinking it was some kind of spell, but it was only tears. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"Not a thing. I just said I'm proud of you. In the thousand years of peace we've had, not once have I seen a warrior with your courage before. Had you been around a millennium ago, I daresay the war would have been over much faster."

Blutgang couldn't wrap his head around those words. A thousand years ago? That was around the time when the founder was first establishing the temple, when the hero Bilegga fought the Demon Lord and ushered in an era of peace. It sounded like the demon had seen it himself, but that couldn't be true. It was unbelievable. Yet for some reason, it sounded extremely convincing coming from him. "Who are you? You're no ordinary devil, are you?"

"Hah hah. I am indeed a demon of devil lineage, but I discarded my name long ago, so everyone just calls me the duke. However, out of respect for your accomplishments, I shall give you my name. I am Tyrfing."

Blutgang fell to his knees. Everyone in the Kingdom of Bilegga—no, everyone on the continent knew that legendary name. It was the name of the other sacred sword who fought alongside the hero Bilegga and brought down the Demon Lord. "Impossible! You can't be the legendary hero from the *Song of Bilegga*! He fought with Bilegga himself and gave the temple's founder a demonic armament!"

"Indeed," the duke chuckled. "That takes me back. Back then I never would have thought that rambunctious girl would go on to achieve so much."

"No way, no way! There's no way Tyrfing's still alive!"

"Yet here I am. Ah, and this is the Demonic Sword of Frost, Jotunn. You've actually done battle with her, so hopefully it's a little more believable."

Blutgang had said it was impossible, but he was starting to believe it. He'd never heard of a sword that could fight independently aside from the demonic

armaments created by the Sacred Black Sword of Salvation. “So you’re tellin’ me I’ve been picking a fight with a hero this whole time?”

“It certainly is unusual for heroes to fight each other.”

Upon hearing the word “hero,” Blutgang exploded. “I’m no hero! If I was, right now I’d be... I’d be...” *I’d be doing what?* He didn’t have an answer.

“But you are. You faced an unbeatable foe, overcame it, and saved every life within your reach. Do you understand how great an achievement that is? I certainly do.”

Blutgang remembered the people he’d saved when he had rushed out of the temple and slain the dragon. The moment the light returned to their hopeless faces, he’d felt like all his hard work had paid off. He wanted to save every life he could. That was his salvation.

But in doing so, the gates of the monk temple had been shut to him. The monks’ doctrine was to protect the cycle of reincarnation. Dragons were to be protected as part of that cycle. He had expected to be expelled for killing one, but his ideal of salvation had still been fostered by that temple. Its silent rejection had felt like a denial of everything he’d believed in.

“The monks’ teachings may reject you, but I’ll say as many times as I need to: you are a hero. I’m sure the people you saved are out there smiling right now.”

“I—”

“You did the right thing.”

Blutgang had no more words. Tears endlessly streamed down his cheeks. Maybe that was what he’d wanted to hear all this time. He didn’t regret what he’d done. At least, he shouldn’t have, but as time went on, doubt had begun to fill the void in his heart and he came to believe he’d made a mistake.

Ever since then, he’d been alone. He had nobody to talk to. He hadn’t wanted to admit that the man who’d slain a dragon was so fragile. He became a slothful, unsightly beast. It was easier that way. Yet this old demon still called him a hero.

“No, Duke. I’m really not a hero. My fists were supposed to bring salvation,

but before I knew it, they'd become the same as that dragon. I've caused a lot of problems for people since then. I was never cut out for that life to begin with."

"Do you really think that? You possess strength capable of ruling a kingdom, yet you've never used it to dominate others or bend them to your will. That's because you're still devoted to your ideal of salvation. That's who you truly are."

Blutgang felt like wind had just rushed over his face. Was this what salvation felt like? Until now, thanks to his blessed physique and magic eyes, he had always been the one to save others. He had never known what it was like to be saved himself.

After crying for a while, he looked up and saw the duke holding something. "What is that?"

"Consider it a symbol of our friendship. Your magic eyes see all—they allow you to pluck out the heart of a dragon and even identify a demonic sword's weak points. But you're too powerful. We can't leave it unchecked."

"'Too powerful'? I couldn't even land a hit on the two of you."

"Just so you know, I never want to fight you again," said Yoto, turning away from Blutgang. "I've never met such a terrifying human. Never again."

The duke patted her head with one hand while offering Blutgang what appeared to be sunglasses with the other.

Blutgang was confused. "I don't really have problems with the sun, y'know?"

The duke chuckled. "No, these glasses will suppress your magic eyes. While they may be rare among humans, long ago there were many demons with eyes like yours, each and every one of them formidable. If your eyes are a sword, then these glasses are the scabbard. That's what you need the most right now."

"A scabbard..." Blutgang had never wielded a sword, so he'd never thought about the significance of a scabbard. However, once the duke pointed it out, he understood. Because his hands could become weapons, it was always unclear whether they were being used as such. This was even more true for his eyes.

“Taking those glasses off and lighting the fire in your eyes will be akin to drawing a sword from its sheath. If you ever deem me an enemy of man, you are welcome to use those eyes on me. That is your answer.”

Blutgang put on the sunglasses, but his vision didn't grow dark. They truly were for suppressing his magic eyes. He felt like he could see the duke's smiling face even more clearly than before. He wondered how many people had been saved by that smile of his. The duke had overwhelming power, yet he hadn't used it, instead forgiving Blutgang's actions with his kind words. *He* was truly worthy of being called a hero.

“Hey, Duke. You think I could warm people's hearts like you?” He was the salvation Blutgang was looking for. Blutgang wanted to climb that peak. He wanted to know how to save people with a smile.

“I'm nothing special, but people have limitless potential. I'm sure you can.”

“Then would you mind if I train by your side?” Blutgang had made up his mind. He would stay in this village and watch the duke, so that he could one day give people that same warmth. So that he could save them the same way he'd been saved.

“Hah hah hah. The world-famous Holy Fist wants to learn from a retired old man?”



“Is that a no?”

“They say those who have become masters have the most to learn. Interesting. Very interesting indeed. I think I’ll be able to learn much from you as well. Welcome to Montt, Blutgang Artzalight.”



“I can’t believe that’s what happened.” Zaza hung her head. Her teacher’s story was more than she could have imagined. The sadness welling up inside her made her chest tighten up. She had resented Father Blutgang for abandoning her when he’d left, but that hadn’t been the case at all. She was ashamed of her own ignorance.

“The church just happened to be vacant, so I started living here,” said Father Blutgang. “I listened to people’s problems, and they said I was like a priest listening to confessions. Long story short, that was how I came to be called ‘Father.’”

The way he tried to tie it all up with a bow didn’t sit right with Zaza. Protecting people and saving lives should be valued above all else. The monks of Mt. Eirimt were envoys of salvation, yet they exiled the man who strove for salvation more than anyone. They hadn’t even given him a chance to explain himself. How was that fair?

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Teacher.”

“What’s done is done.”

“But...Teacher...”

“It’s fine. I’m happy with my life now. The duke had it way worse than I did, and he still finds it in his heart to be kind to everyone. That’s how I wanna be.” Father Blutgang looked refreshed after finally letting the story out.

Seeing his face, Zaza once again felt ashamed. She had continued her training all this time without ever questioning what she had been taught. She had a long way to go if she ever wanted to compare to her teacher.

“Don’t make that face. The present and the future are what’s really important. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah... I guess so,” Zaza relented. “Anyway, that was an incredible story! The duke even says he fought alongside the founder. You meeting him must have been the founder’s will! It’s like fate!”

Father Blutgang chuckled. Maybe it was. His meeting with the duke, and his sudden reunion with his disciple after ten years. They seemed to be bound together without realizing it. He couldn’t think of a more fitting thing to call it than the will of the founder.

“Maybe us meeting again is the founder’s will too! Ah, I feel so much better now! I’ve always wondered what you did when you left!”

“How about you? Seems like you’ve been working hard for the past ten years.”

“I have! But Alma was always there to support me. My dream was to travel the world with him, and maybe we’d run into you along the way. Looks like that part’s already happened though.”

“This Alma guy must really be somethin’ to make you say all that.” It made Father Blutgang want to meet this Alma fellow even more. If they ever met, should he start by thanking him? He even started thinking about trivial things like if he should act like her actual father.

“Of course! He’s just as serious about salvation as you are! He studies more than anyone else and trains more than anyone else! He said, ‘Zaza, I’m going to bring about salvation. I’m going to use my fists to build a world where nobody sheds tears.’” Zaza continued gushing about how cool and wonderful he was.

Apparently Alma was both studious and strong, kind to the other monks, and even more kind to Zaza. He thought about salvation every day, and was so serious about it that he’d even give his opinions to his seniors. He was the ideal monk. Father Blutgang took this high praise with a grain of salt, but he was still curious enough to want to meet him. After talking about Alma for a while, Zaza’s face abruptly turned gloomy.

“What happened?” asked Father Blutgang.

“N-Nothing! It’s just... Ever since I was selected as Balsam Phoenix, he’s seemed a little distant.”

It was plain to see that Zaza was gifted. She was talented enough to have been selected as an Eight Flowers candidate at only sixteen. People so young did not usually attempt the trials, as it wasn't fair to ask so much of someone at that age. From the sound of it, Alma was brilliant, but there was no way he was on the level of a prodigy like Zaza. He probably wasn't satisfied with that and pushed himself even harder as a result.

"But once I bring back your armor, he'll be able to take the trial too! He's definitely strong enough! So please give it to me!"

"Not happenin'."

Zaza pouted and puffed out her cheeks. "That was the part where you were supposed to agree! The founder's will finally brought us together after so long!"

"No means no. I don't care whose will it is, it ain't happenin'."

Just as Zaza was about to call him stingy, something clicked in her mind. She accidentally cried out at the realization, then immediately covered her mouth with her hands.

Father Blutgang just raised his eyebrows. "What's up?"

"Ah, nothing. Thinking about fate just reminded me of something. Our armor has the founder's power, right?"

"Yeah. To be precise, the idol worshipped at the temple absorbs power from the mana veins on Mt. Eirimt, which is then channeled through the founder's armor and turned into a blessing. In short, it's the founder's blessing." That was a secret known only by the monks of Mt. Eirimt and the earth sage Mordan. Monks fought by using the blessing of the mountain and refining their chakra and sacred power.

"The duke said your armor was cursed too, didn't he?" Zaza asked.

Father Blutgang nodded, taken aback by her sharp ears.

"Then that must mean something's wrong with Mt. Eirimt itself, right?"

Just as Father Blutgang was about to say it was a ridiculous idea, he stopped himself. That would certainly be a simple explanation for the entire curse problem. What if the curse had come from the blessing, rather than some

outside factor? But he shook his head. “I don’t think that’s realistic. Even if the founder’s armor broke and something went wrong with the blessing, the head monk would fix it. The mountain’s mana being altered wouldn’t go unnoticed.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. Ah hah hah, just forget I said anything.”

“However, the fact of the matter is your armor’s blessing didn’t come back,” Father Blutgang continued. “If we assume that its connection to the founder’s blessing was severed and that it won’t accept the altered blessing, then it does start to add up.” The two fell silent.

The answer Father Blutgang had come up with was unfathomable to a monk, but it explained everything. The reality was that both Zaza and Father Blutgang’s armor were cursed. Zaza’s armor had been restored and the ritual perfectly recreated, yet for some reason its connection hadn’t returned.

It was sacred armor that shouldn’t have been able to get cursed in the first place. Even if the armor had just been damaged over the years, it was highly unlikely that both his and Zaza’s would break down at the exact same time. That being the case, the only conclusion was that something had gone wrong with the source of the blessing, Mt. Eirimt.

“I doubt they’d have time to respond to a letter if we wrote them asking what was going on.” Father Blutgang sighed. “Maybe sending Gilmeus over was a good call.”

“Teacher, do you think we should tell the duke? We’d be giving up the monks’ secret.”

“He won’t tell anyone, and we can trust him not to misuse it. Come with me. I’ll explain things to him.”

Chapter 6

The demonic armament burst into tears. His master had been reborn.

The duke sat in his living room. Just as he had been planning on flipping through a grimoire he brought from his castle to investigate the curse, Father Blutgang and Zaza came to his home looking flustered.

“You think something might be wrong with the blessing itself?” he asked.

“Our armor gets their blessing from the founder,” Father Blutgang explained. “The founder’s armor is presented to the temple’s idol and receives power from it.”

“Very intriguing. Worry not, my lips are sealed.” As the duke chuckled, Zaza sighed with relief. “However, that doesn’t seem very likely. I assume the founder’s armor draws mana from the mountain and houses the blessing. That would mean the founder’s armor was cursed, then, no?”

“The temple itself serves as a sort of holy force field. So long as that’s there, no ordinary curse should be able to take hold inside.” Like Father Blutgang’s church, holy places acted as magical defenses. Even if the armor had been cursed, the land itself had a reserve of power for exorcisms, so it shouldn’t have been a problem.

“Well, that puts us in a predicament. The only way to learn more about the blessing would be to ask the monks, but if we’re not careful they might find out Zaza’s armor was broken.” The duke saw Zaza go pale at his. No matter the reason, breaking one of the eight sets of armor left by the founder would result in her failing the Eight Flowers’ trial at best, and being expelled from the temple at worst.

“Ugh, how did this happen? What did I do to deserve this, Founder?” Zaza held her head in her hands.

Father Blutgang wanted to say, “You’re being punished for trying to go on a honeymoon,” but given his own armor was cursed as well, he couldn’t act like it was someone else’s problem. “Seriously, what did we do?” he grumbled.

Watching the depressed student and teacher, the duke was at a loss for words. Unable to sit idly by, Yoto headed to the kitchen. After a bit of clattering around, she returned with ice-cold lemon-lime drinks. “Here you are. Nothing is going to come of groaning about it. Your performance decreases when you get too hot, so why don’t you cool off a bit.”

“Oh, thanks Yoto,” said the duke, taking a big gulp. The cool and refreshing taste spread through his system, instantly reinvigorating him and subconsciously making his tail wag. “This is delicious. The fruits are excellent again this year.”

“It’s so tasty!” Zaza cried out. “You really can do anything, Yoto.”

“I hope you all enjoy. Now, I heard what you all said, but why don’t you try speaking with an expert like you did with the witch?”

“An expert?” asked Father Blutgang. “Who’s gonna know more than us?”

Yoto raised an eyebrow. “I can think of someone. An expert who created the blessing alongside the founder, even.”

“That’s right! There is someone!” The duke clapped his hands together in realization.

Father Blutgang and Zaza looked at each other, neither having any clue who the duke and Yoto were referring to.

“My, the years have certainly gotten to me. There is indeed one such person —Barobute.”

“Barobute...” Father Blutgang slapped his knees. “You’re right! He’d know!”

“Teacher?” Zaza asked in confusion.

“What, did you forget? The founder was one of the people who fought alongside the duke. And you know the duke gave each of those heroes a demonic armament, right?”

“Yes, I know that. You’re talking about the Dragon Tail of Ignorance,

Barobute, right? But I heard he's been missing since the founder passed away. Maybe they passed on together."

"He's around. You can even see his resting place from that window." Father Blutgang pointed out the window, at a castle overlooking the village from an elevated forest. "That's the duke's old home. Barobute's asleep in there."

"Huuuuuh?! The duke's castle is real?! I thought it was just a figure of speech!" In the *Song of Bilegga*, the duke's old castle was the setting for the duke's chance encounter with the titular hero. The phrase "the demon duke's castle" had become a common idiom to refer to a place where someone's fate was determined.

"Obviously it's real. You're lookin' at it. Hey, Duke, can we head over and ask Barobute a few questions?"

"Certainly," the duke replied. "He'll start to rust if we don't wake him up every once in a while anyway, so that works out perfectly. However, you should know that he's a little difficult to rouse..."

"What, is he a heavy sleeper?"

"No, he's just been moping ever since the founder passed away," Yoto replied. "It's been a thousand years at this point. I appreciate his faithfulness, but he really needs to get over it." She shrugged her shoulders at her hopeless brother's sentimentality.

"Nonetheless, Barobute is the only one we can ask right now. Yoto, would you mind going with them and waking him up? I'm sure he'd listen to his older sister."

"Yes, my master."



"Hey! Barobute! Wake up!" A slapping sound echoed through the castle.

"You're hittin' him pretty hard, Yoto. Is he gonna be okay?" asked Father Blutgang.

"He can handle this much," Yoto assured him.

After their conversation, Yoto, Father Blutgang, and Zaza headed to the

castle. Yoto was violently slapping Barobute behind the throne, but he showed no sign of waking.

Second from the right, hanging on the wall with the other demonic armaments was a large greatsword. It almost seemed more like a sculpture than a sword. A depiction of a man with his arms outstretched was embedded into it, matching the description of the legendary weapon Barobute, the Dragon Tail of Ignorance.

“Wake up already!” Yoto’s pounding grew more intense. It seemed like she was about to blow, so Father Blutgang tried to calm her down. Yoto’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Once my siblings fall asleep, nothing can wake them up. I have no idea how Albrea got Egmort to get up.”

“Maybe it doesn’t work unless you’re a human?” Father Blutgang tried pounding on the sword as well, but it still didn’t stir. He tried shouting “Hey, wake up!” like Yoto and received no response. “Nothin’. Maybe a human girl would work. Zaza, you try.”

Yoto shadowboxed the air in front of her as though to say, “If this works, I’m really going to let him have it.”

Zaza timidly stuck her hand out and gently hit the greatsword. “Umm, please wake up.”

The next moment, Barobute began to emit a blue magical glow. “Huuuh?!” Surprised by the reaction, Zaza fell on her butt, then scrambled up and hid behind Father Blutgang.

Floating into the air on his own, Barobute was engulfed in magical light, and from it emerged a lean young man. He was 170 centimeters tall, just a little taller than Zaza. He had large catlike eyes that sparkled like deep blue gemstones. His similarly blue hair was slicked back, and his matching blue monk’s garb gave off a very stylish and clean impression.

“Did somebody call for me?” His voice was clear and seemed to cut straight to one’s core, making his visitors stand up straight in response.

“Finally awake, Barobute? It’s been a while,” said Yoto.

Barobute’s face lit up the moment he saw Yoto. “Huh? Sister! Is that you?! Ah

hah hah hah! It sure has been a while!”

“You really are just a giant house cat. I thought you’d still be sulking.” Yoto patted his head, then even stroked his chin like a cat. Father Blutgang and Zaza were amused by how affectionate she was. “Anyway, while you’re awake, we have something to ask you.”

“What is it? I don’t know much beyond Mt. Eirimt and the monks.”

“Those monks are exactly what we want to ask about. Allow me to introduce you. This is Father Blutgang, a former monk from Mt. Eirimt. He’s the current Bellflower Dragon.”

At Yoto’s introduction, Father Blutgang stuck out his hand. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Ah, how polite.” Barobute shook the priest’s hand and immediately his eyebrows twitched. “Wow, I can tell you’re strong. And you even have magic eyes. Julia would be shocked to see you.”

Father Blutgang’s eyes went wide behind his sunglasses. Barobute had correctly assessed him just from a handshake. “That’s the founder’s partner for you. You figured me out instantly.”

“I am a demonic armament, after all. I can tell a lot about a human from coming into contact with them. Now, what did you need?”

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but my Eight Flowers’ armor got cursed. My disciple’s too. I destroyed hers and had the duke fix it up, but the blessing hasn’t come back.”

“The armor is cursed? Wait, destroyed?” Barobute’s catlike eyes opened wide with surprise. He must have also been confused by the implication of sacred armor being cursed.

“The curse isn’t important right now,” Father Blutgang clarified. “There’s probably an explanation for it. The real question is, why isn’t the armor the duke repaired responding anymore? My disciple’s gonna get expelled at this rate. Is there any way to restore the blessing once it’s been broken?”

“The ritual inscribed in the armor is what receives the blessing. As long as it’s

correct, it should connect... Do you have the armor with you?"

"Yeah, we do. Zaza, quit hidin' behind me and greet him properly."

"I'm just nervous..." Zaza muttered. "He really is the founder's demonic armament..."

"Stand proud. You're a candidate to become one of the Eight Flowers."

Zaza stepped out from behind Father Blutgang, cleared her throat, and fixed her clothes. Then she pounded her fist against her palm and politely introduced herself. "My name is Zaza Celette. I'm honored to meet you. I'm sorry to interrupt your long slumber, Sir Barobute, but we need your wisdom."

Yoto was impressed at how naturally she spoke. She didn't always seem too bright when she was around Father Blutgang or talking about her love, but she was still a candidate to become one of the Eight Flowers. Yoto smiled, thinking she'd have to revise her opinion of her again.

"Please, could you— Umm, Sir Barobute?" Zaza paused. Barobute's catlike eyes were locked on her.

"Barobute? What happened?" Yoto asked.

"He froze up all of a sudden," said Father Blutgang. "Did he run out of mana or something, Yoto?"

"No, he shouldn't have. Hey! Barobute!" Yoto slapped him and pulled on his cheeks, but Barobute remained frozen in place. Before long, tears began flowing from his eyes. "Whoa! What's wrong?!"

"J-Julia!" Barobute fell to his knees. When he suddenly cried out the founder's name, the others looked around for a ghost, only to find nothing of the sort.

"What are you talking about?" Yoto demanded.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's just... Zaza, is it? She looks exactly like Julia." Tears continued rolling down Barobute's face.

Zaza, on the other hand, was astonished. "Me?! I-I look like the founder?!"

"Ahh, even your voice! How can this be?!" Barobute turned to Yoto. "Sister! I want to form a pact with her!"

“Calm down, Barobute.” Yoto grabbed his trembling shoulders and shook them violently, making his tears fly everywhere. Father Blutgang and Zaza didn’t know what to make of the situation.

“Look, you can have tea and chat with her or whatever later, but we need to ask about the blessing right now,” said Father Blutgang.

“We can have tea later, Teacher-in-law?! Ask away! I’ll tell you whatever you want!”

“‘Teacher-in-law’?!?”

“Please stop advancing the conversation without me! H-Here! This is what we want you to look at!” Zaza presented the Balsam Phoenix armor she had been wearing to Barobute. He accepted it like it was a royal treasure, stroking the front and turning it over.

“Strange. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it, but it’s not receiving the blessing like it should be. It stops right about here.” Barobute gestured to the air above the armor. Zaza tried to grab the area, but her hand passed right through like nothing was there.

“You can see the blessing?” asked Father Blutgang.

“I can feel it. I’m the one who attuned it in the first place, Teacher-in-law.”

“Enough of that ‘teacher-in-law’ stuff. If the blessing really does reach all this way, why isn’t the armor accepting it?”

“Hmm... I don’t have my full power since I haven’t formed a pact. If you want a more detailed answer, we should reeeally form a pact.” Barobute glanced at Zaza. The refined atmosphere he’d initially had was completely gone—now he was blushing and fidgeting with his hands behind his back like a boy going through puberty.

“Hold on just a sec. This is a big decision, you can’t just rush it,” said Father Blutgang.

“It’s fine, I promise I’ll protect Zaza!”

“That’s not the problem!” Father Blutgang yelled, exasperated. “Listen, Barobute. She’s already in love, so you’re gonna have to give up on that front.”

“Teacher! How could you tell the founder’s demonic armament of all people?!” Her face bright red with embarrassment, Zaza pounded on Father Blutgang’s back. It was okay for her to talk about it, but hearing it from other people was apparently embarrassing for her.

“That doesn’t matter to me.” Barobute shrugged. “It’s a relationship between a demonic armament and a woman, not a man and a woman, so it doesn’t count! We’re basically eternal partners!” Barobute gave a thumbs-up—he seemed to have a really positive outlook.

But the armament’s bright smile only annoyed Father Blutgang further. Pulling himself together, the priest grabbed Barobute’s shoulders and shook him. “If it’s mana you need, I’ll give you as much as you want!”

“Your mana’s a little too strong, Teacher-in-law... To be honest, I’m worried I’d get food poisoning. I don’t really like men’s mana.”

“You’ve been alive for a thousand years and *that’s* where you draw the line?! Hey, Zaza! Say something!”

“Huh? Umm, to be honest, I don’t really mind.” Father Blutgang’s jaw dropped, but Zaza continued. “If you’re asking me to marry you, I’d have to refuse. But we’d be partners, not lovers, right? If that’s the case, then I don’t have a problem with it.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous. Listen, wielding a demonic armament means wielding great power, and that power comes with a lot of responsibility. Are you prepared for that?”

“Excuse me, Teacher, but I *am* a monk, you know?” There was a slight anger mixed into her words.

I am a monk.

At that moment, Father Blutgang realized that he had been treating her like a child this whole time.

But Zaza was older now. She looked straight into his eyes and said, “All my life, I’ve admired people who were passionate about salvation! I wanted to be like you and Alma! But you’re still treating me like a kid! I think I have the right to be mad!”

Father Blutgang kept his mouth shut. Normally he would have yelled and told her to stop being stupid, but the look in her eyes was so serious he didn't even consider it. As he sat there flustered, Zaza kept going.

"Monks have a responsibility to bring salvation to the world. I can't think of a better way to do that than by wielding the founder's demonic armament. If meeting you again after ten years was the founder's will, then this must be too!"

Father Blutgang wanted to say no, but he couldn't get the words out in the face of Zaza's resolution. Yoto tugged at the hem of the faltering priest's shirt. Rather than her usual calm expression, she had a big smile on her face. "Father, how about you just let it happen?"

"Even you, Yoto?" Father Blutgang sighed.

"I'm not saying this because he's my brother. Demonic armaments don't pick their wielders lightly. He's not choosing Zaza just because she looks like the founder," Yoto replied. Father Blutgang looked at Barobute, who avoided his gaze and nervously scratched his cheek. "But as his sister, I do want to let him see the world. He's been moping for ages. I can barely remember the last time I saw him make a face like that. Above all, he's diligent. I think he'll make a good partner for Zaza when she travels the world."

Father Blutgang tried to object, but he couldn't get anything out. Then he thought about what Zaza wanted. He knew she'd do whatever it took to travel the world. And when that time came, she wouldn't be alone. There would be two of them—now three. There was nothing more reassuring than that. He had already left Zaza on her own once. Did he even have the right to object? No. He didn't.

Father Blutgang let out a lengthy groan, then finally chuckled, resigning himself to his fate. "Guess I'm buttin' in where I don't belong, huh?"

"I understand not wanting to let go, but if you love something, set it free. That's what Master says."

"Well, if the duke says so then I guess I can't fight it. Are you sure about this, Zaza?"

“Of course! It’ll let me get closer to the people I admire!”

Seeing Zaza’s carefree smile, Father Blutgang felt a little proud. Even after he abandoned her for ten years, she still admired him. “All right, then. Show me your resolve.”

“Yay! We got permission!”

“Thank you very much, Teacher-in-law!” The two cheered together. They must have hit it off while Father Blutgang had been worrying. He remembered once again that Zaza was the type of person who could get along with anyone.

Barobute extended his hand to Zaza. Zaza shook it, and a torrent of blue mana enveloped them. “Let me ask you one last time. Are you sure you want to form a pact with me?”

“I am! I never would have dreamed I’d get to take the hand of the founder’s demonic armament!”

“And I never would’ve imagined I’d meet Julia’s reincarnation!” The glowing mana swirled around them. It settled down into their bodies, traveling back and forth between them via their joined hands. Barobute cleared his throat, then looked seriously at Zaza. “I am the Dragon Tail of Ignorance, Barobute, one of the seven demonic armaments forged by Demon Duke Tyrfin. That name means I guide my master through the everlasting darkness, revealing the path like a rising dragon. Please, tell me your name, Master. The name of the one who will take my hand and conquer the endless path.”

“My name is Zaza Celette! The Holy Fist’s disciple! I strive to walk the path of the ideal monk!”

Blue fire surged between Zaza and Barobute, forming a pillar that engulfed them both. Before long, the fire expanded like a budding flower, rotating as its petals opened up. The two emerged, still hand in hand, smiling in satisfaction.

“Pact complete,” said Barobute. “How does it feel? My mana has most of the same qualities as Mt. Eirimt’s, so your armor’s blessing should have returned.”

Zaza tested opening and closing her fists. “Whoa!” She cried out in astonishment, her eyes wide with wonder. “I can feel it! My body’s so light! The blessing returned, Teacher! Actually, I feel even better than I did before!”

Zaza leaped into the air, far surpassing the height an average person would be able to reach. When she punched the air, her already swift fists moved so fast that they left blurry afterimages in their stead. She was clearly being strengthened by both her pact and the blessing.

“That’s all it takes to form a pact, huh?” remarked Father Blutgang.

“Correct. Zaza and Barobute’s souls are connected now. No matter where they go, they’ll always be together,” said Yoto.

Was this also fate? Father Blutgang shook his head and slapped his cheeks. “It’s nice that the blessing’s returned to her armor, but can we get back to the original issue?”

“Ah, that’s right. Hold on just a second.” Barobute beckoned to the bouncing Zaza, and she took his hand without a word. The pact seemed to have put them on the same wavelength. After a moment, they both frowned. “This is bad,” Barobute muttered.

“What is it?” asked Father Blutgang.

“The blessing reaches here, but it’s murky. There’s a haze that extends here.” Father Blutgang couldn’t see a thing, but Zaza batted at the air like she was trying to clean something off.

“Murky? Does that mean something really is happening on Mt. Eirimt?”

Barobute nodded his head. “I think so. And it isn’t natural. There are human emotions inside. Powerful negative feelings like frustration, pain, and jealousy. Even the urge to kill. Was it tampered with by someone evil? No, if you were to touch it, you would...” Continuing to mutter to himself, Barobute reached towards the empty air. Neither Yoto nor Father Blutgang could see anything there.

“Is it safe to touch that?” Zaza asked.

Barobute kept his arm outstretched for a while before suddenly yanking it back and falling over. “Waaah! That isn’t possible!”

“Barobute? What has you so panicked?” Yoto grabbed his arm and she could feel his hands shaking.

“It’s an emergency! Julia’s armor has been taken! It’s not on Mt. Eirimt right now!”

Father Blutgang and Zaza were speechless. The impossible had occurred. The founder’s armor was gone. They both shook their heads in disbelief.

“What about the idol?” Father Blutgang demanded.

“I don’t know! But Julia’s armor isn’t where it should be!” In other words, somebody had stolen it and removed it from the temple. But who? And why?

Before they could even worry about that, Father Blutgang, Zaza, and Barobute were imagining an even bigger catastrophe. The monks used the mountain’s power to manipulate chakra. The mountain’s blessing was granted to the monks’ armor, using the founder’s armor as an intermediary. The founder’s armor was the source of the blessing, as it absorbed the mountain’s mana through the temple’s idol.

Therein lay the problem: What would happen if the founder’s armor were removed from the mountain? And what would become of the blessing when it no longer had the mountain’s mana to power it?

“Then we’re in big trouble!” said Zaza. “That armor absorbs power from the mountain, right? If it’s taken away from the mountain...”

“It’ll start absorbing mana from anything around it!” Barobute finished. That was likely the origin of the curse plaguing Zaza and Father Blutgang’s armor.

“Are you positive, Barobute?! It doesn’t make sense. Who would steal it? That idol is defended by ten thousand monks.” asked Father Blutgang.

“I wish I was wrong, but unfortunately I’m confident about this. All these murky feelings, with murderous intent at the core. It’s mixing with all kinds of mana. I can only assume that someone is wearing it!”

Father Blutgang clicked his tongue. If Barobute was convinced, then there could be no doubt. It was more than a simple problem on Mt. Eirimt—the founder’s armor had been stolen and removed from the mountain altogether. And the one wearing it was out for blood.

But at least it finally explained how their armor had gotten cursed. Someone

had donned the founder's armor and left the mountain, and their powerful emotions had changed the blessing into a curse. It was no wonder Zaza didn't remember getting cursed—it had come from the very blessing that was supposed to protect her.

Although Father Blutgang's mind raced with all the ways things could get even worse, he pushed them aside. At that moment, the important thing was finding the founder's armor. "Do you know where it is?"

"I can't tell the precise location, but I can get the general direction. I think it's that way." Barobute pointed at the castle wall, slightly north of the direction of Mt. Eirimt.

"Damn it, that's not helpful! The Kingdom of Bilegga is huge!"

Just as Father Blutgang's frustration reached a peak, the sound of flapping wings filled the castle, and a magically amplified voice sliced through the air. "Hey! Is anyone in there?!" The four on the ground looked up at the skylight and saw a large blue wyvern flying overhead. Rushing outside, they found Gilmeus landing by the castle gate. "I thought you might be here! My intuition was right on the money!"

"Perfect timing, Gilmeus. What happened on Mt. Eirimt? How's the temple?!" Father Blutgang demanded.

"I've got bad news, Father. The founder's armor was taken. I saw the perpetrator on the way here just now. He's along the river, and headed this way. He'll be within range of Yoto's barrier soon." Gilmeus pointed towards the river—the same direction Barobute had pointed.

Father Blutgang's eyes widened. "He's coming here?!"

"It wasn't a pretty sight. Everywhere he walked, the water turned murky, and dead fish were floating on the surface. The contamination's starting to flow downstream too!"

Zaza and Barobute both wore panicked expressions. That could only mean he was absorbing mana from the land everywhere he went. It was the worst possible outcome, just as they had predicted.

"Damn it!" shouted Father Blutgang. "Whoever he is, he's smart. The flow of

the river follows the flow of the earth's mana. Walking along it is the most efficient way to absorb mana. But why's he coming here?!"

"That, I do not know. What should we do? I'm certainly not capable of stopping him."

"Father, I'm returning to the village to call for backup!" Yoto prepared to cast flight magic, but Father Blutgang grabbed her shoulder. "Father?"

"Don't. We need to keep him here. Montt is protected by your barrier and Porion's labyrinth magic. If he gets close, he's gonna steal all the mana from both, and then who knows what'll happen."

Yoto's hair stood on end. She knew how much damage that would cause.

"Teacher-in-law, let us go with you. If he really is wearing Julia's armor, then I'm the only one with the type of mana that can resist him!" said Barobute.

"Th-Then I'll go too!" said Zaza, immediately following him up. Father Blutgang hesitated, looking back and forth between Zaza and Barobute. He only wanted to take Yoto, but there was a chance they wouldn't be able to stop him alone. Besides, Zaza and Barobute had already formed a pact and now, according to Barobute, he was the only one who could stop the one wearing the founder's armor.

This was why he hadn't wanted Zaza to form the pact. She wasn't ready for that kind of power. But then Father Blutgang remembered the earnest look in her eyes when she stood up for herself earlier and shook his head. She was a monk too.

"We don't know what might be waiting for us," he finally said.

"I'm aware of that! Let's get going already!" said Zaza.

"Then make sure you stay focused. The opponent might be the founder's power itself," Father Blutgang warned. "Hey, Gilmeus! Take me and Zaza to him on your wyvern! Yoto, you and Barobute can fly, right? Follow us!"

"You hear that, Ben? I know three people is a little over your capacity, but I believe in you. Help me out just one more time." Gilmeus petted the wyvern's neck, and it roared in response. It lowered itself to the ground so everyone

could get on, then used its powerful wings to take to the sky.

“Why couldn’t this just be a simple case of broken armor?!” Father Blutgang complained.

“Can’t say I expected things to turn out this way either, Father. Let me tell you what happened on Mt. Eirimt as we fly.”

Chapter 7

The bard panicked. It was worse than he'd imagined.

Several hours earlier, at the front gate of Mt. Eirimt.

"Wyverns are incredible. You really got me to Mt. Eirimt in no time at all. Thanks, Ben. Wait here for a little bit." Gilmeus handed Benjamin the wyvern some dried meat Albrea had given him, which he happily devoured and then promptly fell asleep.

Gilmeus had landed on a rocky cliff on Mt. Eirimt. Peering over the edge, he saw a path leading to the monk temple. Following the path from the cliff above, he soon came upon a massive gate—the gate to the monk temple, said to isolate it from the outside world. Although he didn't see any guards outside, even from a distance he could feel a bloodlust that made his skin crawl.

"That can't be good. We may have a big problem on our hands." Gilmeus grabbed his lyre off his back and plucked a few strings, but no sound rang out—the strings merely vibrated. A blue magic circle around thirty centimeters in diameter appeared at his feet.

Gilmeus looked down at the gate once more. A fall from this height would easily kill him, but he found his resolve and stepped off the cliff. He started walking in midair, almost skipping. "I may have a lot of experience with wind magic, but this is still no easy feat. If the rhythm of either my feet or the lyre is even a little bit off, I'd go tumbling to my death." He smirked to himself. "Of course, I'd never make such a mistake."

Hopping through the air like a pond skater on water, he sped through the sky and over the gate, landing in the shade of a tree around halfway up the winding path that he saw led to the temple. Sitting in a thicket, he let out a sigh of relief; however, the tension he'd been feeling remained. He rolled up his sleeve and saw his arms covered in goose bumps. The bloodlust was all around him.

"I feel like a frog being watched by a hungry snake. What in the world is

happening here?”

Gilmeus strummed his silent lyre, a magic item for casting spells. He granted himself the protection of the sound-erasing magic, Silence, and presence-concealing magic, Stealth. Once under the cover of his magic, he got up out of the thicket and crouched his way forward.

“This is clearly trespassing, but sometimes a risk must be taken. I doubt they’re going to let me off easy if I’m caught.” Talking to himself, Gilmeus silently proceeded on, the unusual statues and murals catching his eye. He arrived at yet another gate—a massive two-story structure with an overhanging roof above the first floor. A sign hung from the gate, written in characters he couldn’t read. There were eight thick pillars on each side of the door, surrounding what appeared to be a statue of some sort of god of war. It reminded Gilmeus of Father Blutgang when he got serious.

Gilmeus passed through the gate, then cried out in wonder. “Well, well, would you look at that!”

What he saw took his breath away. Spread out before him was a large valley that almost seemed to have been carved out of the mountain, dotted with stunning architecture. It was more of a village than a temple—no, a town.

A vast area of cobblestone paving stretched from the gate to the large temple that sat straight ahead. The building was so large it threw off the sense of scale for the entire area. The road was lined to the left and right with orderly lodgings and scattered training grounds. There was a cafeteria as well, perhaps because the temple also served as a school for children.

“The homes are so beautiful. Come to think of it, the monks receive offerings from the kingdom, don’t they? I’m sure they get money from neighboring countries as well.”

The offerings hadn’t seemed to have corrupted the monks. The buildings might have been beautiful, but they were also simple and utilitarian. There were no gaudy decorations like one might find in something like a red-light district—the most he could see were a few flower vases adorning the windows.

That was when Gilmeus realized something—despite the wide-open area, there wasn’t a soul to be found.

“Where are all the monks?”

The only human figures were the stone statues of the god of war erected around the town. The fog descending from the mountain gave it the atmosphere of a ghost town.

Avoiding the main road, he walked through a back alley behind a row of houses. Nobody was around. At this point, it was clear to Gilmeus that something was very, very wrong. Should he turn back? If he left without finding anything out, they wouldn't be any closer to an answer.

“All right, calm down. Steady your breathing. Make sure oxygen gets to your brain.”

The more he relied on the techniques he had learned from his master, the louder the alarm bells in his brain rang. Gilmeus had infiltrated fortresses filled with armed soldiers, strolled boldly through the slums, and sneaked inside the castle of a lord who was the subject of endless nasty rumors, but none of those had compared to what he was feeling now. His experience told him so.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Gilmeus continued on. He proceeded quietly, as though becoming one with the scenery around him. Before long, he heard a faint noise around the corner. “Is someone there?” he muttered under his breath.

As he approached, he realized it was the sound of someone thrashing about and knocking over heavy objects. Soon it escalated to the sound of wooden crates and barrels being broken and walls being destroyed.

Hugging the wall as he proceeded, Gilmeus found a small gate leading to an area surrounded by white walls on all sides. It was likely a training ground, as the walls were lined with training dummies and the stone floor was perfectly flat.

“Is he being attacked?!”

A large, elderly man poised like a boulder stood in the center of the training ground, blood dripping from his brow. He was muscular with a shaved head, and judging from the opulent robe he was wearing, he must have been a high-ranking monk. His white beard was dyed red with blood, and his shoulders were

heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

He was surrounded by four other monks, all clad in the same miasma that had plagued Zaza. The monks surrounding the man were all wearing breastplates similar to the one Zaza had worn.

“Not good. That’s the Eight Flowers’ armor!” Even Gilmeus could tell the fighting spirit they were wielding was abnormal. His hands grew sweaty, and a cold chill ran down his spine.

“Return to your senses! You’re the renowned Eight Flowers of—”

The monks rushed at the elderly man before he could finish speaking. The elderly monk’s hands glowed, and using a knifehand strike, he slashed at the monks as they descended on him. However, the Eight Flowers were no ordinary monks, and were able to narrowly avoid the elderly master’s lightning-fast strikes. The man was clearly skilled, but he was no match for their numbers and was gradually being driven back.

Gilmeus instinctively reached for the grimoire in his holster. “Should I help him?”

He had a trick up his sleeve, but if he used it here, he would no longer be able to escape if he were to be surrounded himself. However, in this ghost town of a temple, sane individuals seemed hard to come by, and the man could have valuable information.

“Oh, fine! I hate taking risks!” Gilmeus prepared for the worst before pulling out a manastone and hurling it onto the training ground. It rolled in front of the monks, attracting their attention. A moment later, the stone began to vibrate and Gilmeus’s body emerged from it.

“Who are you?!” the elderly man demanded.

“I’ll explain later! Fall back!”

The monks immediately reacted to Gilmeus’s sudden appearance and attacked, unleashing merciless kicks and thrusts so fast he could hear them cut through the air. The elderly man reflexively reached out for him, but then something strange occurred. The bard should have crumpled from their blows, yet they passed right through him. Startled, the monks put distance between

themselves and Gilmeus.

“An illusion?” the man asked.

“Just a simple party trick,” Gilmeus replied, smirking. Several more images of Gilmeus appeared one after another, all decoys created by manastones. The monks indiscriminately attacked the illusory Gilmeuses nearest to them, striking nothing but empty air.

“I’m grateful for the assistance, but you mustn’t underestimate them. Sane or not, they’re still the Eight Flowers!” Proving his point, the monks soon caught on to the trick and began crushing the manastones beneath their feet, dissipating the illusions one by one.

“I’m well aware. That was just the opening act!”

The man looked up and saw Gilmeus standing atop the wall, pouring mana into his open grimoire. The pages fluttered through the air before clinging to the walls of the training ground.

“Thunderous applause fills the wooden theater. The curtain rises—the fairy’s rondo is about to begin. Dance, twirl, and sing your heart out! The raucous lightning is right by your side! Localized Suppression Magic—Block Buster!”

After this short incantation, Gilmeus slammed his palm against his grimoire. The spell activated immediately, and the pages stuck to the walls began to glow. The monks turned their attention to the real Gilmeus and tried to jump at him, only to fall to their knees. Magical ropes had sprouted from the ground beneath their feet—a trap that had been triggered when they destroyed the manastones. All it did was trip them up, but that was all the time Gilmeus needed.

An explosion shook the air as a dazzling light enveloped the monks. The force that struck the monks was difficult to describe—it was more like a shock wave than a sound. The light was so bright it was like looking at the sun. Had it been night, the area would have been illuminated even brighter than it was in daylight.

The spell was over in an instant. The only ones left standing were Gilmeus and the elderly monk. All the other monks had passed out, not moving a muscle.

“What in the world...?” The elderly man was frozen with astonishment.

“That was a spell intended for use against armies. It’s the ace up my sleeve, capable of making hundreds of people faint at once. Of course, I take measures to make sure there’s no collateral damage.” Gilmeus nimbly leaped down from the wall and walked over to the old man, pulling a piece of paper off of his sleeve. It was a page from his grimoire. That must have been why the monk hadn’t been affected.

“Magnificent. I can’t believe you took down multiple members of the Eight Flowers unharmed.”

“It’s not easy for a human to block out their senses. Even more so for the sharply honed senses of the Eight Flowers. That said, it was still a gamble.”

The man brushed himself off a bit. “I see you’re fond of trickery. Your methods may be questionable, but you saved me nonetheless. You have my gratitude. Who are you?”

Gilmeus fixed his clothes and gave an exaggerated bow. “Do forgive me for trespassing. I am an emissary from the Kingdom of Bilegga. I’m here on behalf of Lady Albrea, the commander of the knights. My name is Gilmeus.”

The elderly monk nodded in recognition when he heard the name Albrea. “That name has even reached us here. She’s the knight who received a demonic armament from Demon Duke Tyrping who watches over the world. You say you’re her emissary?”

“I am indeed. The knights received a report that the kingdom’s merchant wasn’t allowed inside Mt. Eirimt, and their envoy was turned away at the gate without a word. Supposedly they heard strange voices on the other side. The commander was quite concerned.”

“The founder of our temple, Julia Capranica, was also given a demonic armament by Duke Tyrping. This must be her will. Thank you for coming, Gilmeus. I apologize for the late introduction. I am the head monk in charge of this temple.”

Thought so, Gilmeus said to himself, internally patting himself on the back. For this man to have lasted so long against the Eight Flowers, he had to have

been important, though Gilmeus had no idea he was their leader. That would make the investigation much smoother. “My, I had no idea you were the head monk. I must apologize for my rude behavior.”

The head monk shook his head. “No matter. It’s an emergency. Come with me to the temple. It’s currently surrounded by a barrier.”



“I’ll be frank with you—the temple is on the verge of collapse. The arrival of an outsider like you is a blessing.”

Gilmeus was in the main hall of the temple speaking to the elderly, bearded head monk. “What happened here? Are they the only ones who made it to safety?” Gilmeus looked at a huddled group of children and elderly monks, as well as a few instructors who had managed to escape danger.

The head monk looked sadly at the group. “It happened all at once. A week ago, all of the instructors wearing armor began to lose their sanity. Even now, they wander like lost spirits, doing battle with whoever they encounter.” The unsettling atmosphere enveloping the town must have been the smell of death. “I suppose there’s no use in hiding it now. This was all caused by the desecration of the idol.”

“And where is this idol?”

“Follow me.” The main hall was a vast building with wooden floors. Behind what Gilmeus assumed to be the head monk’s seat was a massive statue of the god of war, seated cross-legged. The head monk entered a passage beneath the statue’s arm, grabbing a candleholder and lighting it. The passage behind the statue was dark and only wide enough to walk in single file. The light ahead gradually grew brighter until the hallway finally opened up into a hexagonal room. In the center of the room stood a statue of a goddess, her eyes filled with affection. Including her seat, it was over two meters tall.

Gilmeus was entranced. He wasn’t sure if it was her appearance or pose, but the statue itself put his heart at ease, like it was going to gently embrace him, yet the mana coiling around it felt quite sinister. “This is the founder, Julia Capranica?”

The head monk gave a single nod. “Correct. One of the heroes who fought against the Demon Lord a thousand years ago. After that, she feared for the troubled world and founded a temple here to spread her teachings. This statue is a tomb where her armor is kept.”

However, there was no armor to be found. The statue’s torso was slightly discolored where the armor should have been.

Gilmeus’s eyes went wide. “Was the founder’s armor stolen?!”

“Indeed.”

“When was it taken? Do you know who did it?”

“I am ashamed to admit it, but we have received reports that one of our monks has been seen wearing it.”

“It was an inside job?!”

“I’m afraid so, disgraceful as it is. If only Blutgang were here. His Binding Eye would have noticed something was afoot. He probably would have been able to capture the culprit before they even left the temple.” The monk regretfully hung his head. Gilmeus held his tongue and didn’t mention that he knew Blutgang was in Montt now.

“This is my punishment,” the head monk groaned. “The founder is punishing me. Ten years ago, a hero was born among us, and I used her teachings as a reason to drive him away. I should have been more flexible.”

It was hard for Gilmeus to watch the downcast head monk. The crisis was probably exacerbating his guilt over his past actions. “Please, raise your head. You were faithful to your teachings. Right now we must focus on the present. What happens when the armor is stolen? Is that why the Eight Flowers were rampaging?”

“That, and more. The founder’s armor supplies a blessing to the armor of every monk. Any monk who was wearing armor lost their sanity and began rampaging. Monks who pride themselves on being the fists of salvation. Monks who are a match for an entire country’s army. All ten thousand of them.”

Gilmeus gulped. The situation was far worse than he had imagined: ten

thousand monks who wielded sacred power and could even penetrate iron with their fists. If they were to form a mob and leave the temple, the kingdom would have to raise an army to stop them.

“The founder’s armor also serves as a connection to the land’s mana,” the head monk continued. “So long as it remains on Mt. Eirimt, it uses the mountain’s mana, but once removed, it compensates by absorbing mana from elsewhere. I sent the Eight Flowers after the culprit, but you saw how that turned out.”

“Head monk, do you know where the culprit is headed?”

“I do not, but an aerial view may give you some idea. The earth will be contaminated wherever he has been. If I were in his shoes, I would head for the river where I could follow the flow of the earth’s mana.”

Flustered, Gilmeus pulled a map out of his breast pocket. Maps were invaluable for spies. There was indeed a river to the northwest of Mt. Eirimt, and following it upstream led to—

“Not good! The source of that river is the sacred mountain Sanctra Montt! He must be after that monk girl!”

“Monk girl?! Gilmeus, have you seen Zaza?!”

“Sure have! Don’t worry, she’s safe! Pardon me, head monk, but I need to go! Time is of the essence!” Gilmeus raced outside in a panic. He held up a manastone to the sky, and Benjamin came flying over the temple gate. “Head monk! Request aid from the Kingdom of Bilegga! Give my name!”

“Understood! But Gilmeus, you mustn’t carelessly lay a hand on the founder’s armor! It’s connected to the Earth Mother’s power! Do not allow it to be harmed!”

“I’ll figure something out. That’s my job, after all!” Gilmeus climbed on Benjamin’s back, grabbed its reins, and took off. Sensing his unease, the wyvern flapped his wings as quickly as he could.



“Damn it!” Father Blutgang shouted. “It was one of the monks?!”

“The head monk said he wished you were there,” Gilmeus added.

“Ha! How convenient for him. Now’s not the time for that. Where is this stupid asshole, Gilmeus?!”

“Over there!” Gilmeus pointed over the wyvern’s neck at a mass of dark miasma. It had taken the shape of a pitch-black doll, appearing like a shadow walking on its own. On its chest was a white breastplate—the founder’s armor.

“T-Teacher!” Zaza cried out. “The river!”

“I see it. It’s not pretty.” The damage was readily apparent even from far above. The river downstream from the shadowy silhouette was a murky brown as though it were full of mud. Dead fish floated on the surface, and any birds that entered the river died upon touching the water.

As Gilmeus and the others landed in front of the silhouette, it raised its head and stopped. It remained completely silent, but they could feel the ominous pressure of the miasma it was emitting. Negative emotions that far surpassed what Father Blutgang had sensed from Zaza when she arrived. What Barobute had called the urge to kill was clearly directed at them.

“Wh-What should we do, Father?” asked Gilmeus. “I’ll be honest with you, I’ve already used my trump card. I don’t think I’m going to be much help.”

“I wasn’t countin’ on your help in the first place. The wyvern’s scared too, so why don’t you fly over to the village and inform the duke.”

“As you wish. Take care, Father. Losing you would be a tragedy. That isn’t the happy ending I’m looking for.”

“No need to worry about me. Get going!”

“Leave it to me!” Gilmeus hopped on the wyvern’s back as it cowered away from the silhouette. Grabbing the reins, Gilmeus petted the base of its neck and took off.

“All right, asshole. How dare you steal the founder’s armor! Have you no shame as a monk?!” Father Blutgang shouted at the silhouette, which stared at him for a while before finally opening its mouth. It had no facial features, and the impressions where its mouth, nose, and eyes should have been were only

moving slightly.

“Why does Blutgang Artzalight still live?” Its voice was clearly inhuman, a layered sound neither masculine nor feminine. Various emotions mixed together, just barely giving the impression of human language.

“Wh-Why... No, it can’t be...” Zaza hesitated.

“What is it, Zaza? Do you know the one wearing Julia’s armor?” asked Barobute.

“I-I’m not sure. For some reason, his figure looks like...” Sweat rolled down Zaza’s brow.

Noticing her discomfort, Father Blutgang took up a combat stance.

“I see. It was you who freed Zaza, Blutgang,” the figure said.

“What’s your goal? Are you the one who cursed Zaza? Did you curse my armor too?!”

“My goal? All that I do is for my ideal salvation. To wield power righteously and use it to control everything. All ten thousand monks are within my grasp—except Zaza.” Miasma once again poured out of the silhouette, taking the form of a screaming skull so terrifying it was difficult to face. Even Father Blutgang struggled to avoid averting his eyes. “I seek absolute control over the monks. Monks who stray from my yoke are liable to one day bare their fangs against me. Such impurities are unnecessary, thus they shall be purged.”

The silhouette’s assertion left no room for negotiation. The vein in Father Blutgang’s temple bulged. It was saying it would kill Zaza now that she had become unusable.

“Bullshit! What gives you the right—?”

“You have saved me the trouble of finding you, Zaza,” the silhouette interrupted. “Blutgang as well. How fortunate I am. The two of you are blights. Rejoice, for you shall become the foundation of my salvation.” As it spoke, the silhouette began making hand signs. Shadowy arms emerged from the ground at its feet, surging towards Zaza and Father Blutgang one after another like waves.

“Here it comes! Get ready!” Father Blutgang planted his feet on the ground, manipulating his chakra. A burning red aura enveloped his body, the roaring maw of a dragon appearing behind him. Zaza turned to Barobute.

“There’s no time to transform,” he said. “Take him down!”

Zaza nodded, her hands and feet glowing gold as she gathered her chakra. She joined hands with Barobute, and pale flames surrounded them both.

Father Blutgang was the first to move. He took a step forward into the wave of black arms, his own arm taking on the appearance of a dragon’s. “Phantom Dragon’s Roar!” The priest thrust his fist out, his dragon claw mowing through the horde of black arms. The black arms were smashed like hunks of meat, vanishing into a fine mist.

The silhouette’s eyes went wide as Father Blutgang instantly closed the gap between them, the priest’s legs harboring the strength of a dragon, and both of his arms clad in spiritual dragon claws.

“You call that salvation?! Don’t make me laugh! Phantom Dragon’s Roaring Blossoms!”

Countless strikes flew at the silhouette, each blow powerful enough to take down its target by itself. The moment Father Blutgang thought it was over, that his fists would strike true, the silhouette’s mouth curled up in a smile.

“What the hell?!”

Just as his technique was about to land, it was blocked as though it had hit an invisible wall. His punches and kicks were all canceled out by equivalent force. He increased the speed and strength of his blows, but not a single one connected. His secret technique had been completely nullified.

“Teacher, look out!” Zaza shouted.

The silhouette’s miasma had taken the shape of a dragon’s arm. It was its own Dragon Spirit technique.

“The Eight Flowers’ techniques all originated with the founder, and right now, I am one with her,” the silhouette said calmly. “Allow me to show you the real thing. Phantom Dragon’s Roar!”

Although Father Blutgang immediately covered himself with the Dragon Spirit's red aura, the black dragon arm smashed right through it. He took a clean hit.

"Gah!" Father Blutgang was sent flying, landing on the gravel of the riverbed. Despite being covered in injuries, he managed to stand back up. He couldn't believe it. His signature move, the Phantom Dragon's Roar, had been unleashed with such inhuman strength. He bit his lip. Was that the power of the founder's armor?

"Teacher!" Zaza ran to his side, her arms glowing. She planted both her hands on the ground, and the glow expanded. "Revolving Phoenix Palm!"

Zaza's chakra stuck to the surface of the ground, and the moment the wave of black arms drew close, an explosion rang out. Blown to pieces, the black arms once again dissolved into thin air.

"It worked!"

"Zaza! Don't let your guard down!" Barobute jumped to her side. As another wave of black arms approached, he raised his own arm up, a draconic arm made of a blue aura appearing around it.

"Is that Teacher's technique?!" Zaza asked in awe.

"If that thing can use it, then so can I! Julia and I created the monk techniques together! Phantom Dragon's Roar!" The blow opened up a large hole in the wave of arms, which burned resentfully and vanished into mist.

"N-Not bad, Barobute..." Father Blutgang coughed.

"Teacher-in-law! Hang in there!"

"Heads up! It's not done!" As Zaza shouted her warning, the silhouette made three hand signs. The skull miasma swirled, and from it emerged a giant feminine arm, around four or five meters long.

"What the hell is that?!" shouted Father Blutgang.

"Get ready, Zaza," Barobute advised. "Seems like I'm the only one who can stop that thing. But how? We don't have time for you to properly equip me..."

"In that case, shall I buy you time?" A voice came from above them where

Yoto floated alongside a magic circle. “I’ll settle this in one blow,” she said as she created several more magic circles. An eerie voice could be heard, and soon all the circles turned black. Giant eyeballs emerged and swiveled around, all locking on to the shadowy silhouette.

“I am the one who knows. Gather, o giant birds of the red earth. Behold, that which will become a pool of crimson rain.” An unpleasant, grating noise came from the jet-black holes where the magic circles once were. The eyes retreated into the holes, and the upper body of a rusted iron giant appeared to take their place. With a loud screech, it stuck its right hand forward, supported by its left hand as though it was taking aim. A massive amount of mana gathered around its right elbow, building up heat.

“You are not earth,” Yoto chanted. “You are not stone. Detested and forbidden, I know your name. As such, I shall display your decayed glory here and now! Fire, King of Rust! Grand Ocher Explosion—Daedalus Bow!”

With a thunderous roar, the rusted iron giant launched its right fist at the silhouette like it had been fired out of an arm-shaped ballista. The powerful summoning magic would easily blow away a flesh-and-blood human, and Yoto was certain the silhouette wouldn’t fare any better. However...

“Insolence!” The arm that had formed behind the silhouette caught the iron giant’s fist. A crushing sound rang out, and the giant black arm emitted a dark haze.

Yoto’s face went pale with shock. “I can’t believe it. I know Master isn’t nearby, but it actually stopped Daedalus Bow?”

More arms appeared at the silhouette’s feet and rushed at the giant’s fist, covering it. They then began to glow before finally blowing the fist to pieces.

“Yoto! In front of you!” Yoto took up a defensive posture at Father Blutgang’s warning, but the silhouette was already right in front of her.

“When did it—?!” Yoto immediately cast a defensive spell, a magic circle appearing in front of her just before the silhouette swung its fist. A loud clang echoed through the air. “This monster’s sucked up so much of the earth’s mana!”

“I see you are merely an imitation of a human,” the silhouette observed. “Demonic power that will pollute my salvation. Thus in the name of salvation, you shall be purged!” It placed its hand on the magic circle Yoto had created.

For a moment, she was confused, but once she noticed the purple glow around its arm, she realized what it was doing. “Is that Zaza’s technique?!”

“Sister, get back! It looks like it can use every monk technique!” Barobute shouted.

“Too late. Revolving Phoenix Palm!”

Just as Yoto was about to add another layer of defense, the purple light glowed even brighter and exploded, several times stronger than when Zaza used it. The grieving skulls floating out of the smoke from the explosion were every bit as ominous as the miasma.

Yoto was feebly blown away, her maid outfit singed around the edges. She fell through the air headfirst, seemingly no longer conscious.

“Yoto!” Although he was in no condition to move, Father Blutgang forced his body to act and caught her before she hit the ground. She was completely still. “Y-Yoto! Are you all right?!”

“Agh...” All Yoto could do was groan in response.

A chill ran down Father Blutgang’s spine. He couldn’t believe the legendary demonic sword had been so badly injured.

“Sister!” Barobute came running over, his face pale as well. Zaza stood in front of them and faced the silhouette, but her legs were trembling. Seeing its attack overwhelm even Yoto had terrified her.

“Barobute, what’s the meaning of this?! How could Yoto get hurt so badly?!” asked Father Blutgang.

“She’s too far from father. A demonic armament’s power is linked to the distance between them and their wielder. She used up all her mana trying to quickly finish him in one blow!”

The silhouette sighed. “How pitiful. Did she really think she could defeat me with such meager power? I am one with the earth. An agent of the earth

goddess's divine power."

The ground rumbled beneath the silhouette as it began to gather glowing light from the river and the forest around them. Father Blutgang's brow furrowed as he realized the glow was the earth's mana. The river grew murky, and leaves of the trees turned red and fell from their branches. It appeared as though the summer day had abruptly turned to winter.

"Zaza, you need to equip me! Take my hand!" said Barobute.

"Okay!" Zaza replied. But before she could even reach for him, the silhouette made a hand sign. In the blink of an eye, another wave of black arms appeared and surged towards her.

"Th-There's not enough time! Zaza!"

"Hiyaaaaah!" Zaza was forced to turn away from Barobute, both her arms glowing.

The moment the oncoming arms reached her, they were blown to bits by her Balsam Phoenix technique. Yet the attacks didn't let up. More and more arms descended upon Zaza, forcing her back without offering her any time to breathe. Barobute backed her up, but the silhouette's power seemed limitless.

"Zaza! Barobute! Stand back!" Father Blutgang shouted. "I'll distract it! Take that time to transform!"

Zaza's eyes widened. "Y-You can't! Look at you! Don't you realize how hurt you are, Teacher?!"

"Just do as I say! Yoto's in trouble! She's not waking up!"

"Th-That can't be!" Throughout the conversation, the arms never relented. Just as Zaza was about to give up, she felt a pressure in the air so strong it gave her goose bumps.

The pressure soon grew so overwhelming that Barobute and even the silhouette froze in place. Birds in distant trees flew away, and everything around them grew silent. Each of them knew that if they made a single misstep, they would perish before they even had time to realize they had died. It was a feeling far worse than a blade at the neck. It was a primordial fear that was

meaningless to resist, akin to confronting a god.

“What...what is the meaning of this?” The silhouette’s calm demeanor had finally broken.

“T-Teacher?! What’s going on?!” asked Zaza.

“I’ve never felt anything like this,” said Father Blutgang. “Could it be...?”

The earth began to shake beneath them. Zaza turned around to look behind her and felt a shock wave of power as a pitch-black hole opened up next to Father Blutgang and Yoto. It was reminiscent of an abyss, as though a circle had been cut out of space itself. A figure, some four or five meters tall, slowly stepped out.

“The duke!” Zaza smiled, assuming they were saved, but quickly reconsidered.

Something was off about the duke. Something was *wrong*. His usual kindly expression was warped with fury. His golden eyes blazed, streaming with tears and brimming with mana.

“H-Hey, Duke...”

Father Blutgang called out to him, but the duke didn’t respond. He turned towards the priest, but he wasn’t looking at his friend. He was looking at his daughter in Father Blutgang’s arms, covered in wounds, her eyes firmly shut.

The duke let out a howl. A roar so pained that it shook the sky and caused damage to the psyches of any who heard it. His golden pupils were overflowing with magical energy. A misty miasma rose from his mouth, and with each step, he released enough pressure to make the air itself creak in protest.

Then he began to chant an incantation that couldn’t be expressed in the language of man. Those attuned to magic wouldn’t believe their ears. He was chanting black magic in the ancient languages of elves and dragons simultaneously.

When his incantation finished, a golden tetrahedron about the size of his head appeared before the duke. It rotated slowly, angelic wings flapping on each side. “Pitiful fool. Accept your punishment! Heat of the Aurora—Sting Ray!”

The dazzling light converged at a single point, and an unfathomable ray of mana pierced straight through the silhouette.

Chapter 8

The Bellflower Dragon roared. “You’re supposed to be a protector.”

When Father Blutgang raised his head, he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Th-The river was blown away...”

Everything behind the silhouette had been mercilessly vaporized. A new, several-hundred-meter-long river had been gouged out, and all the surrounding trees had been toppled over. It looked as though a tornado had ripped through the area.

The silhouette was on its knees. That it was still alive after being struck by such powerful magic was nothing short of astonishing. Perhaps it had devoted all the mana it had absorbed to defense and the white breastplate was now empty. The shadow covering it peeled away and dripped to the ground like a thick, viscous liquid, revealing the face of a young man.

He had a shaved head and well-defined features. His body was slender yet toned with no excess fat, and he appeared to be around two or three years older than Zaza. He wore a monk outfit almost identical to the one worn by Barobute. His eyes were bright red, and blood was gushing out of the wounds that covered him. He was so badly injured he seemed liable to collapse at any moment, but in the quiet aftermath of the blow, his injuries slowly began to heal, no doubt due to the armor’s blessing.

“Huh? I-It can’t be...” Zaza sounded shaken. Her hand was over her mouth, tears running down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, Zaza? Do you know him?” asked Father Blutgang.

“A-Alma! Why?! Why are you here?!”

Father Blutgang’s eyes went wide with shock. That was the name of Zaza’s crush. The one who had supported her all this time. The young monk she had

said exemplified her ideals.

But Alma didn't respond when Zaza called his name. Eventually he tried to stand up, only to fall back down on his hands and knees. Zaza wanted to rush to his side, but Father Blutgang grabbed her arm.

"Teacher! Let go of me!"

"No can do. Look at the duke. He's practically radiating bloodlust. It's way too dangerous to get between them."

Just as the priest said, the duke's mana was building up again. Upon realizing Alma still lived, he had immediately begun chanting another spell.

The area grew dark. Ominous storm clouds filled the sky that, until just a moment ago, had been clear and blue. Thunder shook the air in increasingly short intervals, as though responding to the duke's fury. After a particularly loud clap of thunder, Father Blutgang watched through his sunglasses as lightning seemed to streak towards the duke. The duke raised his hand up to the sky, and just as the lightning was about to strike him, he caught it and was left holding a giant lightning spear.

"Hear the neigh of the heavenly steed. The pounding of the Creator's war drums. I covet the sound. The monsters of the mountains and rivers run rampant below, and by the ballista of the heavenly vessel I have been granted, they shall perish."

A series of magic circles appeared behind the spear of lightning. The circles rotated as they expanded, three pairs of wings forming around them. The spell looked to be just as powerful as the duke's previous one, if not even more so. The wind rushing past his cheeks conveyed its might. Alma would be burned beyond recognition if he were struck by it.

"Duke, stop! Please! It's Alma!"

The duke ignored Zaza's desperate pleas. There was no one who could stop him now. Even Barobute sunk to the ground in horror. The lightning in the duke's hand grew ever larger, his appearance that of the legendary Demon Lord.

By injuring Yoto, Alma had incurred the duke's wrath. It could be said that this

was simply the retribution he had earned. Yet in the face of that overwhelming might, Father Blutgang knew he had to stop the duke. What Alma had done was serious, yes, but if the duke were to take his life here, all that kind old man had striven for would crumble.

The duke was someone who protected. Someone who loved. A savior. Not someone who killed in anger. Once he crossed that line, all that awaited him was a spiral of negativity. The world would face a crisis akin to the return of the Demon Lord.

So before that happened, he had to save the duke. He had to save the one who had once saved him. That was Father Blutgang's salvation. The moment he realized that, the priest's body moved on its own.

"T-Teacher?!"

His vision blurry and his body bloodied, Father Blutgang stood before the duke.

"Out of the way, Blut," The duke commanded, but the priest before him simply shook his head and silently removed his sunglasses. "I said get out of the way!"

"Not gonna happen. This is salvation. You're supposed to protect people, Duke. Don't let yourself get swallowed up by your anger and kill someone. That won't save you."

The duke closed his eyes for a moment, but when they reopened, they were filled with burning fury. "Out of the way!"

"This isn't the duke I know!" Father Blutgang's eyes flashed. His Binding Eye saw through all. By now he knew all his close friend's quirks. There was currently a spot on his right shoulder where his mana was gathering. If he could strike it, the spell would be interrupted, but if his timing was even slightly off he would end up burned to a crisp.

Father Blutgang fully unleashed his sacred power, a golden magic circle appearing beneath his feet. His field of view turned gray, time seemed to slow, and he could see the duke's meridians glowing. The duke's mana was staggering, as though countless stars were twinkling all over his body. That

power wasn't meant to be wielded in anger—it was meant to protect. It was time for Father Blutgang to repay the great hero who had given him his scabbard!

The moment Father Blutgang's spell activated, the duke felt an impact in his right shoulder and looked his friend in the eyes. The priest's eyes were golden—those of a man who had far surpassed human capabilities. It was the duke himself who had granted him the ability to sheathe that power.

If you ever deem me an enemy of man, you are welcome to use those eyes on me.

As the duke remembered his own words, his mana rapidly faded away. His arm numb, he held his shoulder and looked straight ahead. At the tearful face of his close friend. "Blut."

"Finally awake, Duke?" Covered in sweat, Father Blutgang rested his hands on his knees.

"You almost died, you know? I was serious right up until the very end."

"If I couldn't stop you, then that would've been all I amounted to."

"Betting it all on a prayer, huh? Guess you're a priest after all." The duke let out a deep sigh, his bloodlust vanishing alongside the dark storm clouds like it had all been a lie or trick.

"Duke!"

Father Blutgang and the duke turned around and saw Zaza, bowing on her knees, Barobute next to her in the same position.

"Please let me save Alma! I'm begging you!"

"I know what happens to people like him. Look at him, Zaza."

The duke pointed at Alma, who was finally standing back up, still oozing bloodlust. He was once again trying to use the founder's armor to absorb mana from his surroundings. Bloodied and broken, he was being driven solely by the urge to kill.

"Once they become like that, they don't stop until they're dead. You still have a future ahead of you. I don't want him to take that from you."

“Still, I want to try.” Zaza was as earnest as could be. “This is Mt. Eirimt’s salvation. He’s not that kind of person. I know him better than anyone, and I’m going to bring him back to his senses!”

The duke sighed and looked at his daughter in his arms. Yoto opened her eyes, her consciousness hazily returning. Her small hand grabbed the duke’s clothes. “Yoto?! Are you all right?!” Yoto nodded softly, and the duke hugged her tight.

Held in the duke’s arms, Yoto’s eyes opened wider. “What happened here...?” She looked out at the land around them, which seemed like it had been struck by a natural disaster with its felled trees, empty riverbed, and melted rocks. “Ahh...” Seeing the carnage around her, it slowly dawned on Yoto, and she put her hand up to the duke’s cheek.

“Yoto?”

“Don’t...” Her voice was small and hoarse. Shaky and fearful. Tears threatened to overflow from her jewellike eyes.

“What is it, Yoto?”

“Don’t get angry, father.” The duke hugged her even tighter. “You’ve been angry enough. I’ll get mad for you, so don’t be angry anymore...” Yoto repeatedly begged the duke.

The sight of it made Father Blutgang’s chest tighten. He had no way to know what was behind her words, but he suspected it had to do with the hellish spectacle from a thousand years ago.

“I won’t, Yoto. I won’t. Never again.”

With a snap of the duke’s fingers, they were surrounded by a warm, green magic circle. Thin, jade-green threads extended from it as the circle gently rotated like a windmill, touching Yoto’s wounds and slowly closing them. A similar circle appeared next to Father Blutgang, healing his bloodied body as well.

“I won’t move from here until Yoto is healed. He’s in your hands, Zaza.” The duke looked at Alma as ever more bloodlust surged out of the boy.

“Th-Thank you! I’ll definitely save him!”

“But bear in mind that once one has fallen, no half-hearted means will bring them back.”

Though Alma was dripping with blood, the duke was all too familiar with the bestial look in his eyes. In chasing his ideals, he had become blind to everything else. He had grown to hate the world and wanted to control everything, falling to the darkness. Once a person reached that point, no one could blame you if you had to kill them to stop them.

But Zaza knew that and still said she would save him. “I’m ready! I’ll handle this!” Zaza stood before her fellow monk. “Alma.”

“Are you going to fight me, Zaza?” Alma’s wounds were smaller now. He had absorbed more mana from his surroundings and was using his monk powers to heal himself. “I thought you of all people would understand.”

“How could I? What is all this? This can’t be the salvation you wanted. Look around you. You’ve stolen more than just power. The forest, the river, all the living creatures—you’ve taken everything you can from the cycle of reincarnation. Aren’t *you* the one who told me salvation couldn’t be based on sacrifice?!”

“I did say that. Salvation can’t be achieved by ignoring people who could be saved,” Alma said, but his eyes hardened. “That’s why I need power! Enough power to drive off a dragon!”

“That’s so stupid.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said that’s stupid!” Zaza shouted at the top of her lungs, making Alma’s bloodlust flare up even higher.

“Salvation is stupid?!”

“Who cares about power?! I’ve never once been saved by your power. It was your kindness and earnest passion for salvation that I fell in love with! So why is power all you’re going on about?!”

“Quiet. What would you know about salvation?” Alma scoffed. “You treat

training as playtime, living without a care in the world!”

Zaza stood firm. “I’ve learned a lot about salvation since I left the temple. Salvation isn’t about imposing your will on others. It’s about watching from the outside and providing help. You’ve never *once* said you needed more power just because you got beaten!”

Alma fell silent. His wounds healed, he was once again clad in a sinister purple aura as if to say further conversation was unnecessary. His limbs darkened, gradually taking on the appearance of a shadowy silhouette once again.

“Barobute, we need to get that armor off of him. Alma isn’t this type of person. I feel like the armor’s making things worse.”

“It sure is,” Barobute agreed. “The founder’s armor was originally made to absorb the mountain’s power and distribute it to everyone, amplifying mana. All that anger with nowhere to go is mixing with the earth’s mana and making a mess of his mind.”

Barobute held his hand out. Zaza looked at him and nodded, taking his hand as he chuckled.

“Barobute?” she asked.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking that my masters are so alike. Julia also fell for someone and ended up standing up to father for him. You really are her spitting image.”

“Really? The founder did too?!”

Barobute smiled. “You bet. This truly is her will. But I’m not here to see Julia’s reincarnation. I want to see *your* story, Zaza. Take my hand once again, Master.” Barobute looked earnestly at Zaza. “This is your first time wielding me. Are you ready?”

“I wish people would stop asking me that.” Zaza looked Barobute in the eyes. “I’ve been prepared from the very start. All this time, I’ve been chasing after Teacher and Alma, but I’m a monk, through and through! I’m going to pursue my own salvation!” Blue flames blazed in Zaza’s eyes as fire swirled around them both.

“Then I’ll support you along that path! Our salvation begins here, partner!” The flames flared up, then disappeared in the blink of an eye. Zaza emerged fully equipped with her demonic armament.

“You were a full suit of armor?!” Zaza shouted, looking down at the armor she now wore.

“Surprised? Julia had the same reaction.”

The layered, almost bellows-shaped sword had split into four segments and attached to Zaza’s arms and legs. Each piece was weightless and could be used as a shield, swung like a sword, or even thrust like a spear.

“I’ll get back up as many times as it takes! Until I die!” Alma howled, unleashing his dreadful miasma. Only his face remained uncovered by the black film. He must not have had enough strength to maintain it anymore. “So long as I have the founder’s armor, I will see my salvation through! The monks no longer matter! I’ll prove that I’m right by defeating you, Zaza!”

“I’ll bring you back! I swear!” Zaza dashed forward, closing the distance between them.

“Hit him as hard as you can! The armor’s power shouldn’t be able to block it!” Following Barobute’s instructions, Zaza thrust out her right fist.

Alma looked relaxed, his guard not fully up. He seemed certain the invisible wall would protect him like it had with Father Blutgang. Zaza had a flashback of her teacher being blown away and felt a jolt of fear, but she powered through it, fully extending her arm. For a moment it seemed like the wall would repel her after all, but then it pierced straight through and connected with Alma’s face.

“Gah! I-Impossible!”

Zaza couldn’t believe it. “It worked!”

“I thought so. Those black arms are made with the power of Julia’s armor. They’re tainted by his bloodlust, but they’re still Mt. Eirimt’s mana at their core. I can negate them!”

“As long as I can hit him, I don’t care what they are!” said Zaza, unleashing a

flurry of blows. Her fists effortlessly passed through. Zaza wasn't as physically strong as Father Blutgang and couldn't finish Alma off in a single blow, so she made up for it in numbers. She came at him from every angle, striking him in countless different ways. "Hiyaaaaah!"

It was difficult to believe they were fighting with their fists from the sounds shaking the riverbed. Sparks flew each time their punches and kicks crossed paths. Alma was able to avoid most of Zaza's blows at first, but as she continued to unleash strikes like a whirlwind of flames, he began to get hit by one, then another.

However, there was more to Alma than just his desire for salvation. His counterattacks were well practiced, and if Zaza let her guard down for even a moment, knifehand strikes and kicks would come flying at areas she wasn't prepared to defend.

Watching the two of them, Father Blutgang narrowed his eyes. Zaza looked more like she was doing an exorcism dance than fighting. She twirled around, covered in blue flames. Her arms parried, caught, and thrust. Her legs swept, stepped, dodged and kicked. Blue flames trailed her every move, her technique as perfect as could be. Father Blutgang saw a side of her he hadn't been able to see when they'd sparred, much less when she was cursed. Tears falling onto his hands, he finally realized how far she had come.

"Duke, could you hurry up with that healing magic?" Father Blutgang asked.

"I'm going as fast as I can. Are you planning on using *that*?"

As the last of his wounds closed, Father Blutgang stood up. "She's up against the founder's armor. I think it's only fair!" After a series of hand signs, a golden magic circle appeared beneath the priest's feet and soon stretched towards Zaza and Alma. "Circle of the Binding Eye!"

Father Blutgang's vision once again went gray. Before him he saw the dancing Zaza and the beastly Alma. He stared at Alma. A dark black rope stretched from the founder's breastplate, wrapping around him and amplifying his anger, grief, and bloodlust. Then he noticed it was concentrated mainly on a single part of his body—a place called the "tanden." With the highest concentration of chakra in the body, the tanden was located beneath the navel.

“There, huh? Tch, Alma’s not gonna let me get a clear shot. In that case...”

As the priest made his assessment, the clash between Zaza and Alma steadily heated up.

“Master! Below!” Zaza immediately backed up in response to Barobute’s warning and a white flash cut a line right through where she had been standing. Alma had unleashed a kick with an almost swordlike gleam to it.

“Whoa!”

“That was Julia’s Lotus Blade Dance! It looks like the armor’s power really does let him use all the Eight Flowers’ techniques! Still, he’s nothing compared to the real thing! Don’t be afraid!” Barobute reassured her.

“Leave it to me!”

Zaza once again charged in. Alma put his guard up and seemed to be aiming to counter her, but Zaza was undeterred. All the force abruptly disappeared from her blow and she instead grabbed Alma’s outstretched left hand.

“Got you!” Her eyes opened wide, all her chakra flowing to her hand.

“Well, aren’t you sneaky? That was the right call though. Exploit the openings in his counter. He was expecting another flurry!” said Barobute.

“Exactly! Revolving Phoenix Palm!” A loud explosion rang out. With Barobute neutralizing Alma’s defenses, this one struck true.

Emerging from the smoke, Alma was grinding his teeth and holding his arm. For a moment, it appeared to be broken, but a dull creaking sound could be heard as the armor’s healing power took effect. “Damn you!” Alma nearly fell over backwards, then took up his stance again. It was like the armor was controlling him. He was a puppet of the bloodlust it had amplified.

“Zaza!” Father Blutgang, clad in bright red chakra, appeared behind Alma and pinned his arms behind him.

“Let go of me! You only barely escaped death!” Alma twisted and turned, trying to escape, but Father Blutgang wouldn’t let him. Consumed by anger, Alma used the armor’s power to call forth countless black arms and strike the priest from behind. It sounded like he was being constantly pelted by magic, but

Father Blutgang didn't budge. "Release me!"

"Like hell I'm gonna let you go! Zaza, his tanden is connected to the armor!"

Zaza couldn't see anything, but if her teacher was going out of his way to tell her that, it had to be a hint as to how to save Alma. "That doesn't tell me anything! What am I supposed to do?!"

"Nothin' too difficult! Just hit the connection with all the chakra you've got!"

A black arm grabbed Father Blutgang by the head, but just as he was about to lose consciousness, his eyes lit up and he held on, his fighting spirit blazing.

A black shadow was slowly rising at Alma's feet. He was desperately trying to clad himself in the silhouette again.

"Teacher!" Zaza shouted.

"Don't hesitate! There's no time! Save Alma!"

Zaza looked at Alma, then stepped forward with a shout. She created a small explosion at her feet and used it to propel herself. It hadn't worked when she'd tried it on Father Blutgang, but it was more than enough to catch Alma off guard. His eyes went wide as she struck him in the face. He must not have expected such a sudden burst of speed.

Zaza was brimming with fighting spirit, and Barobute responded in kind, the pale blue armor glowing with light. Alma continued trying to wrap himself in the dark silhouette, defending himself with the black arms. Zaza lowered her hips and thrust her fist directly at Alma's tanden. As her fist moved forward, the power streaming from Barobute increased even more. She ignored the black arms coming at her and pushed on, not stopping for anything.

She envisioned the fist of the teacher she so admired, its draconic aura etched into her mind. If he could do it, so could she. Fighting spirit in the shape of a bird's talons materialized along her arm. Just like Father Blutgang clad himself in the strength of a dragon, she clad herself in the explosive flames of the firebird that was the Balsam Phoenix's namesake.

The strength she had longed for had taken shape in her own unique, explosive way.

“What is that?! That’s not one of the Eight Flowers’ techniques!” Alma shouted.

“It’s just an imitation! I call it the Phantom Phoenix’s Cry!” The flaming talons scored a direct hit on Alma’s tanden, and the founder’s armor groaned in protest.



“Keep it up, Master!” said Barobute. “Push through!”

“Yaaaaaaah!”

Alma called out black arms one after another in an attempt to stop her, but the flaming talons vaporized them all. Just as the last one disappeared, the clasps of the founder’s armor broke. “No! My power!”

Zaza’s fist dug into his finally defenseless tanden. “This is for everyone you made cry!” Zaza unleashed another flurry of blows to make sure to seal the deal. Fists, palms, spearhands, kicks, heels. Every possible form of hand and foot collided with Alma.

“Gaaaaaah!”

“Now!” shouted Father Blutgang.

The moment Alma lost consciousness, Zaza grabbed the edge of the founder’s armor and pulled. Despite the clasps having released, it was still stuck to him, making Zaza put all her strength into pulling. “Teacher!”

“Urgh... All right!” The impact of Zaza’s blows hitting him through Alma had almost made Father Blutgang lose consciousness too, but he brought himself back to his senses with a smack to his own head and pulled Alma’s torso as hard as he could.

A shock wave ran through the air as Zaza pulled the founder’s armor off of Alma. It was as though all the mana within exploded once it no longer had a place to go. Zaza managed to use Barobute’s power to brace herself, but Alma and Father Blutgang were both sent flying.

Chapter 9

The Balsam Phoenix said, “Of course.” She’d always believed in him.

“D-Did we win? We won, right?!” Still holding on to the founder’s armor, Zaza unsteadily sat on the ground.

“We did it, Master. Guess you could say our first battle ended in a surprising upset.”

The armor Zaza was wearing glowed, and Barobute returned to his human form. Zaza tried to take his hand, but the battle had taken so much out of her that she couldn’t stand up.

“Are you all right, Master?”

“Ah ha ha, I’ve never been this exhausted before. O-Oh, right! How’s Alma?!” Zaza panicked and looked in the direction he had been blasted and saw him already standing, in a daze. “Alma!”

Zaza called out to him, but Alma just glanced at her, then returned to staring into the void. He stood there alone for a while, and just when it looked like his smile had returned, he pulled a small knife from his waistband and held it to his throat.

“Nooooo! Alma! Stop! Don’t do it!” Zaza tried to stand, only to collapse back to her knees. Her first time wielding a demonic armament had taken a toll on her body. “Barobute, please!”

“I-I can’t stop him! We’re too far away!”

Alma’s eyes went wide, and he thrust the blade towards his throat.

“You dumbass!” Father Blutgang shouted as he lunged for Alma.

Though the priest sent the knife Alma was holding flying, the young monk was undeterred. He next tried to use the nail of his thumb to cut his carotid artery,

forcing Father Blutgang to grab his arms to prevent him from killing himself.

“You’ve got another thing comin’ if you think takin’ your own life is enough to make up for all the trouble you’ve caused! You stole the founder’s armor!”

Alma just turned his head towards Father Blutgang and sneered. “Blutgang Artzalight. Even you, the strongest monk in history, couldn’t change the temple’s teachings. And even I, with the unparalleled power of the founder’s armor, couldn’t change the world. I have no regrets. Kill me. I shall die resenting the world itself. That is the only salvation left to me!”

Father Blutgang recoiled when he saw the look in Alma’s eyes. They were the same as Zaza’s when she’d been cursed. Deep and dark, like looking into the abyss. Full of despair and hatred.

That was the same headspace he’d been in after being stricken by helplessness in his pursuit of salvation. Father Blutgang understood what the duke meant. When a person got like this, they would do things that could never be undone. Even if they stopped Alma now, he would just go right back down the same path.

“Can’t you see this is a mistake? What has power given you? What did you gain from wearing the founder’s armor and manipulating ten thousand monks? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about how you made Zaza cry!”

Alma glared at Father Blutgang. His eyes were full of anger, yet tears were pooling in the corners. “So what?! If I had been able to realize my ideals, none of this would have happened. I simply failed. Now kill me. If you don’t, I’ll just try again. And this time I’ll succeed in getting my revenge on the monks.” Alma scoffed, sneering at the monk who held him back. “If you’d like, I could even kill Zaza right in front of you.”

“You little!” Father Blutgang snapped.

Maybe the duke was right and he couldn’t be saved; the deep hopelessness created by mankind had given rise to evil. Alma would become the one to destroy the cycle of reincarnation if allowed to. He was no longer human. It was Father Blutgang’s duty as a monk to destroy the enemies of salvation, even if that meant being expelled.

“If death is your salvation, then I’ll grant your wish. A teacher’s duty is to protect his student. Get ready!”

“Stoooooop!” Zaza’s sorrowful cry echoed through the riverbed, and Father Blutgang’s fist froze just before he brought it down. “P-Please, stop. Don’t kill him. Alma’s just tormenting himself. He’s not that kind of person!”

Zaza crawled towards them in desperation. Unable to stand by and watch, Barobute lent her his shoulder and helped her limp forward. Her knees were bleeding from scraping against the rough gravel of the riverbed and her face was soaked with tears, but her eyes were nonetheless fixed on Alma.

“No, Zaza. He’s left humanity behind.”

“That’s not true! If he was truly set on revenge, he wouldn’t have supported me all this time! He wouldn’t have taken my hand when you left and I was devastated!” Zaza pulled away from Barobute and bowed on the ground, begging her teacher.

“Zaza...”

“Please, Teacher! Don’t kill him! I *know* Alma has a great future ahead of him! He trained harder than anyone else! Studied harder than anyone else! He was kinder than anyone else! I just can’t accept that he’d become obsessed with revenge!” Zaza was on her hands and knees, bowing over and over.

Father Blutgang was shocked. She didn’t just have a crush on Alma. She saw the ideal monk in him and had been following in his footsteps. Even though she had surpassed him, she continued respecting and striving to be like him.

He had thought her request for the Bellflower Dragon armor and dream to see the world with Alma was just the result of childish feelings and had looked down on her for them. He had assumed she was being immature, but she genuinely saw her teacher in Alma and thought Alma was deserving of his armor.

The priest took another look at Alma and saw him shedding tears. His earlier bloodlust was nowhere to be seen. His brow was no longer furrowed and his eyes were open. All the hostility had dissipated. Zaza’s pleas and the memories she recounted must have brought him back to his senses. Father Blutgang

wondered now if he was the one who had turned Alma into a cornered beast. He had rejected Alma's interpretation of salvation until the very end, and had even decided to kill the young monk after deciding he was unsavable.

Power can't change anything—how true that was. It was Zaza's words—her faith—that had saved Alma. Monks were envoys of salvation, guardians of the cycle of reincarnation. Now that Zaza had brought him back, he was part of that cycle. He was no longer a threat for Father Blutgang to swing his fists at.

Father Blutgang looked over at the duke, who simply smiled back without a word. "I know," the priest muttered to himself, releasing Alma. Zaza crawled over and embraced Alma, who just sat there stunned and let it happen.

"Why did you forgive me, Zaza?" Alma asked. "After what I did to you..."

Zaza looked at Alma's face and smiled. "If you're really sorry, how about you try to change Mt. Eirimt with me?"

Alma's eyes went wide with surprise, then he lowered his gaze. "I can't, Zaza. I'm a criminal. You might have stopped me, but my crimes can't be undone." He took a deep breath before continuing. "At some point my ideals were replaced by a desire for revenge. I was a survivor from a village in a distant country that was razed by a dragon. When the Holy Fist slew the dragon that came to the temple and was expelled despite his great achievement, something inside me crumbled."

Alma felt that his family had been killed by the temple's teachings. Then on top of that, the one who inspired hope in him had been expelled. He couldn't handle it. His despair piled up and erupted into the flames of revenge. He stole the founder's armor and took control of the ten thousand monks to force his ideals upon the world. Perhaps somewhere deep down, he had wanted Zaza to hold a special place beside him. Yet when her curse had been removed just as he had almost accomplished his goal, he turned his vengeance on her, as though he had to mend the hole that she had torn in his perfect ideals.

"I even turned on you, Zaza," he said, still not looking up at her. "What I've done can't be forgiven."

"To be honest, it was a shock for me too. But this isn't your problem alone." Zaza stood up and looked at Father Blutgang. Her eyes were shining like a

flickering blaze, her expression beaming with strength. “Mt. Eirimt can’t go on like this. I’ve thought so ever since Teacher was expelled.” Since coming to the village, Zaza had learned how her teacher had suffered and why he’d decided to settle down in Montt.

Father Blutgang was salvation personified. He didn’t stick to Mt. Eirimt’s doctrine; he had found his own answer, and that answer was something that went beyond the mountain’s teachings—something even more valuable. It moved her far more than the salvation she had been taught, and it was something far brighter.

Nor was this revelation Father Blutgang’s alone. The other villagers had also found their own answers, and that was what had led them here. The duke and Yoto were no exception.

As for Barobute, he decided that he wouldn’t force Zaza down the path of salvation the founder had already walked, and would instead take her hand and guide her down her own path. Now she knew what true salvation was. It wasn’t a matter of unquestioningly defending past ways, nor was it a matter of destroying them and rewriting everything. It was about clearing the way with your own personal faith and creating something new.

“The temple’s teachings made you both suffer. I don’t believe salvation is something that should make people unhappy. That’s the real problem!” Zaza extended her shaking hand to Alma. “We’ve been using the doctrine as an excuse to ignore the issues right in front of us for too long. We need to reconsider the teachings so this sadness doesn’t ever happen again!”

“B-But Zaza, even Blutgang couldn’t get them to change,” Alma said.

Zaza just smiled and pulled Barobute over. Barobute blushed and his eyes darted around as he was suddenly brought close to her. “Ta-da! We’ve got the founder’s demonic armament! If Barobute says to change, even the head monk will have to listen!”

Alma’s eyes went wide at Zaza’s nonchalant statement, but Barobute’s catlike eyes opened even wider. “Excuse me, Master? You didn’t form a pact with me just for this, did you?” he asked.

“Of course not,” she giggled. “Though I did think you might be able to smooth

things over just a little bit back when my armor was broken.”

Barobute sighed. “My goodness, you really are just like Julia. Both that beaming smile and shrewdness of yours. Honestly, what am I supposed to do with you?”

“Z-Zaza...” Alma’s voice trailed off.

“Don’t make that face. It’ll be okay, I have a plan. Trust me. For now, just get yourself healed up and then we’ll all go back together, all right?”

At that, Alma could only cry. It wasn’t that Zaza had forgiven him, it was that she had never stopped believing in him in the first place. She never once believed he would do such a horrible thing. That was why her wish reached Father Blutgang and the duke. Her faith was all it took for her to bring him salvation.

Father Blutgang left them alone and headed over to the duke, scratching his head.

“Are you all right, Blut?” asked the duke. “Zaza’s finisher hit you through Alma, didn’t it?”

“My stomach still stings, but I’ll manage. I focused all my power there before it hit.” Rubbing his stomach, Father Blutgang silently sat next to the duke. “Zaza went and surpassed me. She’s even goin’ to change Mt. Eirimt with the one she loves.” His face looked refreshed, as though a weight had finally been lifted off his shoulders. His eyes were sparkling, and not from his Binding Eye. It had been a long time since the duke had seen his friend so happy, and he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Nothin’ more reliable than that, eh, Duke? I can finally be proud of her. Wah ha ha!”

“Indeed. You have every right to be proud of your student.”

The three youths were bathed in the light of the sun, now directly overhead. They embraced in front of the picturesque blue sky, like a scene out of a painting. A stream of clear water flowed through the trench that the duke had hollowed out.

His power had changed the very terrain itself, but soon it would be as though nothing had happened. It seemed the earth was reminding them that flaunting

their power would never amount to anything. The surrounding trees seemed to be overflowing with mana as well, now that the founder's armor had been removed from Alma. Gradually, life returned to them, and leaves began to sprout from branches that had so recently withered away.

"The earth's mana is returning. It's been released from the armor now that it has nowhere to go," said the duke.

"'All's well that ends well.' Isn't that your favorite saying?" Father Blutgang nudged the duke.

"Indeed it is. I'm sure they'll go on to bring salvation to the world and help others find their happy endings as well."

"And then our job is done?"

The duke laughed and shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, it's only just beginning. As the ones who watch over them, I'm sure we'll get dragged into all sorts of troubles. And when the time comes, it's our duty to support them."

Father Blutgang shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Guess so. Here I thought I'd finally be able to retire."

The priest fumbled around his chest pocket and smiled, pulling out his favorite cigarettes. He held one in his mouth as the duke snapped his fingers to light it for him. Taking a long drag, he exhaled smoke out of his nose like a dragon's breath. They had been doing this for ten years now, but Father Blutgang finally felt like he could sit next to the duke as his equal.

Epilogue

Half a month later, Zaza, Alma, and Barobute returned to the temple on Mt. Eirimt. When they reached the gate, the head monk and others came running over to meet them.

Gilmeus had already delivered a letter from the duke explaining the situation. The monks at the temple had been skeptical, but upon seeing Zaza return with both the founder's armor and Barobute, the head monk and the others bowed and welcomed them inside. He didn't even give the order to seize Alma, the one behind all the chaos.

The roads and buildings leading to the main temple had all been repaired thanks to the arrival of relief supplies and craftsmen from the Kingdom of Bilegga that Gilmeus had arranged. Other countries had also sent large donations and supplies, not wanting Bilegga to get a leg up on them, so the temple actually had more than they knew what to do with.

When they arrived at the main temple, the head monk, Eight Flowers, and other high-ranking monks all lined up before Zaza and prostrated themselves.

Barobute stood before them and spoke. "Hear me well, everyone. In the name of the Dragon Tail of Ignorance, Barobute, I hereby proclaim that my master, Zaza Celette, is the reincarnation of the founder. I presume you all know what that means?"

"Yes!" The monks all pressed their heads to the floor in reverence.

"Are you sure about this, Master?" Barobute asked Zaza.

"It'll be fine! I practiced over and over on the way here! Don't worry about a thing!"

Though Zaza was brimming with confidence, Barobute was sweating from nerves. Sure, he was the founder's partner and had started the temple with her, but it had massively expanded over the course of the past millennium. The monks of the past couldn't be compared to the well-trained warriors lined up

before him.

“By the founder’s guidance, I was able to meet her unparalleled partner Barobute. And through my battle with the founder’s armor, I learned something: we have been too strict in adhering to the founder’s teachings.”

Not a single person objected. That was to be expected, as Zaza had not only returned from her Eight Flowers’ trial hand in hand with Barobute, but she had also retrieved the founder’s missing armor. As far as the temple was concerned, her word was law.

Zaza took a deep breath, trying to stop her heart from jumping out of her chest. “The founder’s teachings are priceless commandments that should be protected. But we can’t let them bind us and prevent us from doing what must be done. That’s what Alma here taught me!”

Alma bowed deeply. Zaza hadn’t wanted him to bow to them, but she endured it and gripped Barobute’s hand tight, firing herself up.

“He might have stolen the founder’s armor, but he alone does not bear the blame for the temple’s thousand-year history. Alma has given us the opportunity to rethink our ways. As proof, take a look at this! The Bellflower Dragon armor has acknowledged him!”

Alma stood up straight. The sight of the Bellflower Dragon armor on his chest caused the monks to cry out in astonishment.

“Not only did you meet Duke Tyrfing and Sir Barobute, but you even found Blutgang?!”

“It must truly be the founder’s guidance. This crisis was just another trial to overcome!”

“This means the founder has forgiven Alma’s transgressions. We have no right to object.”

Once again, the monks all prostrated. It didn’t come as a surprise to Zaza and the others. When they were getting ready to leave the village, Father Blutgang had given them the Bellflower Dragon armor and advised them.

“If Alma can put this armor on and make his way back to Mt. Eirimt, then that

means the founder has forgiven him and welcomed him back to the temple. Neither I nor the head monk will be able to complain.”

As a result, they’d had an uneventful and pleasant trip back. Just as Father Blutgang had said, Alma had been forgiven.

“Go on, Master, say your favorite line!”

“I know! Time for the finishing blow!” Zaza squeezed her shaking fists. She looked over at Alma, but he was bowing his head with his eyes closed. *He’s so cool!* Zaza thought, getting reenergized and taking another deep breath.

“So from now on, let’s think about the meaning of salvation without using the founder’s teachings as an excuse for inaction. The cycle of reincarnation is a circle, and we should strive to make that circle bigger and better! For the next thousand years, we’re going to be monks the founder would be proud of!”

The head monk and the others bowed their heads yet again.

Barobute smiled at her. “You did it, Master. Your new salvation starts here.”

When she heard the word “salvation,” Zaza thought back to her teacher in his priest garments. If only he could have been here. If only he could have seen her. How happy would he have been? When she had asked him to come back to the temple, he’d just shaken his head and said his job was to watch over them now. She couldn’t get him to leave the village. She didn’t understand what he meant, but that was okay.

The monks of Mt. Eirimt’s insistence on sticking to the doctrine had caused a lot of sadness. Zaza couldn’t get hung up on chasing after her teacher forever or she’d end up just like them. She would open up a new path for herself alongside Barobute and Alma.

Zaza was suddenly overcome by the urge to travel and see more of the world so she could make the temple an even better place. Traveling with Alma had always been her goal, and as they planned and imagined where they’d go, she had gotten even more hooked on the idea. She had greatly enjoyed her stay in Montt Village, and knowing the world had even more amazing places to offer made it impossible to want to stay cooped up in the temple.

“Master?” Barobute brought her back to reality.

“S-So that’s why I was thinking I’d go out and see the world again! Gathering information is the best way to bring new ideas to the temple! Come on, Barobute!”

At this, the monks whispered to each other, lamenting the fact that another trial had just presented itself. Even the head monk’s mouth was agape at Zaza’s suddenly saying she was leaving.

As Zaza took a step to leave, Barobute grabbed her arm and stopped her. “H-Hold on a second! You can’t leave now! You’re supposed to guide them! Isn’t that the direction the whole speech was going?!”

Zaza was at her limit. She didn’t have the temperament to be a leader. Even the simple speech she’d just given in front of everyone made her feel like her face was on fire. “Just consider this another part of the founder’s will! Come on Alma, you too!” Zaza started to walk away again, only to be grabbed by the scruff of her neck. “A-Alma?!”

“Master Zaza.”

It was the first time Alma had ever addressed her with such respect. His stern eyes seemed to be scolding her. She found this assertive side of him really cool as well, but feeling like she was being disciplined by her teacher, she meekly slumped her shoulders.

Letting go of her, Alma continued. “While we were in the village, Master Blutgang entrusted me with the task of guiding you to become a superb head monk.” He raised a skeptical eyebrow. “He also warned me that you hated standing in front of others and would do anything to get out of it.”

Her teacher had seen right through her. Zaza could imagine him laughing at her and saying, “You’ve still got a long way to go.” Still, she didn’t give up.

“B-But you know how I am!”

“I certainly do. But you and Master Blutgang saved my life, which means the founder spared me. As such, I intend to give my utmost to live up to my title as a monk. I won’t be spoiling you anymore.”

“S-Seriously?!?”

Zaza broke down in tears and threw a tantrum, but Alma refused to relent. Barobute didn't know whose side to take and looked around in confusion with the other monks.

"We'll at least stay until the rebuilding is complete!" he finally compromised.

The head monk watched on as the solemn mood was completely ruined. "I fear for our future," he muttered to himself. Though he sighed, there was a soft smile on his stony face.



The night after Zaza set out for the temple, Yoto sat alone at the counter of the Chimera Tavern.

Meikris reached over the counter and patted Yoto's head. "It's unusual to see you by yourself, Yoto. What's the duke up to?"

Yoto looked up from resting her chin in her hands, a small smile on her face. "He was drinking with Father Blutgang. They were celebrating Zaza's journey back, but they drank so much they ended up falling asleep. Even with all the windows open the whole house smelled like alcohol, so I left to get some fresh air."

"Ah, I see. Well eat your fill and try to cheer up." Meikris reached over the counter again and handed Yoto a bowl of the Chimera Tavern's famous beef stew.

Yoto immediately perked up, her cowlick bouncing with happiness. "Thanks!" She shoveled it down with her usual vigor, and just as she was about to ask for seconds, the doors to the tavern swung open.

"Oh? Is that the little demonic sword I spy?"

Porion sashayed her way over to Yoto. Yoto shot her a look that said "Don't you dare," but the witch ignored it and plopped down next to her anyway.

"I happened to catch Gilmeus on his way back to the capital, so I stopped him and asked what happened. I hear you had a hard time."

"It certainly wasn't fun. You didn't come all the way here just to tease me, did you?" Yoto asked.

“Of course not! I was genuinely worried about you.”

Yoto just shrugged her shoulders, unsure if she could take Porion’s word for it.

“Aww, are you pouting? How adorable!” Porion cooed, then asked in a whisper, “Jokes aside, I really *was* worried. The duke got mad, didn’t he?”

Yoto furrowed her brow, wondering how much Porion actually knew. The duke’s all-out rage would make even the village of heroes tremble in fear. Being a witch, Porion was sensitive to even distant changes in mana. Perhaps that was how she had noticed something was wrong. “He did. But I asked him to stop, and he did.”

“My! Is that the power of a daughter’s love? You must be incredibly dear to him.”

Yoto kept eating her stew, unable to tell if she was being treated like a child or not. Regardless, the ambiguity annoyed her. Suddenly she put down her spoon like she had just remembered something.

“What’s wrong? You haven’t finished your stew.”

“There’s actually something I wanted to ask you. About love. Humans are strange. Why do love and hatred give them such great strength?”

Porion’s face turned serious for a moment at the unusual request, then she went right back to her normal self. “What an odd thing to ask. Is this about Zaza?” She smirked at the maid and saw Yoto blush shyly and nod her head. Porion almost started making fun of her, but Yoto’s eyes were more serious than ever. Staring into the pinkish-silver gemstones, Porion lost the urge to tease her. “Great strength, huh?”

“Zaza was almost killed by the one she loved, yet she forgave him. I just can’t understand it.”

Porion folded her arms, wondering how to explain it. “Did Zaza forgive him unconditionally?”

“It didn’t seem that way. She called his sins ‘sins,’ but she still forgave him.”

“Then the answer is simple. It’s because that’s what love is.”

For a second Yoto thought she was being mocked, but she put her hand on her chin and really thought about it. “That’s a little cliché, isn’t it? Though I do see it a lot in romance novels.”

“They say the words you see most often are the closest to the truth.”

“I see. Love. Love certainly is amazing.” Though Yoto muttered like she was impressed, her head was still tilted in confusion. She was a demonic sword who admired but ultimately only imitated humans. She was as close to a human as she possibly could be, and would have been indistinguishable to anyone who didn’t know better, yet she didn’t seem to understand those words or the feelings welling up inside her.

“From my expert point of view, love is what brings that sort of power out of people. Emotions that spawn such powerful feelings aren’t to be taken lightly.”

“The power of love isn’t to be taken lightly...” Yoto sighed. “I just can’t fully wrap my head around it.”

“I think you’ve felt it yourself. You just don’t know it.” After that, Porion just giggled and refused to elaborate.

Not fully satisfied, Yoto ate three helpings of beef stew and left the Chimera Tavern with a full belly at least. “Love, huh?”

Yoto walked down the village streets alone under the light of the moon, her shoes clacking against the stone. She knew what the word “love” meant and was capable of breaking it down logically, but being a sword and not a human, it was difficult for her to truly understand it.

It was difficult, but she had seen it firsthand: Zaza forgiving Alma, accepting his sins, and still reaching out to him. She had been smiling, her face radiant like a goddess. It was a little embarrassing to look at, yet also somehow heartwarming. It was similar to the warm feeling she got spending the days with her master.

If love was that sort of feeling—the kind of feeling one coveted to a painful degree, where just holding the person’s hand made you happy—then it was no wonder Zaza had been willing to risk her life for it. Looking at the old castle in the distance, Yoto felt a rush of inexplicable feelings. A scene from a time long

ago played in her mind. A thousand years ago, back when she had called the Demon Lord and her master her mother and father.

“I see. So that’s what Master felt for mother.”

If they had shared that feeling she had just come to vaguely understand, then perhaps that love was why her master had killed her mother. A feeling both happy and sad welled up inside Yoto’s chest, then silently faded away.

“Master.” She unintentionally called his name to the empty sky. “I should head home. They might be making a mess of the place.”

Yoto made an excuse to herself, but really she just wanted to be by his side as soon as possible and quickly trotted through the night until she made it home.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Akinosuke Nishiyama. How did you like *The Retired Demon of the Maxed-Out Village 2: The Holy Fist's Vow*? This time Father Blutgang reunites with his beloved disciple, only to find out that her armor has been cursed.

This volume touches on Father Blutgang's past. Why is a man who can defeat dragons with his bare hands working as a priest in a remote village? The catalyst for all the events that unfold is the arrival of the beautiful monk girl, Zaza, but what exactly is a monk? If a martial artist's goal is to meet people stronger than them, then a monk's goal is to train their mind and body and reach enlightenment through that process. In many video games, a monk uses sacred magic while fighting enemies with their bare hands. You become your own source of damage, but your weapons can be frustratingly limited.

The key word of this volume is "teach." What people have been taught can sometimes bind them. When I practiced martial arts for several years, I stubbornly did everything by the book and didn't make much progress, but when an outside factor prompted me to try something different, I was able to overcome my roadblocks.

In martial arts, this is what's known as "shuhari." The first stage, "shu," means to learn and follow the established basics and fundamentals. When you reach "ha," you tear down those basics and create a style unique to you. Finally, "ri" is when it has all become natural—you have departed from rules and techniques and let your mind guide you. In this story, Zaza reaches "ha" through her experiences in Montt Village and inherits what Father Blutgang never could from the freedom of his "ri" standpoint. It's all about love. Father Blutgang was surely changed through his reunion with Zaza. I hope I was able to convey their feelings, as well as those of the duke, Yoto, and everyone in the village watching over them.

Now this is the part where I give thanks. I'm grateful to my editors Nakamizo-

sama and Tsuchida-sama for guiding me through a second volume. It was a difficult project this time, but I can't thank you enough for all your advice and patience. I apologize for how much I worried you.

Thank you again to the illustrator TAa-sama for your wonderful work in this second volume. I couldn't control myself when I saw your illustrations of Zaza and Gilmeus. It was like they had come right out of the story!

To all my fellow writers, thank you for being there for advice and listening to my dumb stories. Writing is a lonely endeavor, so the support we give each other is truly precious. I'm still reflecting on how lucky I am.

To my friends and wife who always support me, I once again offer my heartfelt gratitude, and to the readers who picked up this book, my highest thanks. I will continue to pour my heart and soul into every stroke of my pen and deliver happiness and satisfaction to you all. Thank you for your support.

-Akinosuke Nishiyama

2

THE RETIRED DEMON

of the Maxed-Out Village

◆ The Holy Fist's Vow ◆

Author
Akinosuke Nishiyama

Illustrator **TAa**







"Not in a million years.
There are plenty of
strong people besides
me out there."

"I want you to
see my growth,
Teacher!"



"I heard everything!
You seem to be in
quite the pickle,
my friend!"

BARD
Gilmeus



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The Retired Demon of the Maxed-Out Village: Volume 2

by Akinosuke Nishiyama

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Translated by Jarod Blackburn Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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KANSUTOMURA NO GOINKYO DAEMON-SAN Vol.2

-HENKYO NO DAIKAJISHI—

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