

HAZURE SKILL

THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A WORTHLESS SKILL IS ACTUALLY
A LEGENDARY ASSASSIN

7

Kennoji

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HAZURE SKILL

THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A WORTHLESS SKILL IS ACTUALLY
A LEGENDARY ASSASSIN

→ Rileyla Diakitep ←

A demon woman, the former demon lord, and Roland's lover. She took a liking to Roland, who defeated her, and lived with him for a time, but...

I wished Rila had asked me for help instead of going off alone, but she likely felt the same back then.

"I am sorry."

"What do you intend to do?"

Talking wouldn't solve anything now. My only option was to drag Rila home, whether she liked it or not.

The Guild Member with a Worthless Skill Is Actually a
Legendary Assassin

→ Roland Argan ←

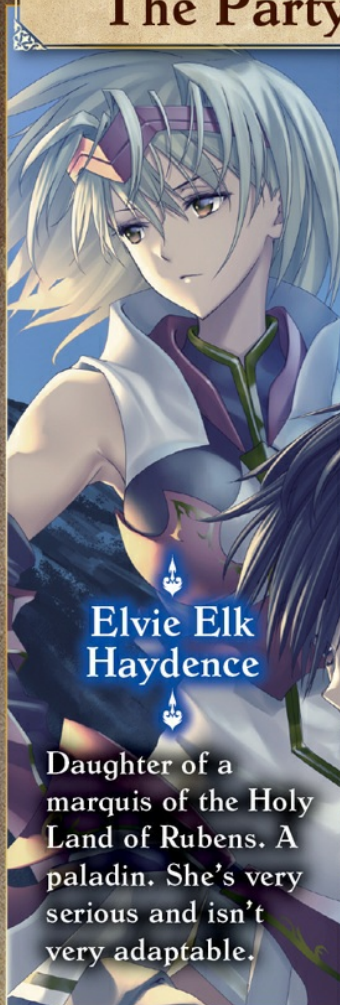
Single-handedly assassinated the strongest demon lord in history. A legendary assassin who ended the war between humanity and demons.

The Party of Heroes



Almelia Felind

Felind Kingdom's first princess and the hero. She's cheerful but innocent and naive.



Elvie Elk Haydence

Daughter of a marquis of the Holy Land of Rubens. A paladin. She's very serious and isn't very adaptable.



Serafin Mariad

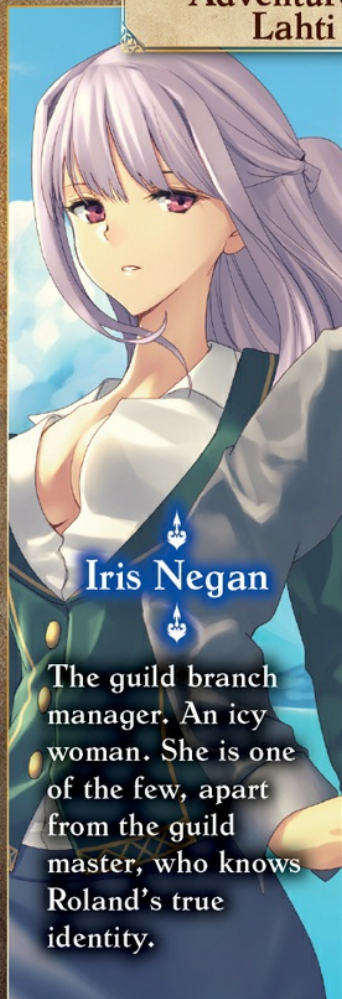
A cleric also referred to as the Saint of Protection. She's easygoing and good at negotiation but an extreme alcoholic.



Lina

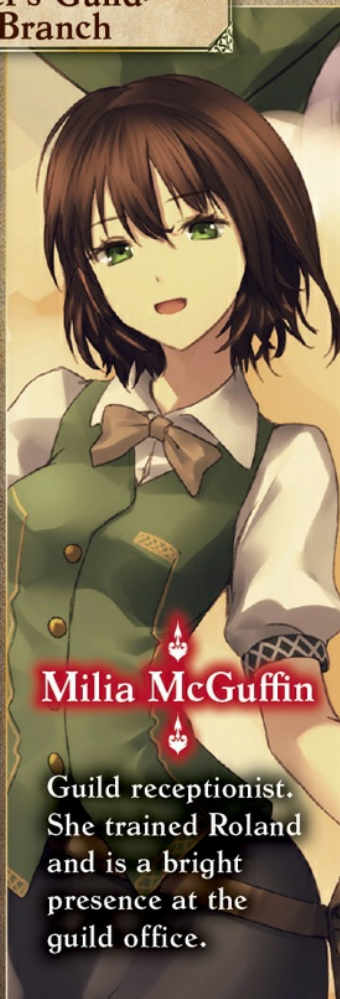
A young mage with extraordinary powers and talent. She's not very expressive, but she cares about her friends.

Adventurer's Guild— Lahti Branch



Iris Negan

The guild branch manager. An icy woman. She is one of the few, apart from the guild master, who knows Roland's true identity.



Milia McGuffin

Guild receptionist. She trained Roland and is a bright presence at the guild office.

Former Demon Lord's Army Leaders



Roje Sandsong

A remarkable elven mage and Rila's loyal retainer. She's talented but often leaves herself open to attack.



Candice Minelad

A vampire who currently works as an adventurer. Excellent at gathering intel and fighting.

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YEN
ON
New York

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1

Second Life

I was starting to get used to my new arm.

It'd been about a week since I started using the armband Wawok Seiv had made me. The band allowed me to use a type of magic called Magi Raegas to manifest a right arm formed of mana. I'd gotten to the point where I could use it for most activities.

Wawok was a vampire inventor and researcher, one impressive enough that even Rila once tried to recruit him to the demon lord's army. However, he disliked pure demons and turned down Rila's invitation.

We'd thought he could fix Rila's collar and searched for him but never expected he was the collar's original creator. And to our surprise, he explained that creating a new collar was quicker than fixing a broken one, so we asked him to do precisely that.

He also made the armband during this time. I didn't request that of Wawok; he'd indulged in it entirely as a side project. Yet the item had become priceless to me.

"Mr. Roland, I'm so glad...that you have a prosthesis now," Milia said when she spotted me using both of my arms to work, just like old times. "You'll need to thank the maker."

"No need. Apparently, he considered the chance to make it the highest honor he could receive."

"Really? He sounds like an odd person," Milia replied, looking taken aback. I rather agreed with her. Despite being a vampire, Wawok seemed more like the personification of scientific inquisition.

He was a strange character, but his skill was undeniable.

I'd tried to repay Wawok, as Milia had suggested, but he'd insisted that feedback on the band and suggesting improvements were thanks enough. The limb generated by the band was blue and partially transparent. Naturally, that would raise questions, so I wore a black cover that went from my fingertips to my shoulder.

I'd had a lot of trouble with fine motor skills initially, but that had improved with practice, and I could write with a pen using the arm. Most people thought the limb was the work of a craftsman who specialized in such prosthetics.

The original plan was actually to reattach my severed right arm, which Rila preserved using magic, but someone had stolen it. I was surprised anyone would want such a thing. Most people would sooner scream upon seeing it than desire to take it.

After we discovered the limb was missing, Elvie, a member of the party of heroes, visited to secretly inform us of King Rubens's sudden death.

"You heard? Apparently, the king of Rubens died," said an adventurer in the guild reception hall.

"Yeah, heard it was from some disease. It was before they chose a successor, too, so it'll probably become a giant dispute," replied another.

Elvie, who was a captain of Rubens's royal guard, had told me the death would be publicly announced as an illness, but in actuality, he'd been assassinated.

A killer had penetrated defenses Elvie, someone I trained, had built. Elvie had requested that I investigate, and after accepting, I headed to Rubens. However, my inspection of the crime scene revealed only one person could have managed such a difficult assassination: me.

I refused to consider the possibility the culprit genuinely was "me," until my doppelgänger kidnapped Rila to draw me out. His goal was to kill me and take my place. Unfortunately for him, I saw an opportunity to test my new armband in battle.

Wawok's handiwork functioned perfectly, granting me new abilities for

combat. In the end, I successfully captured my body double.

We could have been mistaken for twins. He looked and thought like me to the point that even his skill matched mine. After his capture, we attempted to wring information from him, but failed. Elvie and the others tried, too, but nothing worked. That only served to reinforce that this man mirrored me perfectly. I'd heard that he was executed shortly after.

Though he was a fake, I felt somewhat uncomfortable knowing someone exactly like me had been executed. I wondered whether his sudden appearance and the disappearance of my severed right arm were linked. If an entire person could be re-created from their arm, then...

"Mr. Rolaaand? Our lunch break is starting! Would you like to eat with me?" Milia asked. Her face looked unusually serious today.

Rila had prepared a boxed lunch for me. Apparently, it was *normal* to rest at some point during the workday, although eating was optional. Skipping a meal wouldn't affect my productivity, but it seemed that forgoing any nourishment or rest and dedicating oneself to their work wasn't considered *normal*.

"Then please allow me to join you."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. You were the one who invited me, Miss Milia."

"I—I did, but I didn't think you'd say yes. Let me get ready!" Milia hurriedly straightened up her desk. After fixing her hair and prodding at her face while looking in a mirror, Milia picked up her coin purse and let out a determined little huff.

"Shall we go?" she said.

"Sure."

When we tried to leave through the guild's back door, we heard a rather loud "*ahem*." Milia's expression tensed, and she looked over her shoulder.

"What is it, Branch Manager?"

Turning to see what was happening, I spied Branch Manager Iris standing just outside her office with a purse. "Going out for lunch today, are we?" she said.

“Are you going to join us?” Milia questioned.

“Coincidentally, I decided to take my lunch break at the same time today.”

“You were clearly waiting for us!”

“Would you mind terribly if I joined you?”

“I knew it! I know you saw us walking down the hall and came rushing over! You’ve always bragged about how you ‘don’t take lunch breaks during actual lunch’ since ‘everyone takes turns, and the manager goes last’!”

“I just so happened to be taking one at this time today.”

Milia puffed out her cheeks. “Ugh.”

“Whenever I see you two headed out for lunch, I’ll force my way in no matter how awkward it is.”

“How selfish. Fine, do whatever you want.”

And so Iris joined us on our break.

The branch manager took us to a spot she recommended. “I’m paying, so think of this as an opportunity to save a little money,” she explained.

“Sure, I guess...,” Milia groused.

The restaurant was relatively quiet, with only a few other customers. It didn’t seem the sort of place that raucous adventurers visited.

As I looked over the menu, I spied an adventurer who seemed rather out of place sipping liquor at a distant table.

I’d never worked with him, but I’d recognized him nonetheless.

“That’s Stein Markov... I think he’s a D ranker,” Iris whispered. “He’s been frequenting this place a lot recently.”

“I haven’t seen Mr. Stein at the guild much, yet here he is drinking.” Milia didn’t sound especially surprised. Apparently, he hadn’t visited our office lately.

“I guess that means he doesn’t feel like taking on any quests,” I remarked.

Iris replied with a crooked smile. “It does look that way.”

“You typically help the tenacious adventurers who are serious about their

work, Mr. Roland. In reality, most adventurers are more like Mr. Stein,” Milia said.

That was likely true. I was known for approving adventurer hopefuls based on their personal circumstances, even when they fell short in certain regards. Sometimes, I assigned them quests higher than their rank, too.

I always took each individual’s strengths and personality into account. That meant most people who came to me for work sought to become powerful and dreamed of climbing the ranks. Naturally, that meant their quests would become progressively more difficult.

Based on appearances alone, Stein was over forty-five. Perhaps his physical prowess had started to wane. His heyday was likely twenty years ago. All he had under his belt were low-rank quests.



“Barkeep, another glass of wine, please.” Stein flagged down a man who sighed at the order.

“Mr. Stein, much of your tab is still outstanding. We were willing to excuse it for a while because you’re a regular, but we really need you to pay. I’m sorry, but you have to leave. Until you settle your bill, we can’t allow you in again.”

Stein took the barkeep’s complaint quite poorly, mumbling, “Fine... Sorry.” He set some change on the counter and stood to leave.

“That’s not even enough for today... Honestly.” The barkeep sighed again as he counted the money.

Since I was curious, I asked him about Stein. “That man drank here even though he couldn’t pay for it?”

“Oh, you’re a guild staffer. Yes, he did. He used to have a lot of influence here. He regularly brought friends, and they’d all have a grand time drinking together.”

“His friends?”

“That’s right. I haven’t seen any of them lately, though.” The man shrugged. “I wonder what happened to them.”

Iris paid for our lunch.

I never asked her to cover my meal, and was able to settle my own bill, so I’d tried to pull out my wallet.

However, Iris had assured me that, “In these situations, the senior employee normally pays.”

So that was what *normally* happened... I committed it to memory.

Milia had been peeved until we got to the restaurant, but thankfully, the food brightened her mood. She looked quite cheery as we prepared to leave.

After Stein had left, we discussed my arm and work. Once back at the office, I decided to look into Stein when I had a free moment.

That he was a regular at that restaurant meant he kept close to Lahti. Just as Iris had said, he was a D-rank adventurer. He never demonstrated high

aspirations and mostly took E-rank quests. Just as the man at the restaurant had said, he used to associate with several others.

“Miss Milia, do you know what happened to his companions?”

“Oh, you mean Mr. Stein’s?” When I nodded, Milia put one finger on her chin while she thought it over. “I don’t know much, but it’s better not to get involved, Mr. Roland.”

“Why is that?”

“Party relationships can be complicated after they’ve soured, and they usually worsen when an outside person gets involved. In Mr. Stein’s case, it looks as though the rest of his group abandoned him.”

Typically, I tried to help parties reconcile before they got to that point.

“Are you worried about him, Mr. Roland?”

“Oh, no, it’s not like that.”

“Ha-ha. Yet you’re still researching him.”

Milia’s bubbly attitude made her seem oblivious, but she was keen when it came to certain things.

I caught a glimpse of Stein outside the window. No sooner did I realize it was him than he walked out of sight.

“Sorry, I’m going to take a short walk,” I said to Milia, who nodded.

I left the office through the front door and called to the stumbling, middle-aged adventurer, “Mr. Stein.”

He stopped when he heard his name and cast me a listless look. “What’s an ace staffer want with me?”

“I’m not an ace or anything. I’m just a *normal* guild worker. Do you go to that restaurant often?”

“Yeah. For ages now. I used to celebrate there with my pals after we finished a job.”

“Do you not take quests anymore? My coworker said they haven’t seen you around recently.”

“No one’s told you? My old pals kicked me out.”

Evidently, Milia’s guess had been right on the mark.

“And I haven’t got any hopes of making it on my own. An old-timer like me can’t handle F-or E-rank jobs on his own.”

There wasn’t much adventuring work specifically in town. There was some to be found for rookies, but a middle-aged man who accepted nothing but low-ranking quests? It wasn’t hard to imagine others criticizing him behind his back.

He’d been abandoned by his friends and forced to take simple jobs with small payouts to eke out a living.

“Oof,” he groaned as he sat down by the roadside.

“May I have the seat next to you?”

“You’ll get dirt on you, y’know.”

“I don’t mind.”

Passersby gave us strange looks as they walked along.

“My old friends... They wanted to live more glamorous lives. Apparently, I was the only one who thought we could have a steady, easygoing existence in Lahti. They called it boring. Asked me what was so exciting about that, and such.”

I caught the faint scent of alcohol on his breath when he scoffed to himself.

Steady and easygoing...

That was precisely the normal life I sought. I’d have a hard time convincing anyone it was fantastic, too. Honestly, if questioned, I wouldn’t know how to reply.

“I told them the exciting stuff wasn’t all that mattered to being an adventurer, and then we had a huge fight. Before I knew it, they all left town.”

They’d likely moved to the capital.

“You didn’t go after them?”

“How could I? Ambitions and higher aspirations are good things, but I haven’t got much to offer, and I would’ve slowed them down... Some part of me knew

that.”

At Stein’s age, it was difficult to improve. Merely warding off his body’s decline probably took all his effort.

“Drinking away your problems won’t actually make them vanish,” I told him.

“Ha-ha...that’s harsh.”

“I may have been out of line, but I took a look at your quest history.”

“And you saw a string of trivial quests, right?”

I shook my head.

“They were low in rank, but each one aided someone in need. Every quest helps someone, and in that way, they’re all equal.”

“Hearing as much is a bit of a relief.”

I’d noticed a pattern in Stein’s quest history.

“May I have a bit of your time?” I asked.

“Hmm? Sure. Whaddaya want?”

“You like animals, don’t you?”

“As much as anyone else, I suppose...”

I felt relieved to hear that.

“Some time ago, a farmer informed me that they were looking for some extra help.”

I left town with Stein and headed to a plot on the outskirts of town.

“You took several guard quests from here. The owner regularly hires adventurers, but explaining the situation to a different group every time can be tiring.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you are?” Stein laughed with what I assumed to be exasperation.

“How’d you like to work at the farm? It won’t be as exciting as adventuring work since you’ll do the same thing each day.”

Stein didn't reply, but he continued to follow me as I walked.

When we met with the owner, he seemed to remember Stein.

"Oh, is Mr. Stein going to be working for me?"

The question was addressed to me. I looked at Stein.

"Ahh...guess I am." Stein scratched the back of his head and looked away.

"The pay's not much, I'm afraid."

"I believe the salary's about the same as taking an E-rank quest each day," I said. The farmer nodded in agreement.

"I'd be glad to help you. Young adventurers try to skip out the moment I turn away, but you've always been serious about your work. That's why I remember you so well."

I was glad to know the farmer held the man in good regard.

"No one would mock you for retiring," I assured Stein. "I think people will respect you more as a former adventurer than a drunk."

Stein looked down as though in contemplation, ultimately nodding. "All right. I'll do it. I don't want any more excitement, so I s'pose this is the perfect job for me."

He already knew the owner, so negotiations were quick, and after that, I saw less of Stein around town. But every once in a while, I caught him sharing a drink with the farmer at a pub.

They were getting on quite well.

Stein probably didn't revel and drink like he used to, as there wasn't much exciting to celebrate in his life, but the ale was surely just as good anyway.

I reported Stein's change of profession to Iris, and handed over his adventurer permit, which he'd given to me, explaining he no longer needed it.

"It seems Mr. Stein gets along well with the farmer and will be living there. I think the work suits him."

I was a bit worried about how Iris would react. Adventurers were a precious resource for the guild, since they were the ones who tackled quests. Losing one

didn't mean the number of jobs decreased.

"You really are too nice and don't know when to keep your nose out of things." Iris rested her head in one hand and laughed softly.

"You think so?"

"Did you help him because of your own circumstances?" she inquired.

"No, and I didn't mean to impose..."

"Who cares if you did? People change over the years. I wouldn't expect many adventurers to harbor the same passion they had twenty years ago. Feelings alter with time."

"Then perhaps I could help other adventurers like Mr. Stein find different professions when they're serious about changing jobs? We might lose able bodies for quests, though."

"That's fine."

Iris answered more quickly than I'd anticipated.

"Are you sure about that? I know it's odd to doubt you, considering I'm the one who proposed the idea."

"Yes. I didn't mention it to you, but two of our own staffers are retiring. I think we can cut back the number of quests we handle a bit."

That wouldn't be great for the guild. Quests were how we earned money, after all. Regardless, it seemed there was no cause for worry. According to Iris, there were more than enough adventurers and quests.

"Adventurers I understand, but are there really so many quests?"

"I think it's your doing," Iris replied with a grin. She held up a finger. "First, adventurers come by looking for the 'super staffer.' Although, seventy percent of them are young women... Then that staffer assigns them suitable quests. Those adventurers do excellent jobs, and they get the work done faster than most, so clients are more inclined to file new quests with us..."

"I had no idea."

"I figured as much. So even if we have fewer adventurers and quests, we'll be

fine.”

That was a relief.

“Thank you for always listening to my suggestions,” I said.

“No need to thank me. You’ve helped me with all sorts of things. Just be sure to follow through with your proposal.” With that, our discussion was concluded, and I left Iris’s office.

It was nearly closing time, and because I found myself free for a moment, I checked on the number of quests we had. The total had indeed increased since I started. Once the workday was finished, we locked up for the evening.

“Thanks for your hard work today, Mr. Roland!” Milia said with a smile so radiant it all but shone.

“Thank you for your hard work as well, Miss Milia.”

“Mr. Roland, if you have time today, would you—?”

“Milia,” called one of our female coworkers. Milia seemed a bit startled but waved her hand.

“Sorry, never mind.” Her smile turned a little strained.

She joined some other women around a desk, and they spoke as though consulting one another about something.

“Sorry! I completely forgot!” Milia apologized.

“Whose turn is it today?”

“M-me. But I don’t have any self-confidence today, so I’ll pass...”

What were they talking about?

“What are those girls doing?” one of the male staffers muttered from nearby.

A coworker next to him answered, “They take turns each day, I think.”

“With what?”

“Inviting Argan out for dinner.”

“Why?”

That's what I wanted to know. At the very least, this explained Milia's odd behavior.

We were still waiting for the wrap-up meeting with the branch manager, so I decided to talk with my associates about my recent idea.

"I've received permission from the branch manager to proceed with a new task..." I launched into an explanation about finding new jobs for adventurers. "I think it will be helpful for those who want to quit but can't and the injured who can't manage what they used to."

"I think that's a great idea!" Milia immediately agreed.

"Hey, c'mon. I'm already busy, and you wanna increase my workload? Damn rookie," Maurey groused while leaning back in his chair and picking his nose.

"It may take some additional labor, but it will benefit those adventurers who want to retire and clients who need permanent workers. It should also decrease the amount we need to handle at the guild in the long run."

Maurey seemed entirely uninterested in the idea. He rolled his mucus into a ball and flicked it.

"Why don't you go ahead and do that on your own, then? I'm busy, ya got that?"

After listening to the details, Milia voiced her support for the second time. "I'll gladly help you, Mr. Roland!"

That set off an avalanche of other comments: "Some middle-aged adventurers think they don't have other options, after all."

"And others who feel trapped in the profession."

"I think this is a great idea."

I thanked the senior guild staffers who agreed with me.

"I guess? I mean, it's a good suggestion for a rookie with too much time on his hands."

"Mr. Maurey, you're such a poor loser," Milia whispered.

Maurey must have heard the remark, because a vein on his forehead

throbbed, and he yelled, “Nuh-uh, Milia! C’mon, don’t you know? I’m the ace at this guild. You shouldn’t upset me.”

Everyone sighed with exasperation. Knowing Maurey as well as I did, I found his bluster strangely endearing.

“Well, since you’re so insistent, Mr. Maurey...” Milia retrieved the stubs of completed quests I’d been looking through before work concluded. “I’ll sort the last three months of stubs by who handled them.”

Maurey’s eyebrows twitched. “Y-you don’t need to do that. Everyone knows I do the most—”

“Yes, I’m sure. So let’s just confirm that.” Milia blatantly ignored him and set to quickly dividing the slips. “It seems our so-called ace worked on... Oh, forty-six quests. W-well, I’m a bit surprised...”

Milia’s face twitched. She looked a little perturbed. Maurey was doing less than the office average per day.

“See? C’mon, don’t act so surprised.” Maurey had clearly mistaken Milia’s astonishment for praise and looked quite pleased with himself.

“I’ve completed two hundred and thirty of them.”

“Wh-who asked how many you did, Milia? What about the rookie? Did he do five? Maybe ten? Har-har-har-har.”

“Mr. Roland completed about six hundred.”

“Har-har— Hunh?”

“He’s over ten times busier than you are. And people request him by name, so of course he is. Mr. Roland also handles all the exams on his own. He’s the best at the branch, if not the entire guild system!”

Our other coworkers nodded in agreement.

“I-it’s not about the numbers! I dedicate myself to each and every job!”

Maurey began a lengthy explanation of just how dedicated he was, but no one listened. Instead, we discussed how the job-referral system would operate.

“Let’s do the end-of-day wrap-up,” Iris announced as she entered the room.

“Branch Manager, will you explain to these *average* workers how amazing I am?”

“Well, I did overhear your disagreement.”

“I knew you would understand.” Maurey cast the rest of us a smug look, as though he had ten thousand soldiers at his back.

“I do think you have a point that numbers alone aren’t important.”

“See? She gets it!”

“But there’s such a thing as being too thorough.”

Maurey knew he couldn’t recover from that, and he went silent.

“You just said all that to hide your incompetence, didn’t you?” a staffer asked.

“C’mon, you don’t have to spell it out like that...,” Maurey muttered.

“Hey, Branch Manager, Mr. Maurey said he’s so busy he doesn’t want to help with the adventurer-placement plan.”

“Miliaaaa! I never said that! I’ll do it! I will! I’ll help everybody out!”

And like that, Maurey did a complete flip-flop and got on board with the plan.

2

Work in Hand

Everyone at the guild began recommending new workplaces for adventurers who could use a change in profession. Some were puzzled by this, while others were upset, as they took the suggestions to mean we thought they were unfit for adventuring.

Those who took offense were predominantly low rankers with pride in their questing. We'd just implemented this system and needed to adapt our procedures. Evidently, a direct route of suggesting different jobs wasn't the best way to go about it.

Ravi stopped by the guild alone. She'd recently been partnered with the veteran adventurers Neal and Roger because she had a defensive skill that made her a good fit for group work. I wondered if they'd argued again since she was here by herself. Ravi was about fourteen or fifteen years old, so she often butted heads with Neal, who was in his midthirties—especially about small things.

"Hello, Roland."

"If you're here to complain, I'm not going to listen."

"Urk... I-I'm not."

"Then what are you here for?" I asked as I continued with the paperwork in front of me.

"I wanted to ask what Dey is up to."

"She's out on a quest and won't be back for a while."

Before partnering with Neal and Roger, Ravi spent time with Dey. As a

vampire, Dey was most powerful at night and about as useful as the average human when weakened during the day. Ravi's skill paired well with her talents.

Apparently, Ravi had taken a liking to Dey.

"Aw, man...", she whined.

Dey had a well-built physique and seemed graceful, making her popular with just about everyone.

Spying one of the work-transfer forms, Ravi asked, "What's this?"

"We're helping retiring adventurers find new employment," I explained.

"I had no idea you did stuff like this."

Come to think of it, I'd made Ravi become an adventurer because I couldn't find another job for her. The nature of her skill made her perfect for questing, anyway.

However, maybe she would have preferred something else.

"Ravi, if you don't like working as an adventurer, I can arrange another job for you. Although your options are limited."

Once the groundwork was laid, Lord Bardel immediately volunteered to take adventurers. A blacksmith, butcher, and farmer were also seeking employees.

The conditions and their treatment of former adventurers weren't terrible in the least. We'd already explained that adventurers were by no means meant to be treated as indentured servants.

"So the lord needs guards, pages, gardeners... Wow..."

Ravi seemed interested, but only passingly so.

After that, Ravi started telling me what she'd been up to recently. I guess she quite liked me as a conversation partner. Since I wasn't too busy, I responded as needed while handling my paperwork.

"Um..."

"Oh, welcome," Ravi said to someone.

When I looked up from my desk, I saw a timid dark elf standing behind Ravi.

“Looking for a quest? Leave it to me!” Ravi declared.

“Hey, don’t make assumptions,” I chided her.

I suspected this was a bit more complicated than the typical fare, so I shooed Ravi away and invited the dark elf to sit across from me.

“Are you here for a quest?” I asked.

“No... Um, for that.” The dark elf pointed at a work-recommendation sheet.

A dark elf in town wasn’t the sort of person who could go unnoticed. He’d likely worked as an adventurer outside of Lahti.

“You want a new job? If you normally take work from another guild, you’ll need a letter of recommendation. Did you bring one with you?”

“I did, yes.”

He handed me a rolled-up letter and his adventurer permit. His name was Hanbard Geschtenolg, and he was a B ranker.

“If you wish to change careers, you’ll need to work at the place we recommend for a set period. Are you all right with that?”

“Yes, that will be fine. I’m all right with quitting today.”

I couldn’t help but think that was a waste of talent.

Dark elves were rare. Unlike regular elves, who lived in the woods, dark elves didn’t have a single place they called home. However, they often lived in remote regions like the mountains or deserts, where survival was tough.

Their kind possessed unique and powerful magic that made them challenging opponents who could rival vampires.

“I’m not much of a talker...”

“I see.”

“That, coupled with my appearance, leaves people afraid of me...”

“I know that’s something lots of dark elves have to deal with.”

“Yes, at first everyone said I was strong and amazing, and they praised me, but once I rose to B rank, no one spoke to me anymore... And I was never one

for conversation. I don't have a bubbly personality, which only made things worse..."

I tried to imagine what it might be like for a dark elf at a high rank at that guild Hanbard frequented. Given his quietness, I doubted others approached him to talk.

The letter he brought described his personality as follows: *He may be misunderstood due to his reticent nature and looks, but he is a diligent worker and skilled with his hands.*

Hanbard was apparently an excellent adventurer, but the staff at his guild branch didn't wish to force him to remain in the life if he wanted out.

"I'd like to work with others, but no one is willing..."

"And you'd prefer a job that facilitates that?"

"Yes, but my appearance is too much for most people."

So he wanted someone who didn't care how he looked. That seemed to be the source of his unease.

"I want someone who will treat me as an equal."

Reviewing Hanbard's completed quests revealed just how skilled he was. The records contained details down to the minutiae. I could feel the emotion behind the staffer's meticulous documentation. Hanbard was a truly great adventurer, and the guild workers at his regular branch must have noticed he was unhappy.

"How would you feel about working at a blacksmith?"

"A blacksmith?"

The suggestion undoubtedly came as a surprise to him, for he looked puzzled.

"Perhaps you could start out just observing?" I proposed. Hanbard nodded, despite still appearing confused.

There was a smithy on the outskirts of Lahti. It sold some things right at the forge while peddling others out of the town's weapons shop. Merchants also purchased some of the smithy's works to sell in other regions.

"Is this a famous smithy?"

“It’s not that well-known, but it puts out good work.”

I knocked on the door to the forge, and someone opened it almost immediately.

An elderly person with a wrinkled forehead emerged from inside. He looked as ornery as ever.

He glanced at Hanbard behind me.

“I’m here regarding the workplacement program. Would it be all right if he observes what goes on here for a bit?”

“...Fine.”

The smithy was a man of few words. He bid us follow merely by turning his back and walking off.

“Are you sure about this?” Hanbard questioned. “He seems like a terribly frightening person.”

“I’m sure other people think the same of you, Mr. Hanbard,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“Folks judge books by their covers, after all.”

“Sorry,” Hanbard whispered, evidently embarrassed.

We followed the smith into the forge.

“He mostly crafts blades,” I said. “Swords and knives and such.”

The smith returned to his work without a word to either Hanbard or me. His hands moved silently. Very few people visited the forge. The wares on display were covered in a thin layer of dust.

Hanbard absentmindedly reached out to a bow.

That drew the smith’s attention. He stopped and looked over at the dark elf.

“...”

“Can ya? A bow?”

“Huh? Me? A bow?”

“He means to ask whether you can make bows,” I clarified.

“Oh, um, yes, I can.”

“...The materials are over there. Have a go.”

“Um. All right.”

The smith gestured at some materials with his chin. Hanbard gathered them and quickly set to work.

Neal, whose preferred weapon was a bow, had once told me, “That smithy churns out some nice swords, but I dunno about his bows. He can’t even repair them. I bring my bow when I head to the capital and get it repaired at a nearby town instead.”

The man who owned the forge produced first-rate blades, but the same couldn’t be said of his bows. It was a completely separate skill set, after all, and required a different methodology.

At first, the smith had been reluctant about having a worker arranged for him, but it seemed that he had quite a few requests for bows. He was surprisingly cooperative once we broached that topic.

Elves were skilled with their hands, and Hanbard was no exception. He finished the bow very quickly.

“I tried to prioritize adaptability for quick firing with this one, and...” He spoke quickly while he worked. The jargon interspersed with what he said made it difficult for me to keep up. “This one will require a heavy draw. Few people will be able to use it, but it has long range and the power to drop a target with a single arrow.”

The smith hummed.

He took one bow, then the other, and inspected the bowstrings.

“If ya wanna stick around, ya can.”

Hanbard’s eyes went wide, and I said, “It looks like you can work here if you want. What would you like to do?”

“Are you sure?” Hanbard asked the smith, who nodded without a word.

“Th-then, yes, of course!”

I let the two of them hash out the details and left.

No one would bother Hanbard about being a dark elf here.

Customers would think him friendly by comparison when set next to the taciturn smith.

“Boss! The bows at the Lahti weapons shop look really good!”

According to Neal, Hanbard was settling into his new job quite nicely.

“Seems the smith over there is getting better at bow crafting,” Neal said. He seemed oddly pleased despite being ignorant of the fact that a dark elf was the bowyer.

3

The Inspector

After the morning meeting at the guild one day, Iris asked me to come to her office. Whenever she called on me like this, it was because she had some *other* work for me.

The guild office opened as usual, and adventurers started to trickle in. None of them asked for me specifically, so I stood to go see Iris.

“I wonder what the branch manager wants from you?” Milia asked as I left for the office. “Sh-she’s not going to use her position of authority to force you to go out to eat with her, is she? That’s an abuse of power, Mr. Roland.”

Evidently, Milia was fretting for me, as any senior employee would for their junior, I suppose.

“She isn’t the type of person to abuse her authority, Miss Milia.”

“Hmph...the amount of trust you give her is reeeally suspicious.”

Milia gave me a reproachful look, but I bowed to her and headed to the boss’s office, knocking before entering.

“Pardon me.”

“I’m sorry for calling you like this constantly.”

I shook my head to show her I didn’t mind, then sat on the sofa seat she offered me across from her desk.

“I heard something concerning from an adventurer working at another branch office,” Iris told me.

“Something concerning?”

“Yes,” she said before continuing. “It seems their rewards are low.”

“That doesn’t sound like an especially unusual complaint.”

“I wouldn’t call you for something so trite.”

“Sounds like you have a job for me that goes beyond my usual duties.” Iris didn’t deny it and gave me an awkward smile. I shrugged. “A reward should be based on the quest’s level. That’s the standard, at least.”

“From what I hear, the rewards are ten to twenty percent too low.”

“That could be excusable, depending on the situation. Not all jobs are equal,” I replied.

Undoubtedly, Iris knew that. She must have noticed something fishy about the payouts.

“Would you be willing to check whether this is happening because of the clients or another reason?”

“Why do you feel an investigation is necessary?” I asked.

Iris rarely went out of her way to trouble herself with other offices’ matters.

“An S-rank adventurer I have a long history with told me about this issue.”

“I see. So you want to earn some goodwill with one of the few S-rank adventurers.”

I could understand that, I suppose.

Few quests demanded anyone that skilled, but when an S ranker was needed, the guild reached out to one directly. Usually, guilds issued formal quests for them when a catastrophic monster needed slaying or an entire horde appeared. Such jobs were paid by the guild directly because most individuals couldn’t foot the reward.

“I’m sorry to ask for a favor. I’ve reported this to the guild master, but it looks like he’s a little busy and can’t get to it.”

“That doesn’t sound like a favor, just something that will help the guild.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Iris laughed. “I’m not sure what’s causing this, so please be discreet.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve never been a *lawful* adventurer before. It might be fun to try while investigating this office.”

“Oh, really? Ha-ha. What a lovely idea.” Apparently, Iris was on board with my proposal. However, she soon cocked her head to one side. “What do you mean by ‘lawful’?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Once this is over, I’ll treat you to a meal. Sound good?”

“I’m not so sure...”

“Rila can come, too! Y-you’d be fine with that, right?”

Iris had come up with a defense after I’d turned her down so many times already.

“All right. In that case, let’s go—*with Rila*.”

“Did you really need to stress that she’ll be joining us?”

Iris’s expression looked conflicted.

I made my way to Imil and headed to its guild office.

This city was only second in size to the royal capital, and it was the very same place where Lord Moisandle had run the underground arena.

I hadn’t been back here since then. Now Imil was under the management of a noble who supported King Randolph, and it seemed to be doing much better. The bright faces of passersby were quite different from those I had seen on my last visit.

The guild office was one of the city’s significant centers of foot traffic. That made it very easy to find.

The building was an imposing three stories tall, a reminder that Lahti’s paltry one-floor structure was a far cry from city life.

It’d been a long time since I acted as anything other than an assassin or a guild employee.

“Welcome. Is this your first time at an Adventurers Guild?” a female employee asked when I entered. Her job was likely to help newcomers. I guess

she didn't recognize me.

"Yes, I was thinking of becoming an adventurer."

"Please head to the third floor. The staff there will help with your application. A proctor will administer a test, and if you're qualified, you'll be able to become an adventurer."

I thanked her, then headed to the top floor.

There was a long counter up here, just like the one below. I found a guild staffer and told them what I was here for. They directed me to one of their male coworkers who had the look of an ex-mercenary. Small scars from blade cuts decorated his face. He hardly seemed the type to wear an Adventurers Guild uniform.

"You wanna become an adventurer, huh?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to working with you."

The proctor started reading through the application I'd filled out.

"Soland... Twenty-three... No special skill..." He suddenly grabbed me by the shoulders. "Listen. I'm telling you this for your own good. Just give up."

"Huh?"

"I'm sure you've got some reason for doing this, right?"

"Yes."

"You won't make it big starting out as an adventurer at twenty-three, that's for sure. It'd be another story if you had a skill, I guess. You're better off putting your nose to the grindstone and just working a regular job instead. Understand?"

The proctor appeared quite rough, but he was actually a decent man. His advice was certainly reasonable.

"I'd still like to become an adventurer," I replied.

The proctor let out a dramatic sigh. "We'll do a mana analysis in a bit. If that goes well, we can try sparring—you against me. If I think you've got promise, then I'll approve your application."

“All right. Understood.”

“You seem pretty mild-mannered, which is great and all... But you really haven’t got the adventurer look to you, mister.” He scratched his head. “Honestly, I’d show you the door if it were up to me. However, the new regulations say I’m to consider personality and potential, not just mana and physical prowess. It’s a whole lotta work I don’t need.”

I lowered my head at his complaints.

“I’m sorry.”

Following my lecture on proctoring adventurer exams, the standards had undergone a revision. The proctor was surprised by my remark but didn’t linger on it and proceeded with the exam.

He brought over a mana measurement crystal, a device I was familiar with.

“Hold your hand to it.”

I did as he asked. Starting at F rank would make collecting information difficult. Other adventurers wouldn’t chat or gossip with someone on the lowest rung.

I always placed new adventurers in F rank, but a proctor could assign someone a higher position at their discretion.

“If I’m able to reach thirty thousand, please consider me for C rank at minimum.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Thirty-what-now? Only a mage trained from when they were a child could do that, mister. Do you know what you’re saying? Fine, then. Let’s see you try!”

I unleashed my mana on the crystal. If I actually called upon my full potential, the crystal wouldn’t be able to measure my mana, forcing me to hold back.

“Whaaaa—?! Wh-what is this light?!”

The crystal flashed, and numbers appeared on its surface.

Hmm. I managed to gauge it perfectly.

“Th-thirty thousand exactly?! Hey, what the heck are you?”

“Nothing special. Shall we move on to the next portion?”

“How can you act like this is ordinary?! Could you react a little more like a normal person?”

I urged the dumbfounded proctor to continue the test. While I considered what I’d need to do during the practical portion to get C rank, I felt the proctor grab my arm.

“Not so fast.”

“I’m sorry. I should be listening more closely.” I already knew how these procedures went. Paying attention to the proctor’s explanation felt like a waste of time to me. However, that’s not what he was upset about.

“Are you really fine with just being a C ranker?”

“Yes, I intend to adjust my abilities to match that rank during the practical.”

“You’re adjusting your... What?” The man gripped his head as though fending off a dizzy spell. “Tell me more about your magic. What can you do with that much mana?”

“I know some basic spells.”

“Anything intermediate or higher?”

“I’m not suited to the upper-level stuff. I just can’t get it to come out right.”

“So you’ve got mana, but you can’t use advanced spells. That correct?”

“I’m able to cast demon magic, though, if you allow it.”

I created several shadows and controlled them all simultaneously.

“That’s even more impressive than producing a normal high-level spell... All right, take a seat.”

“What about the practical?” I inquired.

“We won’t bother. I’ve already seen what you’re capable of. I’m not sure how to put it. You’re the classic average man who’s got more to him than meets the eye.”

Evidently, he’d sized me up using his experience as a proctor.

“You’ve gotta have a reason for starting as a C ranker. You said you were adjusting your abilities to match that rank.”

“...”

“Fine, fine. I won’t pry.” The proctor raised his hands. I was grateful he’d caught on so quickly. “Look, Soland... I’m not gonna ask who you really are. The aristocratic house of Moisandle used to control this city. I wouldn’t be surprised if somebody came to check on how the current lord is doing.”

The proctor had determined I was an investigator, although for the wrong purpose.

“Have you been working at this guild for long?” I asked.

“Me? Yeah, I suppose. It’s been about a decade.”

That was a reasonable amount of time. He undoubtedly knew all the regular adventurers in the city.

“Here ya go,” he said, handing me my new adventurer permit.

The card listed me as a C-rank adventurer.

“Don’t ya go embarrassing me, you hear?” The proctor chuckled and slapped my shoulder.

For all his gruffness, he seemed like a good-natured man. He tried to explain the workings of the guild to me, but I stopped him and said that wasn’t necessary.

“I’d like to join a party and take on quests. Do you think there’s anyone who would accept me?”

“You’re an unknown right now. I saw a little of what you can do, but that’s not enough to convince other folks.”

“I can also induce hallucinations and eliminate the effects of magi—”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough. Let’s just say you’re an unusual mage who can use demon magic.”

Based on the examples I’d given, people would assume I was a support caster. The proctor started to write something. It looked to be a recommendation

letter.

“Hand this to an adventurer named Orlando, the one who’s got the big-ass sword. Pretty sure you two would do well together.”

“Thank you.”

I tucked the letter away into my pocket and shook hands with the proctor.

“What if I wound up being a pawn of demons who were only here to cause trouble?” I asked.

“Then you’d end up dead. And so would I.” The proctor laughed deeply. I thought he was rather quick to trust others, but maybe that was just part of his charm.

I left the third floor for the second, which was the home of the intermediate reception desk. There were more adventurers there.

I spotted the one with the gigantic sword right away.

So that’s Orlando.

I’d caught him in the middle of reporting back for an appraisal.

“Are you Orlando?”

The slight man was sitting on a sofa, and with his back to me, his sword completely eclipsed his body. When I called to Orlando, it felt like I was speaking with the weapon instead.

The adventurer turned around and nodded at me.

Based on the name, I’d assumed Orlando was a man, but I was mistaken. What’s more, she was an elf, too.

She looked surprised that I wished to speak with her.

“I’m looking for someone to form a party with,” I explained. “The proctor said you might be interested.”

Orlando accepted and read over the proctor’s letter, then she looked between me and the document with clear surprise.

“Dan neeever writes recommendations...”

“Is that right?”

Apparently, Dan was the name of the proctor I’d met earlier.

“You’re new, but you’re already a C ranker?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.”

Orlando was definitely impressed, but she seemed to be an elf of few words.

I’d briefly glanced at Orlando’s permit and saw she was an S-rank adventurer.

Perhaps she was the one Iris mentioned?

“All right. You can join.”

“Thank you. I’ll do my very best.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

The only other elf I knew was that fussy one. What a relief it was to learn that some possessed more tranquil demeanors.

“Miss Orlando Faeglee, your appraisal is ready.”

When a staffer called her, Orlando stood and headed over to take her reward. Her movements were nimble in a way that suggested her gigantic sword weighed nothing to her. I expected her to return immediately, yet she lingered at the counter for a while.

This made me assume she was arranging her next quest, but instead, she came back looking discontented.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“The reward was less than what was promised.”

Orlando explained she’d accepted a B-rank quest. The compensation was roughly 30 percent less than what she’d expected.

“They said it’s because of a handling charge, and because I took too long to report in.”

“Has this happened to anyone else?”

Orlando slumped. “I don’t think so.”

From the way she explained it to me, there was nothing unusual about the quest itself or the initially promised compensation. I’d suspected the complaints of low pay were just typical run-of-the-mill adventurer gripes when I heard about the trouble from Iris. However, it was clear this was a problem with this guild branch itself.

“Time to celebrate our partnership,” Orlando said.

I had no idea what she meant, but I followed her out of the guild to a dining hall.

Orlando ordered some wine and dishes to pair with it. Evidently, this was her version of socializing. We raised up our cups and quietly clinked them together.

“Enjoy,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll pay. Don’t worry.”

“No, I can cover it. I owe at least that much,” I replied.

“All right. Thank you.”

Upon learning I would foot the bill, Orlando drained her cup. Her pale face quickly reddened.

“One of my drinking buddies...listens to my complaints. She’s kinda high up in the guild.”

I had an inkling of who that was.

“Can a drinking buddy do anything, though?” I asked.

“Not really. Still, she said she’d try.”

So that was how I’d ended up here.

“If you aren’t being paid fairly here, why not go to another town?” I suggested.

Orlando sighed. “Other places...don’t have high-rank quests.”

She had a point.

Cities were hot spots for adventuring work. Lahti saw one B-rank quest a month, at best.

From what I'd heard, Imil had two to three B-rank or higher jobs a week.

Guild staffers all operated under an unspoken rule that high-ranking adventurers shouldn't get lower-ranked quests. We needed S rankers available at a moment's notice. They'd end up taking all the work away from weaker adventurers otherwise.

I'd been planning to collect intel steadily, yet I'd come upon an unexpected source thanks to Dan the proctor.

"I'm not sure who's responsible, but I think we should look into this. You endanger yourself on quests. No one should skim off the top of your payment."

After that, Orlando kept drinking even though it was barely noon. She was quite pleased I was paying. I couldn't tell if this was her normal demeanor or if she was in high spirits.

She started to stagger and nearly fell out of her seat, so I reached out to steady her.

"Perhaps you've had too much to drink," I remarked.

She glanced at me, face red, and whispered, "So handsome... You make me nervous..."

"What are you talking about?"

I settled the tab and offered Orlando a hand, but she shook her head and stood by herself.

"I know better. If you touch a handsome man's hand...you get pregnant."

"I'm not handsome, so I doubt that will happen."

Plus, holding hands wasn't the typical cause of pregnancy.

Orlando paid me no heed and lumbered off. I worried about her, and that was quickly justified when she gave in to the weight of her gigantic sword and kissed the ground. At that point, I lent her my shoulder, worked the name of an inn from her, and took her to her bed.

I told her I'd stop by tomorrow, but I doubted she'd remember.

Many adventurers acquired a certain arrogance after climbing the ranks, but Orlando wasn't like that. I understood why Iris wanted to help her. Orlando didn't strike me as the type to complain openly. She seemed quiet and nonassertive. Perhaps that was why she was being exploited.

It was still daylight out. There was plenty of time before the sun would set.

I headed back to the guild, approaching the building from behind this time.

A man exited through a service door, so I took the opportunity to bring a hand down on his neck lightly. He slumped over, and I dragged him into the shadows.

"I'll be borrowing this. I'll have it back to you shortly."

I traded clothes with him, donned his uniform, and headed through the back door and up to the second floor.

There were a lot of staffers moving about. A quick tally put the number at around a hundred. One unfamiliar face wouldn't stand out.

If there was an issue at the guild, I figured there was something to be learned from the quest stubs.

Although this was a different branch, the work was still the same, so it didn't take long to find where documents were stored. I fished out Orlando's completed quests.

"What are you doing?" a male staffer asked me, suspicious.

"I was assigned to the first floor the other day. Apparently, the quest stub of an adventurer I manage was put here by mistake."

I made up that lie on the spot.

"Oh, that happens."

Such errors were pretty common, actually.

The male guild staffer offered to help, but I politely turned him down.

"The second floor is only for C rank and above, so be careful, okay?"

I gave him a friendly bow as he left, then I took all of Orlando's quests from

the last month. Each one was at least B rank. They had appropriate reward totals listed. Nothing about them was odd at a glance.

However, every one had a note that Orlando was an elf scribbled on the back.

“ ... ”

Feeling curious, I checked through a pile of other quest stubs. There were notes like those on Orlando's, but only if the adventurer wasn't human.

The Lahti branch didn't think recording that sort of information was important.

“What? Why? There's got to be something wrong!”

“Unfortunately, it's far past the stipulated time. I'm afraid that means your reward needs to be reduced...”

There was a commotion coming from the service counter. Another adventurer was facing a payment penalty, much like Orlando.

“I'm never coming back! You hear me?!”

A dwarf stomped out of the guild.

I noticed something starkly different between this guild and the one in the capital. There were much fewer nonhuman adventurers here. The larger a city, the more diverse the peoples. However, I hardly saw any nonhumans in this city, which was supposedly second only to the capital in terms of population.

“Sorry, but could you file this away?”

The male staffer who'd been helping the dwarf was the same one who spoke to me earlier. I nodded and took the stub.

“He seemed quite upset.”

“That he was. But it's the branch manager's orders. There isn't anything we can do.”

So their manager had told them to do this.

On the back of the stub, I saw the word *dwarf* written out. The payout decrease was evidently based on a contrived excuse.

I had my suspicions of why they were doing this.

I'd seen discrimination between different species often before the war. Unfortunately, the unified effort against demons had yet to stamp it out completely.

I took several stubs with me to the manager's office and knocked on their door.

"Branch Manager, may I have a moment?"

"For what?"

"It's about the rewards."

I got permission to enter at that point.

When he saw me, the somewhat overweight middle-aged manager cast a dubious look. He cocked an eyebrow.

"You're a new face."

"I joined just a few days ago."

His office was surely filled with people he didn't know, and he accepted that excuse without question.

"So... I just need to lower the rewards for elves, dwarves, and beastpeople adventurers, then?"

"I never said that. Not directly. Heh-heh-heh." The man rubbed his jowls while chuckling. "I just said to give them a hell of a time. If they don't like it, they can go somewhere else. We still give those pseudo-humans quests."

Pseudo-human was the magic word that made all other races your enemy.

I hadn't heard it in a while. Bigots favored it prior to the war.

"I think it would benefit the adventurers and the guild if we gave them the appropriate rewards."

"We don't have to treat them like they're human. Want to join the reduction challenge? The more you skim, the more money you get to keep."

The man let out another hearty laugh that made his double chin jiggle.

“I’m going to report this to the guild master.”

“The boss, huh? Heh, now that’s a funny thing to say. I get righteous types like you every once in a while, but the moment your kind takes a bit of money, you all back down. In the end, you’ll come around and apologize.” This manager was just as corrupt as the previous lord. I should have known. “Go ahead and report it. Do whatever you want.”

“I will.”

“Who do you think the master will trust? The words of a trivial little staffer or the man in charge of an entire city’s guild branch?”

“Have you heard about the guild established in Bardenhawk as part of the broadscale quest?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“Who do you think the guild master will trust? The staffer who was entrusted with overseeing that broadscale quest or a bigot?”

That got his brain working. His face froze in a scowl.

“Well, that’s all I had to discuss, so if you’ll excuse me.” I bowed and turned to leave, but I heard clattering behind me as the man ran into his desk and sofa in his hurry. He rushed over and grabbed me.

“Wait, wait, wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait! Just settle down. Let’s take a seat, okay? What would you like, hmm? I’ll get you a recommendation, and we can make you a branch manager, too. All it’ll take is a word from me. What do you say? Sounds good, right? That will be enough to forg— Huh?”

“I’m afraid I don’t work at this branch, so I don’t think you have anything to offer.”

“Huh? What do you mean...?”

“Your biased views have affected your work. I’m afraid I need to report this.” I brushed the hand from my shoulder and walked away.

“Wait! Wait!! What are you planning to do to me?!”

I activated Unobtrusive.

“Wh-what?” I made sure he’d lost sight of me and leaped out of a window nearby. “H-he disappeared?! Was he just an illusion?!” This man loved to shout. “I—I see! So he was just a dream!”

If only—for his sake.

I traded clothes back with the staffer who was still unconscious and headed to the capital with the stack of quest stubs.

Once I got a hold of Tallow at the headquarters, I told him everything, then I left him to deal with the cleanup.

The next day, when I headed to the guild with Orlando, we spotted the pale-faced manager being taken away by several people.

Orlando looked puzzled.

“I don’t think you’ll have any trouble with reduced payments anymore,” I said.

“Really? That’s a relief...”

To prove my point, we finished a quest. The reward was indeed the original amount.

“I got paid right. Why?”

“Who can say? All I know is that this is *normal*,” I replied.

Since my job here was done, I revealed who I was and apologized for hiding my identity.

“You’re a guild employee, Roland?”

“Yes, I work for Iris.”

“Iris!”

She knew exactly who I meant. I’d guessed right about the identity of her drinking buddy.

“Iris told me about you. I’m sure she’ll meet with you again soon.”

“Yeah... Maybe I’ll pay her a visit.”

I bobbed my head slightly and left Orlando.

Once I was back in Lahti, I reported to Iris that I'd solved the issue. While she celebrated, she asked, "Y-you didn't touch her, did you?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"Well, elves are beautiful... And once she starts drinking, she doesn't stop until she's wasted."

Iris knew Orlando's quirks well. I guess that was to be expected of drinking buddies.

"I wouldn't make a move on someone simply because they're pretty, especially while they're drunk. I don't need alcohol to impress anyone."

"What?" Iris seemed to latch on to something I'd said. "Are you saying you can get a free pass even when alcohol isn't involved?"

"Maybe. I'll leave it up to your imagination."

She gave me a wry smile. "You are one ridiculous employee."

"No, I'm a *normal* employee."

"Give up on that already... Oh, please thank Rila for me."

"Rila? Why?" I asked.

"You'll find out."

Something must have happened while I was gone. I'd ask Rila later when I delivered Iris's message.

4

The Demon Lord Staffs the Guild for a Day

◆Rila◆

It seemed to Rila that Roland was being called upon quite often by Iris and the guild master. Another special job had fallen into his lap recently, and he'd left home without telling Rila why.

"He could stand to refuse one or two of those jobs," Rila muttered to herself as she walked into town for the morning market.

While selecting ingredients from the bounty of fresh vegetables and meats, she spotted a ragged Milia staggering into the Adventurers Guild.

"You there, Milia, are you feeling unwell?"

"Oh...Miss Prima Donna..." The girl who was normally a ray of spring sunshine could barely manage a gloomy response.

"Are you working? If you feel unwell, you ought to rest."

"B-but Mr. Roland isn't in today. I couldn't possibly take off, too."

"They will manage." Rila nodded, full of self-confidence. "I shall inform Iris. You may return home directly."

"Urgh, but..."

Rila couldn't understand why Milia wished to work in such a state.

"The entire organization will not fall for lack of one employee. It is rather presumptuous for a single foot soldier to believe themselves so important."

Rila only meant to say that Milia taking a break wouldn't cause issues.

Unfortunately, her remark did not help Milia.

“Y-yes, you’re right... The office will be completely fine without me...”

Rila was so concerned over Milia that she delivered the wobbling girl home and then headed to the guild to give Iris the news.

The building’s doors were shut, however. Evidently, the office was closed.

“Iris? Iris, are you not in there?”

Rila pounded on the door until someone cracked it open. A man peered out at her.

“The guild isn’t open yet, miss.”

She recognized this man. He was one of Roland’s senior coworkers, Mo-something-or-other.

“Morgan, is that you?” she asked. “Please call upon Iris. I have a pressing matter to inform her of.”

“It’s not Morgan. I’m Maurey. What do you need with the branch manager?”

Although he squinted at her dubiously, he opened the door a little more.

“Oh, you’re the red gal...”

“‘The red gal’?” Rila tilted her head.

Maurey cleared his throat, then he stepped outside. He wore an expression that made it clear he was putting on airs.

“My red lady, I will escort you.”

“Hmm. I shall allow it.”

Staffers were at their stations, working to prepare the guild branch for the day.

“What do you need from the branch manager?”

“Nothing much.”

“Where do you live?”

“Why would I tell you such a thing?”

“Why don’t you come with me an—?”

“I will do no such thing.” Rila stopped Maurey before he could finish.

“Rila? What’s wrong?”

Iris had emerged from her office. Her raised eyebrows gave away her surprise at this unexpected visitor.

“Morgan, you may go. You have my gratitude for the trouble of escorting me in.”

“Like I said, I’m Maurey. Whatever. Just thinking about how that haughty attitude of yours will melt away for me someday gets me excited...”

Rila seemed unconcerned by the man’s ramblings and gave him no response whatsoever. Iris, who knew of the woman’s relationship with Roland, could only sigh.

“Maurey, are you done preparing for work?”

“No, the red lady came knocking when I was about to begin.”

“I don’t need excuses. Hurry along.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

He stuck out his chin and nodded, then headed back to the main area of the office.

“So has something happened?” Iris inquired.

“It seems Milia is not well at all. She will not come to work today.”

“Huh? Today?! B-but we’re already down Roland!” Iris’s face clouded over.

“Is it so significant a loss? You are only missing two workers.”

“Sure, but another employee is taking the day off, too.”

“Hmm. That is a significant lack of workers.”

“Sometimes I help reception when we don’t have enough people, but I can’t do that all day. Plus, Maurey is one of our staffers...”

Rila finally understood how grave the predicament was.

“If I understand, you must complete your work today while at half capacity, correct?”

“Yes, that’s essentially the issue. We’re done for...” Iris was at her wit’s end. “I thought I’d be able to go home without overtime for once.”

When Rila looked closely, she spied exhaustion in Iris’s eyes and in her dull skin. It seemed working as a branch manager was quite taxing. Rila nodded and thumped her fist against her chest.

“You have no need to fret! Iris, you may rely upon me!”

“Huh?”

“I know much of what Roland does for work. I shall fill in for a day!”

“A-are you sure? This is making me nervous.”

When Rila had nothing better to do, she often took on her black cat form to observe Roland at his feet while he worked.

From what she had seen, none of it was particularly difficult or required any specialty.

“Then again, risks are warranted in a situation like this!” Iris composed herself and motioned for Rila to follow her into her office. She handed the demon a uniform.

“Oh-ho, I see.”

While she admired the clothing, Rila stuck her arm into a sleeve. She turned back and forth to inspect herself in the mirror and pulled her hair out of the collar of her shirt.

“Weird. When you wear it, it looks more refined and expensive...”

Rila snorted proudly at Iris’s straightforward compliment.

“I have yet to find an outfit that does not suit me!”

She had a great deal of self-esteem, and what she meant to say was that if an outfit looked terrible on her, that was a fault of the clothing.

“We don’t have time for this,” Iris said. “Let’s go. I need to explain what’s happened and introduce you to the others.” Iris strode out of the room, then

glanced back. “It almost feels like you’re more stylish than me...but I must be imagining it...”

The guild was a trivial battlefield to the charismatic demon lord who’d led an entire army, but a battlefield nonetheless.

“Iris, you shall soon realize you have no need for Roland while I am here.”

“I highly doubt that. Milia, on the other hand...”

When Iris said that, Rila snickered to herself. The demon followed the branch manager into the reception hall. The three staff members present cast puzzled looks at Rila.

“Is that the red gal?”

“It’s the pretty girl I see in town sometimes...”

“That looks good on you. Are you playing dress-up?”

Iris looked at Rila, who took that as the signal to give an introduction.

“I am Rileyla. You may call me Rila. I shall help you with your work today.”

Iris explained the circumstances to the staffers. “...So we’ll need to get through today with the people we have on hand.”

A male and a female staffer looked despondent.

“Argan’s not here? This seems bad...”

“You can’t be serious. We’ll never get all the work done, especially without Milia...”

Only one of the staffers seemed entirely unconcerned, as though not even a single thought was going through his thick skull.

“Poor Milia. I wonder if my girl’s got a cold? I’ll go check in on her later. I’ll tell her taking care of yourself’s part of the job. And when she says ‘Oh, you’re asking too much of me!’ I’ll be like, ‘You can rest for today,’ in my sexy voice, and she’ll totally swoon for me...”

Maurey let out a sleazy snicker.

He wasn’t much of a serious worker. Rila understood why Iris hadn’t counted

him among her troops for this battle.

“I’ll also help at the reception desk. And I’ll fill Rila in on the job while I’m at it. Everyone else, just do what you can.”

““Understood.””

“Uh-huh!”

Everyone was on edge, save for one exception.

Rila nodded with satisfaction. “This atmosphere is most appropriate for a battle. Especially considering we are outnumbered and at a disadvantage. We cannot allow ourselves to be careless.”

Iris, who looked ready for war, said, “That’s it for the morning meeting.”

The female staffer opened the locked door and allowed the waiting adventurers to file in.

Rila’s day as a guild staffer had begun.

“Welcome to the Adventurers Guild. How may I help you to—?”

“Right, I’d like a quest like this today.”

One of the staffers took care of the first adventurer who came over.

Rila was used to this, yet although she believed she possessed an idea about how the office operated, Iris insisted on guiding her through an example. Thus, the demon stood in the back to observe.

“I can help someone here, too,” Iris called, beckoning another adventurer over.

“Is Miss Milia in today...?”

“She’s out, I’m afraid.”

After that, the adventurer glanced at Iris and Rila behind her, then produced their adventurer permit. After checking it, Iris brought out an appropriate quest stub from the stack and launched into explaining the job.

Rila knew all this already.

“I am capable of that much,” she said.

Two other seats were open at the reception counter, so she took the one next to Iris and called the next adventurer over.

“Who seeks business with me?”

Although she spoke haughtily, none of the adventurers complained.

“Hey, little miss, you look new. Are you a rookie?” A middle-aged adventurer sat across from Rila and took out his permit.

“I am no rookie. I am the demon lord.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You’re a real spirited girl.”

“Tell me your business,” Rila demanded.

“How about a drink together once I finish my quest?”

“No. Next!”

“Hey, c’mon. Wait a sec. I’m here for a quest, all right? Could you arrange one for me?”

“Then you would do well to start with that. How utterly ridiculous.”

Rila was the opposite of Milia, who had an airy, small-town girl vibe. Milia was pretty, of course, yet she seemed like a dandelion on the roadside compared to Rila’s noble rose.

Rila had a different kind of charm to her, though Milia had always been the favorite at the guild.

“Guess I made you angry at me... Heh-heh.”

Instead of upset, the middle-aged adventurer seemed lovestruck.

Rila pulled out the quest stubs Iris had put away and searched for one to give the man.

All eyes in the guild were pinned on Rila. The waiting adventurers stared because she was unfamiliar and beautiful, while the other staffers watched anxiously as she did her job.

“How is this? This shall be the quest I recommend for you. You are not allowed to tell me you cannot do it.”

When she placed a quest stub that matched the middle-aged adventurer's rank, he nodded.

"Sure, I'll take this."

"Good answer. Strive for your best. I look forward to seeing the results."

Rila hummed contentedly and sent the adventurer off with a smile.

""""Oh, she's a new type of staffer...,""" muttered everyone who'd watched Rila work.



“Looks like you *can* handle this, Rila!”

Once Iris realized Rila would prove useful, her face brightened.

“You may leave this to me.”

“How is she so talented...?”

Iris couldn't spend all day at reception, so eventually, she clapped a hand on Rila's shoulder, said, “Do a good job out here,” and headed into her office.

“Next. I said next. Is no one here?” At Rila's call, a line of primarily male adventurers formed. “What? Are you all truly so desperate to have a conversation with me? How hopeless you men are.”

When she gave them a gracious smile, the queued men quivered in anticipation.

Rila had ruled over demons. The little adventurers who couldn't pry their eyes from her beautiful face were easy to deal with. She nearly yawned as she worked.

She said to one of the adventurers, “This monster is venomous, so you must prepare in advance, understand?”

To another adventurer who lacked confidence, she said, “If I say you can manage it, then you surely can. Doubt your own abilities if you like, but trust my words.” Her encouragement was kind but firm.

“I think I just fell in love.”

Some adventurers even confessed on the spot.

“Well, I certainly have not. Next.” Rila indulged none of them and kept the line moving.

With half their normal staff, the guild had twice the burden. Though Rila took care of roughly half the male adventurers, the other staffers still had plenty of work. Their eyes were starting to spin. This was to be expected, considering one particular employee was doing nothing at all. At every opportunity they had, the other staffers at the counter looked at him and shook their heads. Based on how they were acting, Rila understood his actions were unacceptable.

When Rila found a small break in the adventurers seeking quests, she asked Maurey, “What are you doing?”

“Me? I’m doing the appraisals. I check on the stuff the adventurers bring in from their quests.”

“And how busy are you with this endeavor?”

“I’m waiting for people to come back to report, so I’ll be swamped soon.”

“And are you incapable of managing a reception booth? I was able to manage after only simple observation.”

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“Then why don’t you give it a try? At present, you don’t even count as one of our troops.”

The other two staffers on duty looked at each other. Rila had said something none of them had been able to.

“I’m on appraisal duty today, all right? I’m the only one who can handle this. That makes me important.”

“Yes, I’ve gathered that. When the time comes, you may simply prioritize the appraisals.”

“*Tsk.*” Maurey clucked his tongue.

“What a shameful man.” Rila shook her head slowly, clearly fed up. “When he has nothing to say, he sulks. New as I am, even I recognize this problem. All the others distancing themselves from you. Do you enjoy being treated as an outcast?”

“Why’re you acting all high-and-mighty when you’re just a temp?”

“I am not *acting* high-and-mighty—I *am* high-and-mighty. Do not state the obvious.”

“... ”

That made Maurey and all the rest of the staff gape in astonishment.

“Is she from headquarters or something?”

“No idea. I’ve seen her around town sometimes. Maybe she’s here for an inspection or to check on us?”

The staffers’ whispers reached Maurey’s ears, and he started to fidget from rage.

“I’m just trying to do my job here! You keep out of this, rookie!”

“Considering you cannot provide a reasonable counterargument, perhaps I am the superior, not the rookie.”

Maurey clenched his jaw.

“I am sure it irks you to have such truths levied against you by a newcomer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous...”

“If you feel nothing after all of this, then you may continue to live as you have. No one shall thank you for your work, as you have not a single industrious bone in your body. You will while the days away accomplishing nothing.”

Maurey hung his head. He’d stopped shaking in anger at some point.

“...”

“I shall forgive you for your transgressions. The choice is yours whether you continue this or not. We shall all follow your lead.”

“Urgh, ugghh,” Maurey groaned.

“This is how an organization functions. Have you anything else to say?”

Maurey’s shoulders trembled, and he sniffled.

“I can’t believe it... I just can’t believe this...”

Rila clapped a hand on his shoulder and gently told him, “In this time of urgency, how about you make Iris reevaluate her assumption that you are unreliable?”

“Right! You’re right!” Maurey rubbed his eyes with his sleeve and then took a seat next to Rila.

“We shall strive to overcome these trials and tribulations together, then, Morgan.”

“I told you, my name’s Maurey.”

The man snickered to himself, then called an adventurer over to help them.

Rila also returned to arranging quests for adventurers.

“Twenty-five.”

After the guild closed for the day, Rila stood before Maurey, who knelt on the ground. Her expression looked tempestuous, and her arms were crossed.

“Morgan, do you know what that number means?”

“No idea. Also, for the hundredth time, it’s Maurey.”

“It is the number of mistakes others had to fix for you!”

“Well...they say everybody makes mistakes, you know.”

Rila knew he’d tried his best, yet her frustration still showed through in her shaking fists.

“What kind of attitude is that?!”

Her mana leaked, producing a powerful gust of wind. It swirled around her and caused her hair to rise.

“M-Miss Rileyla, please calm down.”

“Yeah, please. We shouldn’t fight.”

The two other staffers attempted to calm her, but they couldn’t stop Rila when she was on the warpath.

“Y-you must understand this is ridiculous! You idiot! You useless cretin!”

“What?! Now you’ve said it!”

“Because you dragged us down, we—no, I was bogged down with work!”

Rila’s complaints echoed through the reception hall. She’d gone in with an understanding of the responsibilities but had known nothing of office politics or how tiring they were. She was so exhausted that she trudged home without waiting for the end-of-day meeting.

She vowed to herself that she would never do this again, even as a temp.

◆Roland◆

After I got home, I gave Rila the message from Iris. Apparently, after Iris had tasked me with that investigation job, Rila had taken over in my place.

She'd been observing my work for a while, so I figured it must have been pretty easy for her.

"Morgan is a man of many quirks...," Rila said with a sigh. She looked positively fed up.

Morgan?

Perhaps that was an adventurer's name. The man must have proved quite troublesome. Rila vowed never to work at the Lahti guild branch again.

"I have realized how difficult a job it truly is."

I'd never thought it was that challenging, but everyone was different. Maybe Rila found it more trying than being the demon lord.

"As it were, I am surprised we haven't heard any tidings yet."

"Tidings of what?" I asked.

"Of the fake Roland. You said you were certain he assassinated a king, correct?"

"Yeah. I can't imagine anyone else doing it." It was difficult to forget the shock of facing a copy of yourself. "I know I've asked this already, but you really don't know how someone made a duplicate of me?"

"My answer is unchanged. I am not aware of any magic that can create a person from an arm," Rila answered.

"What if it's new magic?"

"It is not. I am certain. Producing a facsimile constructed from mana is entirely different from making a true copy out of genuine flesh and bone. I cannot even fathom how the latter would be possible."

Fighting the fake had felt like battling myself rather than going up against a mana creation. Rila was right to think it wasn't a spell.

“Then could it be a skill?”

“There are certainly unthinkable powers among them, such as your teacher’s copying skill. It is not out of the question...”

But if something like that did exist...

“I do not know how much of the original is necessary to produce a duplicate, but if such a thing were possible, then the dead could be brought back.”

“Hmm. So then someone could revive the first demon lord?”

“What a terrifying thing that would be,” Rila said gravely.

“Hey, Rila, did you notice that?”

“Of course. I thought it a trifling matter, so I did nothing, but I am aware.”

Another person I’d detected earlier had abruptly disappeared. I’d felt like I was being watched the last few days. Apparently, Rila had also noticed.

After we finished eating, Rila started washing the dishes, and we kept talking as she worked.

“I believe it was three days ago. I felt eyes upon me several times after you left for work, knave. This individual cannot be particularly experienced, because I detected them with little effort. They seem to possess little combat ability, so I left them alone,” she explained.

“So it was three days ago, then...”

I’d felt those same eyes on me today, too. Initially, I thought it was an adventurer, but there was something different about this gaze. It felt as though I were being assessed.

“Did you lock the door?” I asked.

“No,” Rila said.

“Well, we don’t have anything worth stealing anyway.”

“So we believed, yet my back scratcher disappeared nonetheless.”

“It seems the thief found a more effective way to use my arm.”

Rila laughed sarcastically at my joke. “Regrettably, this is no laughing matter.

He's already killed a king. If someone does possess a skill that forges copies, then there are possibly more."

"Apparently, I'm more powerful with my mana arm than any imitation with both original ones," I stated.

"Do you mean to imply that there is nothing to worry about?" I didn't respond, and Rila bit her lip. "Then you have become more powerful... I suppose that does elicit some confidence."

"It's thanks to Wawok's armband."

I wondered whether Rila was more powerful than my double. I hoped so, but her beating a version of me was irritating in a way.

Once Rila finished the dishes, we sat together on the living room sofa.

"I cannot imagine someone orchestrated a king's murder for mere amusement. I know not their aim, but I am certain we've not seen the end of their schemes." Rila paused to clear her throat. "I can use magic now. I am willing to help you, if necessary."

"And yet you were still kidnapped so easily," I replied.

"Grrr."

I decided not to tease her further.

"Shall we decide upon a code word so that I may determine whether you are the genuine article in the future?"

"That sounds like a good idea. What should it be?"

"Urgh..."

Urgh?

Rila turned red and shouted, "Let us make it a kiss! But *you* must initiate!"

"That's fine, but why that instead of an actual word?"

"Because I have always been the one to initiate recently. A-and...I would like you to do it sometimes," she mumbled.

Rila turned away bashfully, but I took her chin and tipped her head up. When I

moved closer and our lips touched, it produced a barely audible sound.

“Will this do?”

“Wh-why would you do that without warning?!” Rila pushed me back and beat against my chest, her face flushed.

“Hmm. This kind of signal seems a bit excessive.”

“I-it most certainly is not! You may use it as much as needed!”

Did this really matter? Rila would be able to spot the fake by his right arm.

I tousled Rila’s red hair, and her gaze softened. Then I wrapped my arms around her and carried her newlywed style.

“I’ve gotten used to this arm to the point that something like this is no issue.”

“I—I see.” Rila allowed herself to be picked up, and clung to me. I took her to the bedroom and gently placed her on the mattress. Her shoulders trembled when I kissed her neck.

“I-it tickles...”

Rila’s warm breath caressed my ear.

I removed her clothes slowly, one button at a time, and at some point, Rila shifted to make it slightly easier. She was wearing new underwear. Evidently, the former demon lord had planned on something happening tonight.

“Wh-what is it?” she asked, troubled by my pause.

“Nothing.”

I shook my head and drew closer to her. Rila laughed and brought a hand to my face.

“I was wondering when you would remove these. It seems you have forgotten about them.” She took my glasses.

“They don’t affect my vision, so I tend to lose track of whether I’ve got them on.”

Rila placed the glasses on the nightstand. When she turned back to me, she spread her arms wide.

5

As Friends

“Looks like someone has free time on her hands.”

That was the first thing Almelia said when Elvie arrived at the orphanage.

“I actually don’t. I just heard that Lina was here while I was working, so I came to check on her.”

“That means you’ve got nothing better to do.”

Almelia acted exasperated, but there was a hint of a genuine smile on her face.

“That room over there is free, so why don’t you wait in there?”

Elvie did as she was told and waited for Almelia and Lina, as well as Serafin, who hadn’t made it yet. The room, which resembled a parlor, was furnished with an office desk, an old sofa that seated three, and an inconspicuous coffee table. Elvie heard the excited cries and yells of children beyond the window, where the light streamed in. Supposedly, Almelia the hero-princess often busied herself here between official duties.

After a while, all three of the people she’d been waiting for made their way to the room.

“Are we having a reunion or something?” Almelia asked, confused.

“If so, I think we’re missing a very, veeery important someone, aren’t we?” Serafin added.

“Roland’s coming?” Lina’s eyes glittered.

The girls talked among one another just like the old days, when they were in a party together.

“El, don’t you have plenty to deal with back home? You’re the captain of the royal guard, aren’t you? I know you didn’t come here just to pass the time,” Almelia said. While leaning on the desk, she slowly wrapped an arm around Elvie.

“I really did mean to just check in.”

“So you’ve got some ulterior motive, then. Right?” Serafin, perceptive as always, took a seat on the sofa and patted her lap. It was an attempt to lure Lina over, but the girl ignored Serafin and plopped beside her instead.

“Roland’s coming? He is, right? Ally, did you ask him to?”

“I haven’t. I only found out that El was coming over today, and she called Sera.” Almelia shook her head, which prompted Lina to squeeze her favorite stuffed rabbit tightly.

“Roland...”

“Actually, I need to talk about Roland,” Elvie stated.

Almelia and Serafin knew their friend well. They immediately understood this was a serious matter, and both women tensed.

A surprised Lina asked, “Did something happen to Roland?”

“You know that he has a roommate, right?”

There was a moment of hesitation before Almelia replied, “Yes. You mean Rileyla, don’t you? I’ve spoken with her a few times.”

“Do you know why Roland lives with a demon woman?”

“...What are you implying?”

Almelia likely knew what Elvie was getting at already. She watched her friend cautiously.

“Roland left us behind to defeat the demon lord on his own, then disappeared from our sight.”

Lina nodded. “But he was still alive,” she said.

“Yes. None of us believed that he died. And after a while, we learned he was living as a guild employee,” Elvie recounted.

Serafin hummed. “It seems like he’s been doing a lot for the guild, too. The guild master, Tallow, had a lot of good things to say about him.”

“Considering your sharp instincts, Serafin, I’m surprised you didn’t notice something was wrong before me,” Elvie remarked.

“Oh? I’m not sure what you mean.” Serafin produced a smile—a fake one.

“Fine, have it your way, then. Anyway, Lina aside, I see where you two stand. I’ll get to the point. The demon woman Roland is living with must be the demon lord.”

“Is she?” Almelia’s response seemingly implied that was no great issue.

“Oh, really?” Serafin’s response was obviously an act.

“We found the demon lord’s—well, it turned out not to really be hers—but we found a corpse at the site of the battle. And because we did, the demons believed their ruler had been defeated and withdrew.”

“When I met Rileyla, I suppose I did think she looked kind of familiar,” Almelia admitted.

“Then why didn’t you—?” Elvie began.

“Because I didn’t feel any mana coming from her. She couldn’t be the demon lord without any magical power.”

Serafin added, “Roland has my collar. It wouldn’t be a stretch to assume Roland sealed the demon lord’s strength with it. Although it might be damaged somewhat.”

“When I visited Roland’s house, she wasn’t wearing the collar,” Elvie said.

Almelia and Serafin, who hadn’t been aware of that, both went silent.

Lina was the only one unable to follow the conversation. It literally passed over her head.

“Roland did come to me inquiring about the collar’s origins. I suppose it really did break.” Serafin seemed to believe Elvie’s story. “So what do you want to do about Rileyla? Or do you see her as the demon lord?”

“After traveling together, I thought I could trust Roland... I think we all

assumed that. But he tricked us and allowed the demon lord to escape.”

“So you’re upset with him, Elvie? You’re not happy that he lied, left without a word, and let the demon lord—powerless though she may be—escape?”

Elvie had thought the flame of righteousness had died in her after the war, but perhaps it still burned somewhere deep in her. “She’s not powerless. I saw her use her strength myself.”

“Look beyond her title, El,” Almelia chided her. The princess recalled how she’d become fast friends with Rila, and how that might have been because they shared similar circumstances.

“Roland is with Rileyla. There’s no one better equipped to stop her. She was the demon lord once, but not anymore. That’s all there is to it,” Serafin said.

“I don’t understand what Roland is thinking. He never would have done something like this in the past. Why would a coolheaded man like him allow the lord of the demons who made so many humans suffer go free? Did she charm him with her beauty? That doesn’t seem like Roland to me.”

Serafin laughed. “Roland’s usually the one doing the seducing.”

“Okay, El, you’ve made it clear that you don’t accept the current situation,” Almelia said. “But you should drop this. It’s weird.”

“You think I’m the weird one here?!” Elvie shouted a little louder than she intended, and Lina flinched.

“El, don’t be mad...,” Lina muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Elvie replied. “I’m not actually upset.”

Elvie petted Lina’s head silently for a moment.

“If word of this ever got out, the world would know that the party of heroes lied. We’d be impostors who defeated a fake. The repercussions would be earth-shattering.”

Almelia took on a fiery tone to match Elvie’s outburst. “But the war is over. Isn’t that enough? Who cares if the demon lord who died was a fake? It ended the fighting.”

“You always rely too much on Roland.”

“You’ve got it all wrong! It’s not like Roland hasn’t thought about any of this. He’s probably considered the dangers more than we have! He thinks way into the future!”

“And what will we do if he’s had a change of heart? He’s *different* these days. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Almelia and Serafin didn’t reply. They couldn’t. Both of them knew that Roland had softened lately. A once sharp edge had become a warm ray of sunlight.

It seemed like a good transformation to them.

“You’re overthinking it,” Almelia said dismissively. “Just leave it alone. It’s not like we could beat him anyway.”

“So you’ve considered it, too, Al? You’ve thought about us fighting him?”

“No... I didn’t mean it like tha—”

Lina realized the argument was reaching perilous territory. She started to look frightened. Serafin gently patted her head. “It’s all right, Lina. This is normal.” Then she clapped her hands “All right, all right. That’s enough.” With a pointed look at Elvie and Almelia, Serafin said, “There’s no point in arguing when the person in question isn’t here. First, let’s get a hold of the facts. Speculation will only make this worse... That’s what Roland would say, I think.”

Almelia nodded. “I agree.”



“Yes. So, Sera, how will we confirm things, as you suggest?” Elvie said.

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?”

It was unclear whether Lina was keeping up at all. Still, she muttered, “I wanna see Roland...”

6

Assembling the Old Team

It was morning. I got out of the bed quietly to keep from waking Rila.

While I was preparing for work, I noticed an envelope stuck in the door. I'd felt like I was being watched recently, and now there was a letter. It bore no indication of a sender or where it was from.

Undoubtedly, it had nothing but bad news for me.

"I hope it's not an assassination request." I allowed myself a sarcastic grin, then opened the missive and investigated the letter.

"..."

It was from Elvie. I'd expected it to be an update on her home country, but it was nothing of the sort.

Roland, before his execution, the copy suggested that you are living with the demon lord. I would like to confirm this claim. If it is true, I wish to know why you let her live.

One of Elvie's subordinates must have been watching Rila and me.

I massaged the wrinkles forming on my forehead.

"Why do you frown so?"

Rila grabbed me from behind, clothed only in a bedsheet.

"It looks like we've been found out."

"Hmph?"

"This is a letter from Elvie. It seems my double revealed you were the demon lord."

“To that female knight?”

Elvie was a stubborn one. To her, the demon lord was the demon lord. It didn't matter whether Rila was powerless. However, considering her powers weren't sealed anymore, I couldn't begrudge Elvie for her caution.

Apparently, Elvie couldn't accept that I'd allowed the very person who'd started the war to survive and share a home with me.

“What shall we do? Will you defeat me yet again?” Rila snickered. She seemed to know already that wouldn't be happening. “Why not make another fake corpse, just as we did at the castle?”

“I doubt that would work a second time.”

We'd been found out by the most troublesome person possible. My copy had probably told Elvie specifically because of that. I'd fully intended to kill the demon lord in her castle, so I understood why Elvie couldn't tolerate the current situation.

Something about being an assassin gave one a certain intuition. When people faced someone like me—a person who, in their eyes, was essentially the grim reaper—they revealed an aspect of themselves that showed whether they were a good person.

I'd determined that Rila wasn't as evil as we first believed. That's why I'd tried using the collar. Would Elvie, a veritable personification of justice, be convinced by that alone?

Now that I thought back on it, there was some part of me that had wanted to quit being an assassin. I'd told myself it was all part of my job, but a portion of me always disliked killing good people. It's why I sought a normal job...

“That the knight sent a letter suggests she is still amenable to negotiation.” Rila's remark pulled me from my thoughts.

“Yes. She's written that she'll bring the other members of the party of heroes with her. She's even specified a date and time.”

The letter had been delivered inconspicuously. Hopefully, that meant Elvie didn't intend to reveal to the public that the demon lord was alive. If it got out,

the world would fall into panic.

“Rila, you’re not a bad person. At the very least, you seemed good enough to give me pause.”

She’d only started the war as part of an overarching political decision. Rila was hardly some bloodthirsty tyrant. That meant little to all the humans who’d suffered because of damage from the fighting, though.

“I am well aware that I have caused you distress. And that you are protecting me.” When I turned around, Rila was smiling. “To the humans, I am a heinous criminal. Regardless of the reason, I invaded your country and took things that can never be returned. I knew a day like this would come.”

“Don’t be so quick to jump to conclusions... Elvie only wants to talk. She hasn’t taken any action yet.”

“In the past, you have claimed that if anyone attempts to kill me, you will face an entire division, army, or country to save me. Is that still true?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Even if it means standing against your old friends?”

“Of course.”

“Ha-ha. You truly do love me.”

As she hugged me, I slowly stroked her back.

“I fell for the strongest demon lord in history, after all.”

Once I was prepared for work, Rila saw me off at the front door, just as she did every other day.

“Mr. Roland, is something on your mind?” Milia asked me while we were working.

“It’s nothing big.”

“Still, that’s unusual for you.”

“Yes. I’m going to meet some old friends later...”

“Isn’t that a good thing? What’s the problem?”

“I’m embarrassed to admit this, but they found out about a lie I told them a while ago. And now they’re upset.”

When I explained the gist of the events without revealing details, Milia grinned.

“Oh, I see! Everyone tells one or two white lies at some point. If you apologize, I’m sure you’ll make up and remain friends.”

Her smile was as warm as the sun.

Perhaps she had a point. Maybe I was worrying too much.

“You’re right. I’ll do what I can.”

Would a simple verbal apology suffice? Elvie held fast to the rules. She wasn’t exactly the flexible type. However, we’d fought through some gruesome battles together.

But we’d also gone through gruesome battlefields together.

If I explained the situation, would Elvie’s strong sense of justice permit her to let this go?

Throughout the day, I mulled it over, trying to come up with an answer that would put my mind at ease.

Elvie’s meeting fell on one of my days off from work.

I wondered if she’d asked around to find out when I was free. If nothing else, she was very considerate in specific ways.

I heard a knock at the door, which prompted me to stand.

“Sounds like she’s here.”

“Y-yes...”

Rila sounded anxious.

No matter what the others tried, Rila and I outpowered them. They undoubtedly knew we had the upper hand in a fight, but they still wished to talk. Or maybe *interrogate* was a more appropriate word.

Rila’s nervousness was perfectly understandable. This meeting would

determine whether the others would accept her continued existence.

“Roland? Hello?” I heard Lina’s cheerful voice through the door.

A group of familiar faces greeted me when I opened the door. I’d seen each of them recently, but we hadn’t all been gathered since the attack on the demon lord’s castle.

“Roland!” Lina hugged my waist.

While I petted Lina’s head, Serafin peered inside. “So this is your house, Roland. It’s so modest. You could have found a much nicer place.”

“The building was abandoned, and we fixed it up. It serves well enough for living a quiet life.”

“A ‘quiet’ life? You haven’t been quiet at all,” Almelia quipped.

“Personally, I consider this living quietly.”

“How can you say that with all the fighting you’ve done?” The princess cast me an unimpressed look. Presumably, she was referring to the fight with Amy.

Although everyone else conducted themselves as usual, Elvie exuded the reticence and gloom I’d anticipated.

“Rila is waiting. Come in.”

All of them had met Rila, save for Serafin, but none knew she used to be the demon lord. I worried that would color their opinions of her.

My home lacked a parlor to host guests, so I led everyone to the living room instead.

“Sit wherever you like,” I said, and the four obliged, each taking a seat on the sofa. Rila should have been here, yet I didn’t see her anywhere.

“Hey, Rila. They’re all here.” When I peered into the dining room, I saw Rila sitting and looking quite pale. “You don’t look so good,” I remarked.

“...Indeed. I can only imagine what they will say to me.”

“I thought that you were more prepared than this.”

“These people are important to you. I cannot ignore their opinions, although I

wish I could.”

“Cowering in this room won’t fix anything.”

Rila took a deep breath, then she looked directly into my eyes and nodded. I took that to mean she was ready.

We returned to the living room together.

“I’m sorry for not introducing you all properly sooner,” I began. “This is Rila... Rileyla Diakitep. She’s the former demon lord we tried to overthrow.”

Rila seemed loath to allow any silence. She immediately followed my words with, “I am Rileyla, a demon. Presently, I live with Roland here in this house. I mean no harm to the citizens here. You can take me at my word.”

“Rila, th-thank you for everything!” Lina stood up and bowed.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“All the slaves you freed and cared for are at the orphanage now. I never told you how grateful I am...”

Right...

Lina was referring to the kids I’d brought home from the underground arena. I’d asked Rila to look after them, and she’d worked hard to prepare their baths and clothes.

“That was kind of you, Lina. I bet you wanted to tell her for a while now.”

The little mage smiled at my praise. “Yeah.”

Almelia cleared her throat rather pointedly. “I met Rileyla in the capital and we’ve interacted here, too, so I don’t have anything to say.”

They’d gotten to know each other at the market while I was attending a seminar. Rila’s coin purse had been stolen, and Almelia helped her.

“I put your collar on Rila, Serafin. As it happened, while it sealed Rila’s mana, it also had another function that turned the wearer into a talking black cat. From what I understand, the maker added that just for fun,” I explained.

“So, just to be sure, that lecture you gave me was about...” Almelia looked between Rila and me.

The former demon lord flushed. “Um, yes, that is correct.”

The very imaginative princess turned red and jabbed a finger at me. “Y-you’re not supposed to do that with a roommate! Wh-wh-wh-what do you think you’re doing?! A-a-a-and you even kissed me!”

“Let’s save this for later.”

This was only going to complicate things.

“What?!” Almelia stood from her seat, clearly unwilling to drop this. However, I turned the conversation to Elvie, the reason we were gathered.

“You’ve spoken to Rila yourself, haven’t you, Elvie?”

She’d shown us hospitality when we stayed at the Haydence estate to help solve the mystery of King Rubens’s assassination.

“Yes...I’d heard you were living with a demon. I assumed she couldn’t pose a threat because you wouldn’t keep a threat so close...” Elvie stared pensively at the floor while she spoke. “I was surprised to learn Rileyla was the demon lord, but it made perfect sense when I thought back to the war’s final battle and what you did, Roland.”

It seemed she understood Rila was harmless and not a bad person. However, she couldn’t accept the situation.

“I’d like to apologize for concealing who I used to be,” Rila said. “I know the war was a mistake, and that apologizing now cannot fix it... So I shall do whatever is in my power to make amends to the country and the people who have suffered.”

She couldn’t simply ask for forgiveness. Everyone would have to come to accept her on their own terms after grappling with their memories of the conflict with demons.

Rila didn’t mention it, so I wasn’t going to bring it up, but she’d never wanted to start a war.

The demon lord carried the burden of all her army’s crimes. She had a

responsibility to make amends for what happened. To that end, Rila had brought crops from Hell to Bardenhawk, Maylee's homeland.

"I am not a child," Elvie said. "I assume you did not start the war purely of your own desire. There were surely circumstances leading up to the decision. However, there's one thing I can't wrap my head around." She turned her attention to me. "You, Roland."

"What about me?"

"I—no, not just me—Al, Sera, and Lina agree. Why didn't you tell any of us?"

Presumably, she'd been wondering this since learning the truth about Rila.

"Why did you disappear without telling us anything? Instead of killing the demon lord, you rendered her powerless with that collar. For how coldhearted you can be, that's the sort of kindhearted decision that is very in line with your character. You could have just told us. Did you think we'd harm a defenseless woman?" Elvie started to sob. She pursed her lips tightly, but she couldn't stop them from trembling as she wiped a tear with a finger.

When Almelia saw that, she put an arm around Elvie's shoulders and stroked her hair.

"I understand, El," she said. "We never believed that Roland was dead, but we still worried. I was so glad to learn he was alive. But then as soon as I thought about it, I wondered why he kept it a secret. The idea that we weren't important enough to tell made me feel awful..."

Elvie sniffled and gazed at me through her tears.

"Yeah, that's right! I was sooo sad, too," Serafin added. Her shoulders quivered, and she hid her face with a sleeve, although she peeked to see my reaction.

I decided to ignore her and her fake tears.

"I just want you to stay," Lina declared.

"Lina, that's not fair of you to say," Almelia chided.

Lina cocked her head at the princess.

“We were supposed to be important to you, but you abandoned us and went off to live it up with the ex–demon lord... I’m so sad... You could have let us join in.” Evidently, Serafin was upset for an entirely different reason than the others. She was really no different than usual. Whenever a conversation turned serious, she couldn’t help but act silly.

“First, let me apologize to you, my friends, for lying.”

Back at the time, I couldn’t explain to them why I’d spared the demon lord. I was only a cold assassin who knew nothing of the world. Things were different now, though.

Since becoming a guild employee, I’d learned of warmth and what counted as normal. Understanding how different an assassin’s life was allowed me to finally reveal what happened in the demon lord’s castle.

An assassin kills anyone for the mission, regardless of whether they’re good or evil. Since quitting that life, I’d figured out why that had felt so off-putting.

“I’m sorry for vanishing without a word, too.” I bowed my head at the four women, who received my apology in silence. “I’d decided that would be my last assassination mission, yet I failed to kill my last target. I’d felt that the demon lord was a good person and decided that sealing her powers was enough. Then I made a choice very unlike me. However, I didn’t keep it from any of you because of a lack of trust. I hope you can believe that, if nothing else.”

I’d believed I couldn’t let anyone find out the demon lord was alive, even if she was powerless, and that kept me from revealing the secret to my friends. Things might have played out very differently had I told King Randolph or my party members.

“El, can you accept what Roland’s said?” Almelia asked.

“Yes, as long as he is with Rileyla, we have nothing to worry about.”

Rila was obviously relieved to hear that.

“Al, may I ask a question? What was that about a kiss?” Elvie inquired.

“Huh?”

“You said you kissed Roland.”

“That’s— Oh, who cares about that...?” Almelia turned away and shot me a bashful glance.

“Hey, did you two just exchange a look?!”

“S-so what if we did?! There’s no problem! Just leave us alone!”

Almelia tried to stand, but Elvie grabbed her. “No, there’s definitely an issue here.”

“I haven’t kissed Roland yet,” Lina stated.

And I had no plans of it ever happening.

“Oh yes, I haven’t gotten one, either.”

Likewise, I didn’t intend to kiss Serafin.

Rila snickered to herself as she watched. “So this is the party of heroes. I see. Traveling with them must have been difficult at times.”

The living room grew quite noisy as Elvie demanded details while Almelia staunchly refused. Lina hovered around the two nervously, trying to stop their argument.

“Roland, do you have anything to drink?” Meanwhile, Serafin brazenly asked for alcohol as though nothing was amiss.

“Ah yes, I believe you are the one who can hold her drink,” Rila commented. She headed to the kitchen and brought back wine and glasses, then began to pour.

I quickly whipped up some snacks and brought out something nonalcoholic for Lina.

The conversation turned to chatting about what we were doing these days, interspersed with reminiscing.

“I like that story. You tell it, Roland,” Lina said.

“You mean when Almelia wet herself?”

“Ally peed her pants. Heh-heh-heh.” Lina had heard the story multiple times before, yet still requested it from me and laughed to herself as she recalled it.

“Don’t talk about that while we’re eating! Also, I never peed myself!”

Serafin smiled. “I seem to remember Lina peeing in her sleep several times.”

“I—I did not!”

“And then you had to go to the battlefield with no underwear since you didn’t have a new pair to change into...”

“Nooo! Nooo!” Lina tried to cover my ears to keep me from hearing.

Admittedly, I already knew, so I let her do as she pleased.

Everyone chatted easily, likely because of the alcohol.

“And El would cry at night because Roland’s training was too harsh,” Almelia said.

“You did as well. You hypocrite.”

Everyone laughed.

“Have you any embarrassing stories of him?”

“Rila, don’t ask that.”

All four of my old party members considered the question, but Almelia was the first to speak up.

“During an attack at night, Roland once fought entirely naked.”

“I remember that. Why weren’t you wearing any clothes?”

“Oh, c’mon, that’s obvious. Roland was dedicating his energy to another kind of ‘assault,’ so his clothes were off and he... Heh-heh... He was naked because... Heh-heh. Roland, since when was your weapon of choice a spear? Pfft!”

“Let’s move on to another topic.” I punched Serafin in the side to stop her.

“Ha— Hrrgh...” She fainted, but it would only last a short while.

“As reliable then as you are now,” Rila commented with an exasperated sigh.

“Why don’t you tell us about Roland, too, Rileyla?”

“Yeah, I want to know your side of things. Tell us.”

“Ha-ha. Then I shall regale you.” Rila launched into a story with clear pride.

It seemed all of them—except Serafin, who was still unconscious—were curious to learn what had happened before we’d all reunited. Most of what Rila said was the unembellished truth, so I had little cause to interject.

“No guild staffer would ever do those sorts of things, Roland.”

“I thought it was all *normal*, personally.”

“No, Al’s right. You haven’t been living quietly at all.”

I tilted my head. I couldn’t believe it.

“Roland was being Roland,” Lina stated, as though delivering a definitive point, and Almelia and Elvie nodded.

We kept talking and sipping at our drinks.

After I took Lina up to a bedroom when she grew sleepy, I came back to find that everyone else had succumbed to their liquor.

“It seems the cleric is not as stout as she appeared,” Rila said.

I nodded. “Yeah. She enjoys her drink but can hardly endure it.”

I took Almelia, Elvie, and Serafin to the bed Rila and I normally used, which quickly became rather cramped.

Rila poured me another glass. “It seems I am the only one able to keep up with you.”

“But you can’t drink much yourself.”

“It’s true.” She laughed, but turned serious quickly. “So those were the people I fought against during the war...”

“They’re a tad idiosyncratic, but they’re good friends to have.”

“They showed no signs of hostility or vigilance when my powers were sealed away. What tremendous trust they have in you.”

“I don’t believe you’re dangerous, and I think they sensed that.”

Once we were back together, we mostly spoke like we had in the old days. I’d thought something had changed, but that worry was unfounded.

“Oh, I meant to ask earlier what happened to Yorvensen,” I remarked

offhandedly.

“Yorvensen...”

That was the first region our side took in the war. Its keep was known as the former demon lord’s castle.

“I heard that the demons haven’t returned since the army withdrew. Supposedly, monsters and magical beasts have taken it over.”

I hadn’t seen a single quest for the area, so I doubted there was anyone living there.

“I see,” Rila muttered.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell them? You fought to take over, but you had your reasons.”

“That would simply be an excuse coming from the aggressor. And those who wanted battle only sought it because of my overwhelming power.” Rila was rapidly growing melancholy in her drunkenness.

“Don’t beat yourself up for it. The war is over, and you’re no longer the demon lord.”

“Indeed,” Rila said as she sipped from her glass.

In times like these, Roje was quick to cheer Rila up, but the elf was nowhere to be seen when she was needed most.

We were silent for so long that Rila reclined on the sofa and fell asleep. When I tried to put a blanket over her, I saw she was crying.

“The cruel and ruthless demon lord, was it...?”

Rila had adopted that persona after declaring war. In actuality, she’d been the kind and caring daughter of a king. Even when I beat her, she never tried to struggle. Instead, she looked freed of a burden.

The war must have been difficult for Rila.

She was no longer the demon lord in name. However, the memories from that time still haunted her.

7

The Cruel and Ruthless Ruler

◆Rila◆

The demon lord clicked her tongue as she left the throne. She thrust an extravagant jacket at a chamberlain, who followed after her in a fluster as she departed from the audience chamber.

“Do they mean to say they are dissatisfied with the way I rule?” the demon lord complained to no one in particular.

The dark elf accompanying her, who also served as captain of the royal guard, replied, “The vassals couldn’t possibly be dissatisfied with you.”

“Then why? They wish to invade... How absolutely inane. It is nothing but a waste—of funds, personnel, and goods. And how do they expect us to transport it all? Do they wish to make use of my greater teleportation magic?”

“I’m afraid that...your great powers have given the nobles a reason to dream for more. They believe you have the ability to rule the entire world.”

“How dreary. If countries ran on hopes and dreams, there would be no strife.”

“I think you are entirely right.”

The demon lord was peeved.

She’d just finished the most recent of many periodic conferences with vassals gathered in the audience chamber. Every time they met, the faction calling for war against the human world seemed more vocal.

The demon lord had always dismissed the idea, but she no longer had that luxury.

Now the warmongering faction made up the majority. Its members had won the neutral faction and several moderates to their side. The situation had progressed to the point that it seemed going to war was the overwhelming public opinion.

“And here they claim that we should attack the humans because they believe demons are the superior race. It’s positively childish.”

The demon lord opened the door to her chambers and headed inside. The dark elf followed after.

“What do you make of this?”

“I’m not sure,” the dark elf replied.

“I see,” the demon lord let out a dreary sigh and sank into the sofa.

There was a soft knock at the door, which the dark elf answered. She inquired about the reason for the visit, then told the demon lord, “His Highness Luther has arrived to see you.”

“I am not in the mood. Send him away.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Luther, the demon lord’s younger brother, was one of the corps commanders, and the leader of the war faction.

“As you heard, Her Majesty is not in the mood, so if you could come another —”

The demon lord heard the dark elf try to explain, but she was cut off by the sound of the door swinging open violently. Heels clacked against the floor as a demon man made his way over.

“My dear sister,” he greeted.

“Luther, I am not in the mood. Did you not hear?”

“Why were you so evasive in your answers?”

“Because I do not know what a war would mean for us.”

“We’ll bring about the fall of the human realm and use it as a step toward our future conquests. That should bring more wealth to our own nation.”

“That is but an excuse.” She had heard this reasoning many times over, but it was all for the public—just for show. “You and yours are merely bored. You claim to desire peace and wealth, but in truth, you simply wish to subjugate others.”

“And what would be so wrong with that?”

“Violating the other continent accomplishes nothing. There is naught to gain. We have no need to even consider that realm’s existence.”

“You’re wrong. An invasion will prove that demons are superior! With your powers, the humans are nothing more than worms beneath our feet!”

“Alas, I have no interest in such endeavors. Humans are simply humans, and we are demons. Neither is superior to the other. And as your lord, I decide all. Now go.”

Luther gave his sister a pointed look before turning and leaving.

The war faction’s arguments never changed.

“Is it so boring to live in peace?”

“It’s already been two decades since your father, the previous lord, put an end to the last conflict. Many old vassals are still hot-tempered, especially Lord Corniel. To them, it likely seems natural to subjugate other species and fight.”

“And now they have Luther, the outspoken dunce, to represent them.”

The warmongers were from a different generation with different values.

The previous demon lord had given the throne to his daughter. However, the position of demon lord was not typically inherited. Undoubtedly, some jealously eyed the throne with dissatisfaction.

Rileyla could have simply given a display of her power. They would fall into line once they saw how far beyond them she was. However...

“Politics is never simple. Those old men are ever one or two steps ahead of me.”

Speculation abounded in the palace, claiming that the last war would have ended sooner if Rileyla had been in her father’s place.

The current demon lord's father was far from incompetent, though. In fact, he'd been a brilliant demon lord, but Rileyla far exceeded him in talent. She was touted as the strongest in history.

"If I may, I believe an invasion is not a poor idea, Your Majesty."

"Oh? You hardly ever volunteer your opinions on matters."

"I have rather unpleasant memories of humans..."

"Ah yes, you do hail from that continent."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I see no direct benefits to that route. Hmm. What shall I do?"

The demon lord smiled weakly to herself and sighed.

Such were the events three months before the strongest demon lord in history went to war.

Following that day, the demon lord showed no interest in attacking the human realm and quickly changed the topic when it was raised during conferences. She knew the war faction was dissatisfied, yet she always quickly rushed the topic along as soon as it came up.

She turned the talks to something she believed was of more interest whenever possible.

"I have considered taking a husband, but he must be stronger than me. You may raise candidates among the lords or recommend any who seem appropriate. We will take applications anytime."

The announcement caused a stir.

After the demon lord returned to her chambers, the dark elf asked her, "Why did you say such a thing?"

"They're mighty enough. Why not have some fun and enjoy a fight with me?"

"They would not stand a chance. And the vassals know that well..."

"For all their talk, they merely bully those weaker than themselves without daring to challenge those more powerful. What wearisome men they all are."

Because the demon lord had no interest in love, she employed her authority as a ruler to judge potential suitors.

At that point, a chamberlain appeared.

“The grand lord seeks an audience with you, Your Majesty.”

“My father?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. He requests your presence at the villa if you are available.”

“All right. Then I shall go.”

It had been a year since Rileyla took the throne, and in all that time, he’d never called upon her like this. He’d never said a word about her rule as he dedicated himself to his retirement, finding joy in farming.

The demon lord left for the villa with the dark elf attendant.

“Rileyla, it’s been quite a while.”

The demon lord’s father wasn’t an audacious person like her brother. In fact, he was the opposite.

There was a placid air around her father, as though all time had stopped in his presence. He was soft-spoken, but all his words reached everyone’s ears clearly.

Simply put, he was reasonable and persuasive.

It was said that he used wit, not might, to end the conflicts of his era.

“It has indeed,” the demon lord replied. “I have asked you to eat breakfast with me, but you never come.”

“You are the demon lord, but you are also my daughter. Anything that troubles you would hasten me to intervene.”

“I would not mind.”

“I did not think it wise to govern from behind the scenes while my daughter stand out front to block criticism for me.”

“You fear your opinions might influence me?”

“I am merely cautious of the possibility. May I speak about one matter,

however?”

“Yes, what would that be?”

Her father took a moment, perhaps to choose his words carefully. “It seems tensions are running high among the aristocracy. I hear about these things regardless of whether I wish to or not.”

The demon lord had expected this conversation.

“I believe it is vital to protect the country you bequeathed to me, Father.”

“The vassals of my time were especially impulsive. Some things cannot be avoided by denying them like a spoiled child, Rileyla. Allow them to investigate the human continent’s military capabilities. That will be enough. You are believed to be the strongest of us, but once they realize the fight will not be simple, their enthusiasm will wane.”

These were the vassals who’d helped Rileyla’s father during previous conflicts. He understood how to handle them more than the current demon lord.

“Then that is what I shall do.”

“You may simply allow them to indulge their opinions.”

“Yes, but what will happen if we find that the continent is conquerable?”

“Were I in your place, I would attack swiftly, bring the humans to heel, and secure peace quickly. To prevent a grudge, you must make it beneficial for both parties. This will also sate the war faction’s need to feel superior.”

“I shall take that into consideration.”

It seemed that was all he had to say. After exchanging pleasantries, the demon lord left the villa.

After the demon lord acknowledged the legitimacy of war, she created a vanguard to survey the continent. Its members traveled across the far reaches of the sea and successfully set up a Gate, but a report came in that claimed a few vanguard troops perished in an accident before arrival, including the commanding officer.

The expedition that was supposed to be confidential leaked to the war

faction, who turned the effort into a military intelligence mission instead of a survey. Until the demon lord heard of the trouble from across the ocean, she believed the vanguard was still only observing things in the human realm.

“It seems the vanguard engaged in battle. Half its members perished while the others were captured.”

One of the officers in charge of the operation had rushed to the demon lord and delivered the bad news—although some did not see it as negative.

“They fought? Who gave them the authority to do that?!”

“Yeek!”

When the demon lord saw the military officer fall backward, she returned to her senses and cooled her temper.

“I am sorry... Continue with your report.”

“A-all right...”

The vanguard had been wiped out. The only free survivor was the officer giving the report.

A battle had broken out in a small country on the southern side of the human realm. This land’s name was Yorvensen. Apparently, the humans had struck first, but the demon lord had her doubts.

At the next conference, many called for a battalion to be sent on a rescue effort.

“Surely you won’t hesitate now that the humans have done something so despicable, Your Majesty.”

The demon lord finally realized that the vanguard had never been under her control. It had likely been a pawn of the war faction, a sacrifice to begin hostilities forcibly. She could see that if she dispatched troops, this would become another opportunity for the battalion to request even more reinforcements.

“We’ll send out envoys to ask for the release of the prisoners. And if you try to interfere again, I shall render you all into dust.”

Despite her threat, the demon lord could not be sure whether the vassals would obey.

She wasted no time sending out an envoy. The one she chose understood the demon lord better than most and was the captain of the guard. She was the dark elf. With the power to change her appearance, she could avoid attention anywhere.

Thanks to the Gate, the dark elf returned within three days.

“The prisoners are gone... Their heads were displayed outside the castle.” She delivered the report to an assembly of vassals and the demon lord.

“How barbaric.”

“They displayed their severed heads? Have they no sense of the dignity we demons possess?”

The place stirred, and the demon lord shut her eyes tight and furrowed her brow. Something was approaching, and she wouldn’t be able to hold it back. It was tumbling toward her.

“According to the townspeople, it is a show of the royal family’s might and influence.”

What benefit was there to doing something so awful? The demon lord held her head as she sat upon the throne.

“The humans cannot tolerate other races. I believe they will not negotiate and speaking to them is a waste of effort.” The dark elf herself wasn’t an adherent of the war faction’s ways, so her words held the weight of truth and objectivity.

“What a savage, inferior species!”

“Oh, great Demon Lord! Let us send the troops!”

“We ought to show those humans our true strength now that they’ve dared to soil our pride!”

“Great Demon Lord, we are willing to travel across the ocean!”

All factions voiced their support. The only option was to begin the battle.

“Attack swiftly, bring them to heel, and secure peace just as quickly.” The

demon lord recited her father's words to herself in the tempestuous air of the audience room.

She resolved herself and stood. All the voices criticizing her went silent at once as they waited for the demon lord.

"I never leave work half done! I will send five army divisions to bring Yorvensen under my control."

""""Hurrah!"""" A unified shout echoed throughout the chamber.

"I shall take command. The conceited humans shall learn of our anger!"

""""HRAH! HRAH! HRAH! HRAH!""""

The vassals raised their fists in the air.

Expeditionary forces were assembled much faster than expected, almost as though they had been prepared beforehand.

So long as they were within the demon lord's sight, she could stop them whenever she needed—or so she hoped.

Attack swiftly, bring them to heel, and secure peace just as quickly.

Using her greater teleportation magic, the demon lord brought large numbers of troops with her to Yorvensen.

As she had claimed, the demon lord did not leave the job half done. She razed villages, obliterated towns, and left cities in ruins. And after each show of her overwhelming might, she sent an envoy to the castle.

However, the castle refused to accept the envoy each time.

Soon Yorvensen Kingdom was no more.

It took less than two weeks.

The flag of the demon lord's army fluttered over the castle, and the place was made a temporary fortress.

While the demon lord set to drafting a nonaggression pact, the human army and former citizens of Yorvensen rallied to reclaim the land from the cruel and ruthless demon lord they so despised.

“Roje, it is impossible. How did things turn out this way? Why do two species with the ability to speak refuse to talk with one another?”

“Ah... I’m afraid that may be how creatures with the ability to communicate are.”

“This country has been made into an example, something I never intended. Was there no other way? Such is the result of my inexperience and reliance on the use of force.”

The demon lord had to wonder what her father might have done.

“Your kind words are wasted on those humans. The man who ruled this country simply was not intelligent enough. This kingdom was bound to fall eventually. You have no reason to fret.”

“Perhaps this is the result of keeping imbeciles as enemies and allies. Still, this is my blunder. I was not able to control my troops.”

“I’m afraid I must disagree.”

“You have awful memories of humans, correct?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I would prefer that you ruled the entire world.”

“I do not have any such aspirations... I would prefer to live someplace where no one knows me, with no power or title.”

“Please do not speak so rashly.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I jest.”

Following that, the war between the humans and demons intensified.

Only the demon lord sought to negotiate, and in time, the envoys she dispatched stopped returning.

A year later, a hero with special powers appeared with mighty companions, and the demon lord said to be the strongest in history was defeated. Then the so-called Human-Fiend War came to an end.

However, before the demon lord’s corpse was discovered, a young man and a black cat left the castle without anyone the wiser.

8

Runaway

When I returned home after work, instead of finding Rila waiting for me as usual, I was greeted by a bored-looking elf.

“What are you doing here?”

“Don’t give me that. I informed Lord Rileyla that I would be here today. I thought she had returned, and now I find you instead.”

Then she gave me a dramatic sigh.

“Where’s Rila?”

“Was she not out shopping? She was not here when I arrived in the afternoon.”

I checked the living room, kitchen, and bedroom, but Rila was nowhere to be found.

“Hey, tell me where Lord Rileyla has gone. Y-you don’t think she’s been kidnapped, do you?!”

Roje was beginning to panic, so I tried to calm her down. “She has her powers back and would be able to use a Gate. She could easily go to the capital or anywhere else.”

“So you’re saying she might be far away? She knows I was going to come by today. Lord Rileyla has never missed one of my visits.”

Roje had served as Rila’s personal guard, so it was no wonder she was anxious. I had to admit that it was odd that Rila had left without a single word to Roje on the day of her visit.

“Hey, human. Do you have any idea what’s happened to her?”

“ ... ”

Any idea...

Rila had rather abruptly asked about Yorvensen. I had no idea if that was related, but it was the only thing I could think of.

“Roje Sandsong, did Rila ask you anything about Yorvensen?”

“Yorvensen? No, not in particular. Why?”

I told Roje about what had happened recently—the fake me, how Elvie realized Rila was the demon lord, and that my old party members came here to talk.

“Th-then one of them must have— The party of heroes took Lord Rileyla! It must have been the Maiden of the Shield!”

The Maiden of the Shield was another name for Elvie.

“Calm down, you idiot. They couldn’t abscond with Rila that easily.”

“Then why isn’t Lord Rileyla here?” Roje seemed close to crying.

We looked for signs of kidnapping.

“ ... ”

I suddenly remembered that someone had been watching Rila and me lately. I’d thought it was whoever delivered Elvie’s letter, but if they only meant to give a message, why spy on us?

Was there anyone else who might be interested in Rila or me?

While Roje and I tried to figure out what happened, someone else stopped by. I opened the door to find a rather unusual duo.

“I heard you were here, Commander Roje. I figured that promised to make this a veeery fun night.” Dey glanced at Almelia beside her. “Did you invite her, too?”

“A vampire and an elf... Roland, what were you planning to do?” Almelia gave me an exasperated look.

“It seems the hero-princess has too much time on her hands,” I countered.

“Don’t give me that.”

“Sorry, but we don’t have time for this today. Rila’s missing.”

“Oh my,” Dey said. Meanwhile. Almelia’s expression hardened.

“Do you have an idea what’s happened to her, Almelia?”

“I can’t say, but El’s been acting weird lately. I came by today to ask you for help.”

“Elvie, huh?”

“Yeah. We cleared everything up last time I was here, but she’s since started talking about how she can’t let it go... Maybe it’s related?”

I understood where Almelia was coming from. Elvie wasn’t the type to change her mind easily. However, if she intended to blame Rila for the war, she would have done so at the earliest opportunity.

“You mean to say the Maiden of the Shield found Lord Rileyla’s weak point and captured her?!”

Rila was good at heart. She wouldn’t resist if the responsibility of the war victims was levied against her.

“I’m going to see Elvie,” I said.

“I’ll go, too,” Almelia added.

Dey nodded. “Then I’ll tag along as well.”

Asking Roje was a waste of time. She wore a grave look that suggested she was prepared for war. Since we’d all be working together, I thought it best to tell Almelia who we’d be working with.

“This elf is Roje Sandsong. She’s known as a dark elf, but this is her true form. She often visits because her master, Rila, lives here.”

“I see. And I assume this one has a similar situation?” Almelia cast a look to Dey, whose smile didn’t so much as flinch as she greeted the hero-princess.

“That’s right. I used to be part of the demon lord’s army. Now I work as an adventurer and I’m *sooo* very close with Master Roland.”

“...” Almelia seemed disgusted to hear that.

“Dey, don’t cause misunderstandings. Her name’s Candice Minelad, and she’s one of my top two adventurers.”

Almelia sighed. “Sounds like there are more stragglers from the former demon lord’s army than we thought.”

She was probably right. There were undoubtedly others like Dey who’d been stranded on this continent and forced to hide to protect themselves.

Our group totaled only four, but we had power to spare.

Dey, in her usual lackadaisical tone, said, “I’m so happy to get to work with you, Master Roland.”

“Hey, Candice, we’re not doing this for fun and games!”

“Oh my. All fighting’s fun and games, though.”

“Hmm? R-really?”

Dey snickered at Roje, who was entirely too gullible.

Almelia pointed at the pair. “Are you sure about them, Roland?” She sounded worried.

“They pull their weight when they need to.”

I couldn’t be certain that applied to Roje, however.

“Let’s go.”

We used Roje’s transportation magic to travel to Rubens’s capital, Wegal.

There was no telling who might see us, so we teleported to a deserted hill overlooking the city.

Almelia whispered, “The demon lord was known for being cold-blooded, vicious, and evil, but Rileyla seems far from that image...”

Just as Almelia said, Rila was entirely different from her demon lord persona.

“Lord Rileyla is kind at her core. After the war, she was constantly tormented by guilt. I have watched her closely all this time. The war’s damage pained her dearly.”

Roje was likely right.

“I can’t accept what the demon lord’s army did, but I couldn’t hurt someone who’s recognized their crimes and wishes to atone for them,” Almelia replied.

Presumably, Rila hadn’t known what to do about her transgressions and desired to rectify them in some manner. She’d done what she could to help restore Bardenhawk already.

“Let’s find Elvie and see what she knows. There’s still no telling if Rila is with her.”

I summoned my shadows and had them investigate Elvie’s estate. We’d visited before, making it easy to sneak the shadows in to collect intel.

“You’ve learned some strange magic.”

“It’s a demon spell. Rila taught me.”

“Hmph...” Almelia pouted. “You couldn’t manage much when I taught you, though. Yet you can do all that after Rileyla shows you. Hmm...”

She looked so disappointed. I explained, “Human magic has a lot of roundabout and redundant aspects compared to demon magic, and that didn’t suit me.”

“Are you saying that demon magic is a better fit for you?”

“Well, I’ve still only learned a small amount of it.”

One of the shadows found something. I linked my senses to it and saw the courtyard from a low height. I heard a conversation through the walls, so I had the shadow move closer, keeping silent all the while.

“Who do you think our lady brought to the guest room?”

“It’s the pretty woman who was with Sir Roland. I believe her name was Lady Rileyla.”

“Really? Do you think it’s carnage in there? Do you?”

“Of course not. Our lady wouldn’t. She would never resort to something like that.”

“Our lady is the type to face someone directly.”

“Really? You think she’ll be straightforward and declare that she’s better for Sir Roland?”

“Naturally. I’m sure it’s tense in the room right now.”

“Oh, I hope it goes well for our lady.”

Honestly, the servants’ imagined situation sounded preferable to the real one.

I cut my link from the shadow.

We still needed more information, so I had the other shadows gather at Elvie’s estate and wait for us.

“It seems that Rila is with Elvie. From what the servants have said, she isn’t being treated harshly.”

She was in a guest room, so she was probably all right.

“If the Maiden of the Shield knows that Rila is the demon lord, she could have alerted others and gathered a human army. We can assume she’s kept that information secret and wishes to resolve her issues behind closed doors,” Dey said.

“Likely.”

Rila and Elvie had drunk together and spoken face-to-face. Did Elvie really only see her as the demon lord that entire time?

“You know...,” Almelia began, apparently recalling something. She stared into the air for a second. “She started wearing a different sword right about the time she began to change.”

“I’m sure she carries a different weapon on occasion,” Roje said dismissively. However, Dey shook her head.

“Two blades can feel very different in combat. I doubt she’d make a decision like that so abruptly.”

“Roland’s here, so there was no need to go this far, even if Rileyla’s the demon lord. Silly El.” Almelia thrust out her rather diminutive chest and put a hand on her hip. “It’s all going to be fine, though. I’ll go in to talk to her directly!”

“How reckless,” Dey commented.

Roje replied similarly, “There is such a thing as being too foolhardy...”

Almelia’s confidence and rash behavior had sprouted from her powerful abilities. However, I knew her demeanor inspired hope in others.

Elvie had said my duplicate told her the truth about Rila. A sense of foreboding chilled my skin like the northern breeze. Whenever I had that instinctual feeling, it was likely because things were rapidly approaching a worst-case scenario.

As I gathered information from my shadows, one stopped moving.

I took on its senses and found myself staring directly into the eyes of a squatting woman.

“So you are here...”

It was Rila.

Naturally, she’d noticed my shadows already.

There were many things I wanted to ask her, but I couldn’t speak through my shadows as Rila did.

“I do not seek rescue. I came here of my own free will. And I did not wish to burden you... I am sorry for making this decision on my own, but it has already been done.”

Rila’s voice was gentle and forlorn. She did something to the shadow, and my connection to it was severed. The shadow itself had dissipated.

I did the same to my other shadows and told the others what I’d learned.

“Rila is in a guest room of the estate. She is not a captive and claims she’s here of her own accord. I assume that’s why she isn’t restrained. The security hasn’t changed compared to the last time I was here.”

I quickly outlined the guards’ positions, but I was unsure about whether to reveal one particular detail.

The others waited for me, puzzled by my hesitation. I was concerned Rila might resist us, rather than Elvie.

“She told me she doesn’t want to be rescued.”

“Oh, really? So now she’s being stubborn?” Almelia didn’t seem particularly concerned.

“Even if Lord Rileyla does not desire it, my duty is to protect her from harm. I, Roje Sandsong, shall do all in my power to safeguard her or die trying.” Roje’s declaration was full of vigor. Sometimes she managed to say something sensical.

Dey, however, seemed to receive that statement a little differently. Her face twisted into a half smile.

“Y-yes, Commander Roje. Pfft... I hope for your sake that clichéd line hasn’t tempted fate to actually kill you... Pfft.”

“What’s so funny?”

Roje was confused, but Dey shook her head as she held back her laughter. Regardless of Dey’s amusement, she clearly agreed with the rest of us.

It didn’t matter whether Rila wanted this.

“Roland, I’m ready when you are!”

“I as well.”

“I’m ready to go whenever.”

We wanted this.

Sorry, Rila, our egos have gotten in the way.

We moved between dark spots down the large roadway, dodging the moonlight.

As we approached the back gate, two bored-looking guards yawned. I’d known their location in advance thanks to my shadows.

They’d be taking a nap for a while.

I activated my skill, Unobtrusive, and approached them. An open hand against their necks rendered them unconscious. I found some footholds and scaled the wall with nothing but my bare hands, then landed on the other side.

After confirming no one was around, I quietly opened the back gate from inside.

That's when Almelia started making a fuss.

"El! Come oooooout!" she yelled from the front of the manor. I sensed motion inside. People were headed to meet Almelia.

The princess was great at standing out.

"How is that hero so loud?!"

"My, how unbecoming."

Roje and Dey entered through the now-open gate.

"It's fine. She's creating a distraction."

"You're using a hero as a diversion? What a fiend you are, Master Roland." Despite Dey's criticism, she looked captivated by me.

"Securing Lord Rileyla is our priority, human."

"If she'll let us without a fight."

"It's not a matter of 'if'! We shall! We must be firm in our resolve!"

"All right, all right," I said to placate Roje. She was huffing through her nose.

A visit from the hero was an unusual event. Most guards didn't leave their stations, but Almelia certainly occupied their attention.

We used that to slip in undetected as I invoked my skill.

I made sure to take out every guard. One, two, three...

Roje and Dey followed after.

"H-how quickly you work..."

"That's my Master Roland."

"Don't talk without good reason."

These two were apparently less vigilant together.

I stealthily traveled through the hall, rushing to the guest room I'd once stayed in, relying on memory alone to find it.

“Here we go.”

Once we reached the door, Roje grabbed the knob.

“Hey, it might be a tra—” I tried to warn Roje, but I was too late.

She had already opened the door and taken a step inside.

“Lord Rileyla! I, Roje Sandsong, have come to—”

“Master Roland, get back!”

I reacted quickly without needing Dey’s warning and withdrew.

A magic circle formed.

“Huh? Uh?! Oh sh—”

Roje had realized something was wrong, but it was too late. She disappeared without a trace.

“It’s a court order rank mono spell called Subspace. As far as I know, only Lord Rileyla is capable of casting it. It’s advanced magic that sends someone to another space entirely,” Dey explained.

I’d seen it from a distance once. An entire army division had fallen into a trap and vanished.

“Pfft... Pfft... She was so enthusiastic and ended up being the first one out...” Dey, who was hardly acting cautious herself, tried in vain to hold back her laughter. “She’ll reappear after the caster ends the spell.”

“Evidently, Rila doesn’t intend to let us get to her without a fight.”

“It sure seems that way.”

Getting back my runaway cat was shaping up to be quite a lot of work.

We remained vigilant for other traps as we stepped into the room. Fortunately, we didn’t encounter any more, and Rila and Elvie waited inside, just ahead.

“Roland. If only you hadn’t gotten in the way, this could have been settled without further issue.” Elvie brought a hand to her sheathed sword.

“Oh dear, oh dear. Oh my, oh my. How terrible. How can you say all that

drivel while knowing you're a powerless nobody?" Dey summoned spears from thin air.

"A vampire... You've grown quite close to demons, Roland."

"And you appear to judge people based on old prejudices rather than who they are. Your values as a knight have changed substantially." My attempt at a taunt didn't elicit much from Elvie. She remained stone-faced. However, that's how she looked when she couldn't stomach something.

"Rila, why did you do this?"

"You did not speak with me when Amy returned, knave."

She was right.

I wished Rila had asked me for help instead of going off alone, but she likely felt the same back then.

Rila tapped a heel against the ground. The scenery around us changed.

"The guest room is much too cramped," she said.

We were suddenly taken to a place of endless wilderness.

"Lord Rileyla, why don't we go home with Master Roland? I prefer it when you two are together."

"I am sorry, Dey."

"Elvie, what are you planning?" I questioned.

"The demon lord wishes to be punished. She says she can't endure the heavy guilt of her crimes. She doesn't want us to fight, so please back off."

"Sorry. I can't do that."

Talking wouldn't solve anything now. My only option was to drag Rila home, whether she liked it or not.

"I'll take her away by force, if necessary. Just *try* to stop me," I said.

Dey readied her spear, and Elvie drew her sword. The blade pulsed with excess mana, rippling. This was the sword Almelia had spoken of.

Elvie's old weapon had been simple and well-used. This was obviously some

manner of demonic blade. From what I gathered, it amplified her magical power. Supposedly, when humans gained more mana than they were capable of holding, they were overcome with a false sense of omnipotence.

“Master Roland, be wary of that sword.”

“I know. I’ll leave Rila to you, Dey.”

“I’m not sure I’m powerful enough.”

“No, I think you’ll put up a good fight.”

“Oh my. My, my. You have so much faith in me. I’m overjoyed.”

Honestly, I didn’t think she could win against Rila, but I had a hunch about something. If I was right, then Dey stood a chance.

The demon before us was Rila in appearance and mannerisms. Something was off, though. The best way to describe it was to say it seemed as if something else wore Rila’s skin.

“Roland, I’m warning you for the final time: Please back off,” Elvie said.

“You’d be better off abandoning all thought of fighting me,” I replied.

“I bet you’re about to tell me that I should focus my strength on protecting others instead of fighting.”

“Sounds like you remember the lesson well enough. Why not heed it?”

Elvie didn’t have her usual large shield. I wasn’t sure if that was because she didn’t intend to use it or because we’d caught her off guard. Whatever the case, she only had that demonic sword.

“All righty then, Lord Rileyla. Let’s get started before they do.”

“I never expected a day might come when we would face each other.”

Dey readied her spear and dashed straight for Rila.

Rila moved back to dodge. At the same time, she created a sword from mana and blocked Dey’s next attack.

Dey must have come anticipating this battle. Her motions were flawless.

She attacked swiftly and in succession, never letting up. Her strikes prevented

Rila from having the time necessary to use magic.

I had to wonder how long she could keep it up, though.

“Has your arm healed already, Roland?”

“I’m stronger than you remember. This will end soon, and you’ll regret ever fighting me.”

That sword had some power that gave Elvie enough confidence to cast aside her shield, even though I’d lectured her on the subject during the old days. I found that concerning.

The mana empowering the blade glistened more brightly than before.

Elvie’s skill was Impregnable Fortress.

It drew all enemy attacks within a certain range to her and also increased her defense and that of her equipment greatly. It was quite a unique ability.

Anyone would have told Elvie to focus on guarding after learning about her skill.

It was an easy skill to grasp, very useful, and remained potent even if enemies knew of its effect. All this made it an excellent ability in every way.

She only needed a shield to take advantage of it, yet she had none.

“I’ve decided to exact my own form of justice,” she said.

“Big words for someone so powerless.”

As I dashed toward her, I sensed her activating her skill. Rila and Dey, who I’d been keeping an eye on, vanished. My surroundings clouded over. Only Elvie remained visible.

This was my first time being subjected to Impregnable Fortress. I understood why it was so compelling.

Elvie swung her sword with such force that it whistled as it cut through the air. For all her training, attacking with brute force was apparently all she could manage.

I easily moved past her and invoked Unobtrusive. When she lost track of me, Elvie turned around and slashed blindly.

She knew me and my tactics. That deserved a bit of praise.

However, I knew her just as well. I'd never intended to rely on my usual tricks.

Instead of moving behind Elvie, I'd remained in front of her, and she realized that too late.

I aimed a punch at an opening in her armor.

"Urk?!"

Elvie's face scrunched up, yet she still tried to fight back. She tried to land a diagonal cut on me, but I activated Unobtrusive again. I stealthily drew her other sword; a spare, apparently.

"I'll be borrowing this."

"When did you get behind me?!"

Elvie had powered up her defense, but I'd show her who was superior.

Still, I didn't want to hurt her too badly, so I aimed for the back of her knee. The skin there was supposed to be thinner. However, it felt like trying to cut through a boulder to me.

"You've moved again?!"

"Unlike you, I have a loser skill, so I have to rely on other things."

Elvie held her sword in front of her. Mana crackled around the blade like lightning.

What was she planning?

Mana was clearly gathering in her blade, which only grew stronger.

"I don't want to kill you, so dodge!" Elvie cried as she brought down her weapon. A surge of light erupted from the blade.

The silver ray of mana roared as it sped for me, yet I evaded it easily.

Something so big and obvious would never hit me unless Elvie distracted me first somehow.

"So what do you think, Roland? That's the power of the demonic sword Hols."

Was that supposed to be the weapon's name?

“So then that wasn’t your mana alone.”

I knew immediately where she was getting her extra power. Rila.

I sensed mine, Elvie’s, and Dey’s, too, but most of it had come from Rila.

“It absorbs mana and releases it, then?”

Admittedly, that seemed appropriate for a demonic sword. Where had Elvie obtained such an item?

With that weapon at her disposal, I understood why she’d abandoned my teachings and believed herself capable of handling Rila alone.

Elvie’s attack gouged deep trenches in the subspace realm Rila created, clear evidence of the power behind her strike. The sword looked to be recharging. I didn’t feel the same power coming off it as I did earlier.

“What an interesting toy,” I remarked.

Elvie’s shoulders heaved with her breath, but she didn’t say anything.

“I have a new weapon, too.”

I activated Unobtrusive.

As Elvie furrowed her brow, I fired off my right arm. She clearly sensed some projectile approaching, even though she couldn’t see it, and brought her sword down to cut through it.

However, before her blade made contact, my arm broke into droplets and rained down, pummeling her.

“Seems I can also use it like a volley.”

“What did you do to me?!”

Elvie’s bolstered defenses meant she came out of the attack mostly unscathed. I’d been experimenting more than anything else, and it had been something of a success.

The smaller mana shots weren’t powerful, but they had uses.

I waited for Elvie to falter, then circled behind her. All I needed was a moment of weakness. If slashing and buffeting didn’t work, then...

I brought my arm around Elvie's neck and squeezed.

"Guh, urgh..."

She flailed around but fainted almost immediately.

Her skill finally deactivated. I could see Rila and Dey again.

"Master Roland."

Dey appeared at a loss, and I saw something near her that seemed melted. Describing it was difficult. It resembled what might happen if a person were boiled for hours.

The subspace realm vanished, returning us to the guest room. A blacked-out Roje lay at the base of the door.

"Right before that flash of light, Lord Rileyla melted away like ice."

I glanced at Elvie, also unconscious, and her demonic sword.

"That sword seems to absorb mana from around it. Once it's sufficiently charged, it releases that blast of light," I said.

"Now that you mention it, I did feel like I had less mana. But I certainly didn't melt," Dey answered.

"Perhaps she fell apart because she wasn't a full person."

Apparently, that was what I'd felt was so off about Rila before. She'd been duplicated, just like me.

Dey used a spell to restrain Elvie while she was still knocked out.

"This spell's called Bondage," Dey said. "Isn't it positively obscene?"

She laughed as she told me that, though I'd never asked her for the magic's name.

We carried Elvie to the bed and did the same with Roje, too.

"Master Roland, do you think Lord Rileyla is...?"

"You fought a fake version of her," I said.

"That makes sense. I felt like something was missing."

Dey stared at the tip of her spear; the weapon abruptly vanished.

“Does that mean the real Lord Rileyla wants to come home with us?”

“No, I think the part about leaving was true for the fake and the real Rila.”

I’d realized from fighting myself that the duplicates had the same thoughts as the original.

If the false Rila felt guilty, then so did the real one. Otherwise, things would have turned out differently.

I sighed slightly.

“Miss Hero, you can’t! Please, you can’t just barge in— Ah! Wait!”

“It’s fine. I’ll explain it to El later. I’ll make sure none of the servants or guards get in trouble!”

I heard the shuffle of feet outside and bewildered voices as the door flew open.

“El! I know you’re in... Wait, you guys are already here?”

“You’re late.”

After peering into the room and realizing the battle was already finished, Almelia cocked her head to one side.

“Where’s Rileyla? Is she not here?”

“It seems she never was...”

“Hmph. I see.”

It almost sounded as though she’d wanted to fight Rila.

Rila was undoubtedly more powerful. However, Almelia was a quick learner. If she used the defensive maneuvers and dodging techniques I taught her before she’d fought with Amy, she might have put up a good fight.

Since Almelia was here now, too, I slapped Elvie’s face to wake her.

Almelia scolded Elvie and flicked her on the forehead.

“You know you’re no match for him, silly El.”

Elvie lowered her head.

“I thought that maybe I had a chance this time. I normally wouldn’t assume I could win against him without a plan.”

“It must have been the sword that made you act that way.”

Elvie looked over at the blade that was currently sheathed and propped up in a corner of the room, then she nodded slightly. “I followed what I thought was right. I don’t regret it. You can do with me what you will.”

“We’re not going to do anything to you.” Almelia cast me a look that asked *Right?*

“Hmm. Even if we did, there’d be no benefit. But, Elvie, I’d like to know where that sword and the fake Rila came from.”

“Fake?” Almelia was obviously confused.

Dey explained, “Lord Rileyla was here, in a way, but it wasn’t the real her. The fake melted.”

“It melted?”

“Pretty much. Maiden of the Shield, did you really think you could handle Master Roland with that sword? Were you in your right mind?”

Dey was right, but her tone was turning self-righteous.

Why did Elvie act alone? She was normally prudent. She would have informed the army and taken other preparations.

“After I visited your house, a man appeared with that sword.”

A man?

“Who?” Almelia asked.

Elvie told us that she didn’t know much about him but said, “He claimed his name was Van. He gave the sword to me and explained that it was a prototype. The sword has a strange power. Once you use it, it feels as though you’ve obtained raw power. I felt an absurd amount of proud confidence.”

She’d been granted a great amount of strength but overestimated her abilities. It really was a demonic blade. Just as the name implied, it corrupted

people.

Had Elvie gone up against anyone but me, things would have turned out badly.

Perhaps Wawok can learn something by inspecting that blade.

“Why did he give you that weapon, El?” Almelia inquired. The rest of us were wondering the same thing.

“I’m not sure. Van claimed he was from Rubens, but he had an accent from the south. He also knew that the king was assassinated under my watch.”

Because she was the captain of the king’s personal guard, it was only natural for Elvie to feel guilty for the murder and wish to restore her honor.

Had she captured the demon lord, she would have been dubbed a hero in Almelia’s place. Elvie’s natural sense of justice had been exploited.

“Wait... The assassination was a secret. How did he know about that?” Elvie seemed to have a moment of realization when I pointed that out.

How had Van learned something confidential?

I doubted that anyone would be so quick to talk. That fake me probably told him. He knew of Elvie’s position and personality, plus he was the one who’d assassinated the king.

“Van must have found out you were a member of the party of heroes and decided you were a good target for the sword,” I said. Elvie would have been the perfect person for the prototype sword.

A prototype...

It seemed that this man had some connection with me, and he’d created a demonic sword. He’d known that if Elvie took the fake Rila, I would come to get her. He’d orchestrated this to see how the fake Rila and the demonic sword would perform.

He’d manipulated us.

“What happened to the fake me when you took care of him? Did he melt, too?” I asked.

“Are you suggesting the same person made the fake Rileyla? I didn’t ask for details, but I’ll look into it later,” Elvie said.

“Thank you. Do you know the real Rila’s whereabouts?”

Elvie looked down. “Sorry. I have no idea...”

Van made that demonic sword. He probably had some manner of creation skill.

“May I take that weapon?”

“Yes. That’s fine. Use it however you like.”

With luck, examining the blade would reveal something useful.

◆Roje◆

“L-Lord Rileyla?!”

When Roje sprang awake, she found herself in an unfamiliar guest room.

“Oh, so you’re awake now, elf?”

“Hmph. The Maiden of the Shield from the party of heroes... What am I doing in a bed? The moment I tried to walk into here...Huh?! Where did you take Lord Rileyla?!”

“I’m not sure where she is, but Roland and the others already went home.”

“S-since when?!”

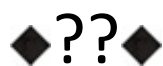
“How about some tea?”

“Well, if it’s not too much of a bother...”

A servant bobbed her head and brought in tea, which Roje sipped as she took a break.

9

The One Given a Mission



They walked through the rubble, all that remained of the town.

Although the war had passed through here long ago, an offensive odor still hung about the air and prickled the nose.

“Is something on your mind?” a man asked the demon woman beside him.

The woman seemed uninterested in talking and only said, “Not in particular.”

“Yorvensen—what remains of it, anyhow...”

The woman had looked upset since they’d arrived.

This was Ajahidalia, the capital of what was formerly Yorvensen Kingdom.

The demon lord’s army had overrun this kingdom, using it as a stepping stone in its conquest of the humans. The castle here had been used by the demon lord for a time. The man walking the ruins had lived here before the demons came.

“Anyone could use this land now.”

The woman sighed as though she were done with the conversation.

“Your name is Van, correct?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“What do you intend to do?”

Van looked up at the castle on the hill that the demon lord once held.

“Diakitep, you took the throne as demon lord because you have power. And I have power as well. I’ve learned of my ability, and I’d like to use it. That’s all.”

“And is that why you stole Roland’s arm to create the double and made a fake version of me as well?”

“Consider it a test of my abilities. I wanted to know if it was restricted to a particular species or if it had limitations in general. It’s only natural for me to be curious about my powers.”

Van had learned from a skill appraiser that he had the Smithing skill.

Although disappointed initially, he’d figured the ability would provide steady work. When the demon lord’s army had invaded, he’d fled to Rubens.

Then the war began in earnest.

As Van had possessed no workshop of his own, he joined a blacksmith guild to create large amounts of weapons. The Smithing skill had turned out to be incredibly useful, and he was able to make better weapons faster than others. However, he hadn’t been satisfied with the circumstances.

Van had quickly grown discontent with the simple, monotonous lifestyle. He’d even considered devoting himself to becoming an adventurer like he’d always wanted.

He’d long hoped to complete the special sword he’d devised in secret as well. Ultimately, he’d decided to become an adventurer when he successfully created the blade.

That was his plan.

To his surprise, Van completed his design almost too easily.

While he was in the middle of working, the sword he’d been making turned out exactly like the one he imagined. To keep others from finding out, Van had hidden the blade. This development had gotten him wondering about his Smithing skill. Some trial and error had soon revealed his ability helped craft more than weapons.

With the right ingredients, he could make anything. It didn’t matter whether the thing was inorganic.

Van had heard rumors the man who had killed the demon lord yet lived, and if that was the case, then he was the perfect subject of Van's first live creation. Van hired someone to collect intel for him and learned where the assassin lived and also that he'd lost an arm. For whatever reason, his arm had been preserved.

Van's one concern was that all his informants had cautioned him against getting involved with the assassin.

He didn't heed those warnings, however.

The assassin surely didn't expect someone would steal his arm. It had been easy. Then Van used the arm as a base to create his own assassin.

It was almost as though he'd grown a person straight from the severed limb. The new creation even possessed all the original's memories.

"An assassination? I've already quit that job, but if you command it, Master, then I must obey."

Van had expected the duplicate to refuse him, yet he agreed without question. That made it plain he was in control of the copy.

"King Rubens is a tyrant. Roland, show me what you can do."

"Elvie protects him, if I remember right. Still, I should be able to do it."

"By Elvie, do you mean the one from the party of heroes?"

"Yes."

Roland left at night and returned even later. He remained nonchalant throughout, as if he'd merely gone for a walk.

Officially, the king died suddenly from illness. Although quite a bit of the story was suspicious, it was undoubtedly Roland's handiwork. As long as Van had this version of Roland who listened to his commands, the original didn't need to exist.

"So you want me to kill myself. Hmm. You are exposing me to experiences I'd never have otherwise."

Van had left Roland to decide how to go about the deed, but he'd assumed

that the two-armed version would win against the one-armed original.

“Or so I thought, but that was a mistake. He never came home.”

“Of course not. He was executed in secret for assassinating the king.”

“I see. That’s too bad. He was no match for the one-armed original, then.”

“You made my duplicate well, but I doubt it will be a match for Roland. Even I could not best him.”

Diakitep seemed somewhat pleased about this.

The two slowly climbed the hill and made their way to the front gate, now buried under layers of ivy. When they turned around, they saw a sweeping view of the wastelands. The place was deserted. The only creatures were the occasional wild dogs.

“Can I come to you for advice should anything happen?”

“You are not royalty, but if you intend to revitalize this country, then I shall aid you.”

When Van had first asked for Diakitep’s help, she hesitated, but learning he was from Yorvensen convinced her.

“I look forward to working together.”

Diakitep didn’t take the offered hand.

Van had wondered what kind of person Diakitep was, and it turned out she was the sort who carried a great amount of responsibility. She felt terribly guilty for the invasion.

Elvie had been much the same when Van met with her.

No matter who Van copied with his power, his creations had to obey him. That power had allowed him to forge his special demonic blade. Soon, he wouldn’t need the real Diakitep anymore.

“I’ve decided to rename my Smithing skill. It will henceforth be called Army Maker.”

This declaration only earned a disappointed response from the woman beside him. “Do as you please.”

10

The Slumbering Weapons and the Demon Lord's Castle, Part I

Two days had passed since we returned from Rubens.

Elvie arrived at the house with Roje.

"Did you find anything?" I immediately asked her about the matter I'd requested she look into.

"You said the fake Rileyla melted. The fake Roland didn't, but he did decompose into bone quickly."

My copy was made from my right arm, so maybe his abilities and flesh were proportional to what he'd been made from.

"I see. So we can safely assume that Van made duplicates of me and Rila."

According to Elvie, he had an accent from the south, the sort shared by many people from Yorvensen. Rila had recently asked how that country was faring. That person we'd detected spying on us recently was probably some servant of Van's, not Elvie's.

They must have reported back about our relationship. Then later, he'd made contact with Rila. I could only guess what he'd said to her. Whatever it was had convinced her to go with him willingly. Van must have leveraged his ruined homeland against Rila to get her to cooperate.

"Hmm. Okay. Now then, why are you here, Roje Sandsong?" I said.

"What do you mean?! We must search for Lord Rileyla! The Maiden of the Shield has agreed to help, and I am desperate enough to accept her assistance

and yours.”

Elvie stood behind Roje looking quite embarrassed.

“Elvie, are you fine with accompanying this idiot elf?”

“Yes. Rubens will break into fighting for the throne soon. If I remain there, I’ll be placed into one faction or another. I’d rather be abroad.”

How very like Elvie.

Almelia peeked in from another room, dressed in an apron. “What is it? Is someone there?”

“Oh, Al. What are you doing here?” Elvie asked.

“Urk, El... What are you doing here?”

“I was planning to aid this elf with the search for Madam Rileyla...”

“Hmm.” Almelia looked Elvie up and down for a moment.

“What?”

“Nothing. Looks like you’re back to your usual self. You’ve been different for a while.”

“I’m sorry about that, and I should apologize to you, too, Roland.”

“It’s fine. This all started because I kept a secret from all of you. I can’t blame you for this.”

Perhaps I should have asked Rila to put on the collar as soon as it was completed. I shouldn’t have left the decision in her hands simply because a lack of powers might have been inconvenient.

“How long do you intend to stand around talking, you scoundrel?!” Roje had a fearsome look on her face as she marched right in.

“Come in. We don’t have much to offer, though,” Almelia said.

Elvie glanced at the princess and gave an awkward grin. “You’ve settled in nicely.”

“What? Do you have something to say?” Almelia gave Elvie an unhappy look, to which Elvie only responded with a shrug.

All sorts of food lined the dining table. Elvie's eyes went wide at the sight.

"Did Almelia prepare all this?"

"That's right! I went around to the market and dining rooms and bought the breads, meats, and soups and arranged the table!"

She seemed very satisfied with herself as she raised her chin to gloat.

Roje looked exasperated. "Uh, normally, people make this sort of stuff themselves..."

"Yes, I went shopping all on my own and made a well-balanced meal!"

"Uh, sure." Roje appeared at a loss. She cast a look at me.

"These two are from well-to-do families. They've never even gone shopping for themselves," I explained.

"Hmph. I suppose that just means they're lesser than Lord Rileyla."

Roje's pride in her master was written all over her face.

"Lately I've been bathing all on my own. And it's been super easy."

"Me too. And without maids."

Almelia and Elvie sounded as though they were competing, although I had no idea what for.

As the one who'd taught them the basics of battle, I needed to set them right.

"Hey, you two, bathing alone is normal."

"I don't think I want a lecture from you about what's normal, Roland."

"Me either."

Why?

We ate the meal Almelia had prepared while discussing our next moves.

"Want me to call Lina and Sera?" Elvie offered. I shook my head, however.

"It would be better for those two to stay put in case anything happens." Honestly, I didn't think things would get too hectic, though. "I don't want to get Lina involved in a fight. Pulling her away from her peaceful life, even for only a

short while, feels wrong.”

Almelia and Elvie agreed, nodding. We wanted Lina’s time in the party of heroes to be a small blip compared to the life she had now.

“Hey, human, we don’t know where Lord Rileyla is. We could use any help we can get.”

“Elvie, do you have any ideas? You’re the only one who’s seen Van,” I said.

Since the fake Rila had been with Elvie, the real one was presumably with Van. I had a guess of where they could be, but that wasn’t much to go on.

“I have no idea where he is or what he could be up to. I heard that Van used to be part of some crafting guild, but I can’t say if that’s true, and I’m not certain of his skill.”

After the battle with Elvie, I’d given the demonic sword to Wawok for inspection on the way home.

“It looks just as you described. The sword increases its user’s mana and steadily drains mana from them and the surroundings. Apparently, it makes the user mentally unstable. The longer it’s used, the worse the effect.”

That’s what he’d told me.

According to Elvie’s description of Van, he was slightly older than me. He was the sort of young man you could find anywhere. He’d ordered the king’s assassination, but it was possible he’d never met the ruler of Rubens directly.

“Presumably, he was just testing his abilities.”

He must have thought I could manage the task and sent my copy to confirm it. The same seemed to apply to the demonic sword and the fake Rila.

Almelia tore off a piece of bread and shrugged. “There’s no telling what he’s plotting.”

“He’s a dangerous man. My duplicate slew King Rubens, so it’s possible the copies have to obey Van. If so...”

“He can create mass-produced copies of Lord Rileyla. He could destroy the world.” Roje looked grim.

“Say, Roland, who’s stronger? Me or Rileyla?” Almelia inquired.

“I think you’ve grown stronger thanks to your training, but Rila is probably still more powerful.”

“Oh, I see...” Almelia didn’t look pleased to hear that.

Whether or not Van intended to mass-produce an army, he’d tried to dispose of me, and he might do the same to Rila.

“She’s such a handful,” I muttered.

“Why would Rileyla go with a man like Van? They don’t know each other, do they? I can understand what happened with El. She was a member of the party of heroes—lots of people know about her.”

Almelia posed a good question.

“It’s likely—,” I began, but Roje interrupted.

“You don’t think that Lord Rileyla...is in love with this Van scoundrel?!”

“Doubtful,” Almelia shot back.

“How can you be so certain?!”

“Well, because she likes Roland, doesn’t she?”

Roje squinted with evident discontent but nodded.

“So it’s probably another reason, right?” Almelia looked to Elvie, who nodded.

I didn’t quite understand. Roje seemed equally confused.

“Okay, this is nothing more than a theory, but I think Rila went with Van because...Rila found out Van is from Yorvensen. She could be working with him to atone for what she did,” I said.

“Atone?” Almelia repeated.

“Yeah. Rila’s struggled with guilt for a while. She started a war she never wanted. I think she’s been waiting for punishment and a way to make things right.”

I exchanged a look with Roje, who offered no objection.

“After she was forced to invade, she did all in her power to end the war

quickly. She repeatedly sent envoys to negotiate, but they were all ignored.”

I’d heard rumors to that effect, but I assumed her dispatching envoys was an attempt to mock humans.

“So Madam Rileyla was even willing to abandon you, Roland, to atone for her crimes...,” Elvie remarked.

That was how heavily Rila’s sense of responsibility bound her.

“Roje, would you investigate Yorvensen Kingdom, where the demon lord once held a castle?”

“All right. I likely know my way around better than any of you.”

To my surprise, she agreed to my proposal without complaint. When Rila was involved, Roje became much easier to work with.

A week passed. Roje had yet to report back.

I doubted that was due to travel time. She had access to Gate magic, after all. There was no evidence of her attempting to return, either.

“What is that idiot elf doing?” I grumbled, despite myself. Even if she’d turned up nothing, she could have come back and let us know.

“Idiot elf?”

When I looked up from the reception desk, I saw Orlando, a girl I’d worked with for a short time.

“Oh, Miss Orlando. I had no idea you were here.”

“I wanted to see you and Iris.”

“Thank you for coming all this way.”

Orlando stood out in the guild. She carried a large sword, and elves were rare in countryside towns.

“Would you like me to call the branch manager over?”

“Sure. But what was that about an elf?”

“Would you recognize another elf by name alone?” I asked.

“Probably,” Orlando replied, nodding.

“Her name is Roje Sandsong.”

Roje had served in the demon lord’s army, so there was no telling whether Orlando knew her.

“Sanny?”

“‘Sanny’?” I parroted.

“She...was a friend.”

“Then you do know her.”

Considering Orlando’s use of past tense, perhaps they weren’t in contact anymore.

“I thought she was dead.”

Roje was a regular elf, but she’d joined the demon lord’s army disguised as a dark elf so others wouldn’t look down on her. I didn’t know much else about her beyond that.

The female adventurers waiting in line after Orlando were all listening in.

“Do you think Mr. Argan knows that elf with the gigantic sword?”

“Could she be Quick Sword Orlando, the S ranker?”

I decided to finish helping the adventurers waiting in line first. The conversation with Orlando threatened to run long.

I met with her at a tavern after work.

“I was close with Sanny and her little sister, Marion. The trees in our homeland were reeeally special. The humans knew that they could be used for something, so they cut down lots.”

Orlando was drinking.

I’d taken a seat across from her. There was clear nostalgia in her eyes when she launched into her story.

“That’s very common,” I said.

Elven forests were often pristine. Rare trees and minerals flourished there.

When some greedy humans had discovered the woods, Roje and the others

fought them off.

“Sanny was the daughter of our leader. She fought. So did Marion and me. But it was no use. Lots of us died, including Marion and our leader...”

Roje had later joined the demon lord’s army for revenge. By some stroke of luck, Orlando survived and now earned a living as an adventurer.

“Is Sanny doing okay?” Orlando asked.

“I think so,” I replied.

She hadn’t returned from Yorvensen after I asked her to investigate, though. Roje had left in high spirits, eager to find her beloved Rila. Had I been wrong about Rila’s possible whereabouts, Roje would have returned to complain immediately, yet I’d heard nothing from her.

If Roje only sought to find Rila, then I wouldn’t be surprised to learn she never meant to come back. There was a chance she’d simply taken up residence with Rila, reasoning she belonged by her master’s side.

“Sanny, it’s been so long...” Orlando, who was very drunk at this point, started telling me about her childhood.

Evidently, she’d been friends with Roje and her sister since they were young. I would have liked to reintroduce them, but I had no idea where Roje currently was. Perhaps I should have asked Dey to go instead, but I’d refrained since I knew she was busy with quests.

“No, really. For real.”

“You liar. You must have been seeing things.”

In the din of the tavern, I heard the voices of a pair of adventurers—two men sitting side by side at the bar.

“No, seriously, really. It was the former king. I’m sure of it.”

Orlando evidently heard the conversation, too. She finished her cup and ordered another.

“There’s been a lot of talk like that recently,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Supposedly, there’s a place where you can see the dead again.”

There was no departed person I wanted to see again.

I stood and approached the two men. “Um, excuse me. About what you just said, where did you see this person?”

They both realized who I was immediately, so they told me without bothering to inquire why I’d asked.

“I saw him near the demon lord’s territory. Oh, right, that’s not the demon lord’s territory anymore.”

They were referring to the lands that encompassed Bardenhawk and Yorvensen. The former had been restored, which meant...

“It must be Rila and Roje...”

I thanked the two adventurers and returned to my table. It looked like Orlando had finally quit drinking, but closer inspection revealed she’d merely passed out with her chin propped on her hand.

“You’ll catch a cold like that.”

I placed my coat on Orlando and paid the check, then left.

I waited until morning to contact Almelia and Elvie to request they make some time to meet up. Luckily, neither had work that was too pressing. Both had a few free days to spare.

Although Orlando had nothing to do with this, she asked to come along, too.

“I’m worried about Sanny.”

I guessed that she was concerned because they used to be friends.

“Does this mean Rileyla is in Yorvensen?” Almelia asked.

“Most likely.”

“Sanny too?”

“If Rila is there, I have to imagine Roje is as well.”

I could tell from her weapon that Orlando fought as a vanguard who focused on her physical abilities. Initially, I’d wondered how such a dainty elf could use

that huge sword, but once I saw her actually wield it, everything clicked into place.

“Madam Orlando, do you truly fight with that large sword?” Elvie questioned.

“Yeah.”

I’d told Orlando we’d be working with the hero and one of her party members, but the elf wasn’t very interested. She only offered one-word answers.

“Big doesn’t necessarily mean strong, you know. Only kids think that way,” Almelia declared proudly.

I’d said something similar to Almelia once.

“Miss Orlando manages it with wind magic. She can handle her weapon like someone would a single-handed sword. Few people can pull off such a stunt.”

“Was that a compliment? I’m happy.”

Elvie had her normal equipment this time: a large buckler and a well-used sword. She and Orlando would likely make a good pair.

We used transportation magic to travel to the Gate nearest Yorvensen.

We arrived in a meadow in the shadow of a boulder. On the other side of it, I saw the castle the demon lord had once held in the distance.

“How nostalgic.”

“Yeah. Lina and Sera were with us back then. This whole place was crawling with the demon lord’s soldiers.”

Almelia and Elvie looked around as they spoke.

“This isn’t the time to reminisce. Let’s go.” I urged them on, and we headed for the capital.

We weren’t heading that way following a hunch alone. If anyone came to Yorvensen, they’d likely gather in the capital. I’d assumed it would be easiest to gather information there.

“Do you think anything came from that myth about Yorvensen? Have you heard any rumors, El?” Almelia asked.

“No, nothing in particular.”

“And you, Roland?”

“I haven’t, either. There’s been no word about anyone so much as trying to investigate.”

Orlando was confused. “What myth?”

“It’s said that an ancient, sorcerous weapon is buried in Yorvensen. It’s something of a legend, but I haven’t heard of anyone finding it. It’s probably just an unfounded story.”

When Yorvensen fell, other leaders worried about the weapon falling into the hands of the demon lord. However, the demons never gave any indication that they possessed the item. I think that’s why many concluded the weapon never existed.

“Why do you speak to Orlando so formally, Roland?”

“Yeah, I don’t get that, either.”

Almelia and Elvie, the two noble ladies in our group, pouted and gave me annoyed looks.

“Are elves special or something?” Almelia wondered.

Orlando looked flustered. “A-are we, Roland?!”

“No.” I let out a sigh. “As a guild employee, it’s natural for me to show respect to an S-rank adventurer.”

“So I just need to become an S ranker, too?”

“Hey, Roland, in that case I want to become an adventurer, too.”

“You two don’t have the free time to go adventuring.”

Orlando started to snicker. “How funny.”

None of them had any sense of urgency, apparently.

The ruined buildings became clearer the closer we got to the castle. And there were people among the remnants of the capital, too.

“I’ve heard the former territory of Yorvensen is infested with monsters,” I

commented.

“But there are people,” Orlando replied.

“Who could they be?” Almelia said.

“If they’ve moved here without realizing the region’s dangers, we’ll need to warn them,” Elvie stated. I agreed.

We quickened our pace and hurried through a broken gate, then we split up.

I found an elderly woman almost right away.

“The demon lord’s army used to operate out of these lands, and some still linger. You should leave and find somewhere safer.”

I didn’t know of any nearby places where someone could take refuge, but I could transport the old woman away. However, she reacted to my warning with clear bemusement.

“The demon lord’s army? What are you talking about?”

“The army,” I repeated. “The one that invaded this kingdom.”

“Yorvensen has been around for three whole centuries. No one’s fool enough to invade a kingdom that’s stood for so long.”

Had you asked anyone before Yorvensen fell, they surely would have said the same thing.

No matter what I said, the old woman refused to listen. Ultimately, she left in a huff.

I’d noticed during our conversation that there were other people around. They didn’t seem like travelers so much as folks who’d settled down here. I found at least thirty just walking through the ruins.

I tried talking to those I could.

“Gosh, I have no clue. Our prospering town is all rubble now. And I can’t find my family. I thought I’d try to clean up my place, but the house has collapsed. Just give me a break...,” said a man in his thirties. He scratched his head, looking dispirited.

He seemed ignorant of the involvement of the demon lord’s army, just like

the old woman. How could anyone not know about the war that had rocked the entire world? When I reunited with Almelia, Elvie, and Orlando, they told me they'd encountered much of the same.

"Do you really think someone could be unaware of the demon lord's army?" Almelia frowned, seeming dubious.

"Maybe...", Elvie began, "the war was such a shock that they completely erased it from their minds?"

Almelia shook her head. "That could be the case, but it's not realistic to assume all of them would forget about the invasion."

"Yeah, it's weird," Orlando agreed. She was right.

If Van could make a person out of an arm, perhaps he could do the same with other parts, too. If Rila was safe, then what had he used to make her double? Maybe a single hair was enough?

"I see. This is a country of the dead."

"It's Van's power at work. It must be."

I heard cheers and the sound of a four-legged beast approaching, along with some manner of creaking. It turned out to be a beast that resembled a gigantic dog carrying tubelike weapons on its back that I presumed were cannons.

The creature lifted its head and looked straight at us. Its three blue eyes abruptly turned red.

"What is that?"

"It seems hostile."

Almelia and Orlando turned wary immediately. However, Elvie said, "Are you sure it's not trying to befriend us?"

"Sure, if you think *befriend* means *target*," I replied.

The creature had been fashioned from steel. I didn't see any magic or skill animating it. Apparently, it possessed a will of its own.

Wait, is this...?

"Jahhhhhhhhh!"

The large steel dog opened its maw wide.

Crackling red lightning gathered around the constructed beast, amassing in the cannons on its back.

“Elvie!”

At my shout, Elvie readied her shield, and Almelia and I took up position behind her. I pulled Orlando to safety since she was too surprised to move on her own.

There came a mechanical noise. The odd sound issued from the cannons firing at us. A red shot bounced off Elvie’s shield and flew up into the air, then disappeared.

“I’ll charge it.”

Almelia had drawn her sword, and she rushed the enemy as it prepared the next blast.

“Me too.” Orlando followed after her.

We couldn’t be sure there weren’t other enemies around. I climbed to the roof of a half-ruined building and checked our surroundings.

“Hahhh!” Almelia used her prized magic sword technique to slice at the enemy over and over, while Orlando attacked with a crushing blow from above. At the same time, I heard a ghastly noise ring out around us. I’d assumed the dog would end up buried in the ground with the way they pummeled it, but it seemed the thing was still unscathed.

“Jgahhhh!”

The three eyes moved independently until they all settled on me.

I heard rapid bursts come from the cannons that sounded entirely different from the earlier attack. The dog fired a volley of small shots this time.

“Oh no—”

As Almelia was taken by surprise and sent flying, Elvie met the attacks with her shield. Evidently, Almelia’s and Orlando’s weapons hadn’t done any damage.

Observing the metal creature and its shape helped me realize something about it.

I waited for an opening while Elvie weathered blows from the beast.

I invoked my skill, then approached the dog and moved beneath it.

“How do you like this?” I used Magi Raegas to punch its underside. Unlike the earlier attacks, my arm easily went through the thing’s body.

“Jgaah... Ah... Ahhh...” It let out a groan and melted just like the fake Rila had.

I noticed that the townspeople had been staring at us since the large dog decided we were enemies. They didn’t seem too pleased.

“Are they glaring at us?”

“It seems that way.”

“I wouldn’t expect a warm welcome,” I said.

“Roland, this isn’t the time for sarcasm.”

“You’re right,” I replied. “Let’s leave.” We took off in a hurry.

“What was that?”

“You said the fake Madam Rileyla also melted. You don’t think...”

“It seems like that was a sorcerous weapon made by Van himself.”

I had felt steel when my arm went through it. At first, I’d thought it was controlled by magic, but it was more accurate to say that it had been formed with magic and had possessed autonomy.

Regardless, I hadn’t expected it to melt.

We made our way to an abandoned building and climbed to the second floor to keep watch out the window.

People had gathered around the large metal dog and were making a commotion.

“Do you think we’re the ones causing a problem?” Almelia whispered as she observed the scene.

“We might have disturbed the town’s peace, and the sorcerous weapon

responded to chase out potential invaders.”

However, we’d turned the tables on the metal construct.

This was bigger than finding Rila or Roje now.

“I know what that is,” Orlando said.

“Madam Orlando, you could have told us sooner...” Elvie shook her head and sighed.

“Well, I haven’t encountered one directly. I read about it once... Two hundred years ago in a book. A four-legged sorcerous weapon. It has three cannons and looks like a hunting hound. This matches that old description.”

“A hunting hound weapon.”

“That’s right. The technology was lost a thousand years ago. There was a huge war. And then the weapons were destroyed. That’s what it said in the book.”

If that was true, then this one was the result of reconstruction. I didn’t intend to check, but perhaps the townspeople had been re-created in the same way.

“Van used his abilities to make false versions of Rila and myself,” I said.

“And the demonic sword I had,” Elvie appended.

“Yeah, the ability likely makes him good at creating things. As long as he has a piece of the original, he can apparently produce anything.”

“Wait...did he use people’s buried bones to re-create them?”

“It’s possible.”

If so, we’d likely see some traces of that around nearby grave sites.

“That’s abominable,” Almelia muttered. She seemed genuinely disgusted.

“Right now, we’re being treated as intruders. That likely isn’t the only hunting hound, and there might be other weapons.”

Any of Van’s creations presumably already knew that there were intruders. The weapon we’d fought was able to determine enemies and attack on its own. The technology of a thousand years ago was quite advanced.

“Where do you think Rileyla is?” Almelia asked.

“Probably over there,” I replied.

Elvie raised an eyebrow. “Where?”

“The highest point.”

Almelia and Elvie both looked in the direction I indicated.

“The castle?”

I nodded at Elvie, who’d tilted her head.

We’d come this far. Rila was surely aware of our presence. The least she could do was show herself.

◆Rila◆

As Rila stared out the window of a chamber that was once her room, she spied a commotion among the townspeople. Evidently, someone unfamiliar had wandered in, but the hunting hound was yet to return.

Rila opened her window and used her mana to improve her hearing. She learned that the hound had been destroyed and the townspeople were terrified of the invaders.

Curious, indeed.

A single hound should have been able to drive away any monsters or thieves. Van had created a hound all too easily from a fragment he discovered in the ruins. Rila was convinced he could have made the fake Roland from his arm with an ability like that.

When Van had told Rila he would revitalize the country, she had focused first on safety. She drove away the monsters that infested the region and did the same with the thieves who had established bases. While she’d been busy with that, Van had gone to the relics and successfully re-created the ancient weapon.

Since then, they had left protection up to the metal hound.

Rila had become an adviser to Van, aiding in his campaign to create a nation. She spent her days counseling him when he called for her.

“Lord Rileyla.”

She heard Roje’s voice from beyond the door.

Some time ago, Roje had arrived in search of Rila. When she’d informed Roje of the plan, the elf had voiced discontent about the method, which was rather unusual for her. However, after Van had made a suggestion, she agreed to help.

“You may enter.”

“Yes, Lord Rileyla.”

Roje reported on the situation in the ruined town.

“*He* has arrived.”

“I see. Of course.”

“I will report back to Van as well. One of the hounds was destroyed. He will likely send out another sorcerous weapon. Are you sure you don’t want to see him?”

“Yes.”

Roje looked as though she wished to say more, but only nodded. She gave Rila a small bow, then left the room. Through the gap in the door, Rila saw another elf walk by.

After Roje’s arrival, she had brought a girl to meet Rila. Apparently, she was Roje’s sister, who’d been lost during a war with humans. Rila had immediately realized what Van offered to gain Roje’s cooperation.

Initially, Roje was disgusted by Van’s dabbling in resurrection, but her ethics lost out to her love for her family.

“We’ll show this town is safe and overflowing with abundance. Then the people will naturally return.” Such was Rila’s plan. However, Van had taken a different route, using his abilities to make it happen faster.

Now the ruins of the town overflowed with people resurrected from interred remains. He’d only reanimated about two hundred, but he could easily increase the population by simply going to another cemetery.

“A country of the dead...”

Van used his skill to create duplicates identical to the originals. Functionally, they were the same person.

He would continue to amass people here. Once a supply line was secured, the first major step toward restoration would be complete.

Rila would see that through, then leave.

“...”

Footsteps approached from the hallway, quite a few of them. The door was flung open, and a dozen burly men flooded in.

Van had told Rila he would create a military unit to ensure public safety, but he couldn't train soldiers and commanders himself. Instead, he must have reanimated people from a graveyard who specifically already had the necessary qualifications.

“Diakitep, our master has ordered your execution.”

Rila let out an exasperated sigh. “It seems he has greatly underestimated me. This is nothing less than insulting. I find it laughable that he believes such paltry forces could do anything to me. He will forever regret making light of me.”

As Rila laughed boldly, the men readied their swords and daggers and rushed to attack her.

“This cannot even be called entertaining.”

She used the court rank octa spell Singe Shot. Several orbs made of dark red mana appeared.

One, two, three... Rila counted as the spheres sped for their targets. She turned her would-be assailants to ash without so much as drawing a magic circle or chanting a spell.

“How droll. Even after I agreed to assist him...”

The remaining assailants retreated slightly. When her targets liquefied unnaturally, Rila made them evaporate with another spell. That melting was a characteristic shared by all of Van's creations.



When Rila met the fake Roland, she had been convinced he was the same as the genuine article, but upon seeing the liquefaction process, she realized they couldn't be exactly identical inside.

“At least permit me some fun. I am in need of stimulation.”

The men let out fierce cries and charged. Rila disintegrated two with a finger and spied another wielding an unfamiliar weapon out of the corner of her eye.

She recalled reading something about such an armament once. It was called a gun.

Rila cast Dimensional Wall. This was magic that could block any physical or magical attack. As she wasn't familiar with guns, this was usually her best strategy for blocking its attack.

An explosion thundered, and a projectile raced for her. The Dimensional Wall would likely block it without issue. When she saw the bullet coming toward her, she realized it was no ordinary shot.

It was elaborately engraved with unknown glyphs; a sorcerous weapon.

“...”

Rila stomped her heel and called upon transportation magic, but she also tried to evade, just in case. Unfortunately, both proved to be slightly too slow.

The first bullet went through her shoulder.

The second hit her chest.

11

The Slumbering Weapons and the Demon Lord's Castle, Part II

◆Roland◆

We decided to spend the night in the town ruins below the castle.

I kept watch of our surroundings while the other three rested. Lights were visible from the castle the whole night. Guards and sorcerous weapons patrolled the structure's perimeter constantly. They were searching for us.

Sensing movement nearby, I peered into the dark.

"Mrgh! Are you not here?! Where are you?!"

Someone was complaining loudly. I saw Roje politely closing the dilapidated door of a destroyed home.

By now I'd figured out she hadn't returned because she'd joined with Van.

"I thought that human would be in this area for sure. He always causes me so much work!"

She kicked a pillar, which proved to be quite sturdy. Roje gripped her foot as she hopped in pain.

As usual, she possessed very little sense of self-preservation.

"I know you're here somewhere! Come ooout!"

Clearly, she was looking for me. We needed to ensure she didn't find us.

I could handle her all on my own, though.

I left our resting place and invoked my skill, taking the long way around to keep her from tracing my path back to our camp.

“It’s too late at night for you to be so loud,” I said.

“Th-there you are!” Roje pointed at me and ran over. She didn’t give off any hostility, so I allowed her to approach me.

“Were you looking for me?”

“That’s right! Lord Rileyla is—”

It was difficult to tell in the dark, but Roje seemed frightened and panicked. Her mouth was pressed into a frown, and she gave me a pleading look.

“What happened to Rila?”

“It was another sorcerous weapon Van excavated. He said it was something called a gun.”

“Calm down. I have no idea what you’re talking about. What happened to Rila?”

“Lord Rileyla was shot with the gun, or whatever it’s called, and now she’s unconscious.”

An attack actually injured her?

I could hardly believe it. But if anything could manage that, it was a sorcerous weapon. The technology behind such creations was completely unknown. Perhaps one was capable of hurting Rila.

“You came here to take Lord Rileyla back, didn’t you? I made an agreement with Van, but I only serve Rila. I cannot save her on my own...”

Roje suddenly broke down into tears.

Undoubtedly, she was upset over her inability to rescue her master. And now she was probably terrified of what might become of Rila.

“I need to know more about Van’s combat abilities. Tell me the details.”

Roje brightened slightly. “O-okay!”

She had aided in reclaiming the castle and knew its layout. Our biggest

obstacle would be sorcerous weapons.

Thankfully, Roje was able to tell me about a few of them.

The dog was called a hunting hound. There were also large humanoid ones, rock-giant soldiers. Then there was the gun that injured Rila. Apparently, there was one more sorcerous weapon, but Roje didn't know how it was used.

"D-do you think you can do it? They were a challenge even for Lord Rileyla and me."

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

We didn't have time for this. I started for the castle but soon heard someone call out to me. "Where do you think you're headed?"

"Are you going to the bathroom alone again?"

Almelia, Elvie, and Orlando were up.

"Roland, do you think we're holding you back? Could you put just a tad more faith in us?"

Orlando ran over to Roje and hugged her. "Sanny, it's been forever."

"Orlando?!"

While the two elves got reacquainted, Almelia and Elvie prepared for the trial ahead.

"We heard everything. If you try to go on your own, we're going to follow you!"

"Yes. I'd rather lose to our enemies than have you think I'm useless in a fight, Roland."

"Do whatever you want. But I'm not protecting you."

The two girls shared a look and laughed.

"I can't believe we've gotten to a point where Roland would say that to us."

"Working myself to death following his training has paid off."

"He's not worried about protecting us anymore."

I didn't respond to that.

“What will you two do?” I asked Roje and Orlando. Both of them nodded.

“Naturally, I shall be going,” Roje replied.

“Me too,” Orlando said.

A few of the members were different, but a party of five was about to storm the same castle again.

When it came to a battle of raw strength, no one could match Almelia. Her might was truly overwhelming.

On the way to the castle, Almelia used Indignation and swept through the hunting hounds patrolling the area.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. These guys are nothing!”

“Don’t get too far ahead of us, Almelia.”

Before I could give the order, Elvie readied her shield and invoked her skill to draw all the attacks to her. While Elvie distracted the enemies, Orlando sent them flying with her large sword. The rest of the group had abandoned the idea of destroying the weapons. Instead, they knocked them away with loud crashing sounds.

“Orlando, go low.”

“Okay.”

Roje loosed a mana arrow with a magic bow, an elf specialty, perhaps.

“Aim for the underside.” After hearing me say that, she fired the arrow so it traveled along the ground and pierced a hunting hound from the bottom. “I never thought you had enough competence to actually hit a target.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“That was praise.”

“Hmph. Was it, now?”

Truthfully, it wasn’t, but Roje accepted the words happily enough.

It was the middle of the night, so none of the citizens were around. No one was going to get dragged into the battle needlessly.

Almelia's power and Elvie pulling the attention toward herself took care of most of our foes. The two elves dealt with the rest.

I specialized in one-on-one combat, which meant I had no role in any of this. They were handling things well enough anyway. I could entrust this to them.

We didn't need to sneak into the castle, and so planned to have Almelia smash through the front gate.

"That was nothing!"

"Roland, I think Al wants a compliment, too. She's used that same line twice now," Elvie said.

"Great job, Almelia! I'd expect nothing less from the hero!"

"I know, right?!"

The princess's ego was growing in real time.

With Almelia in a good mood, she easily destroyed the gate to the castle with her magical sword.

The first floor of the foyer looked so familiar. An elf stood at the top of the stairs.

"Sis, what's happening? What are you doing?"

Sis?

"I don't remember having an elf sister..."

"She doesn't mean you, El."

"Huh?"

Roje pushed her way to the front.

"Marion, we're here to save Lord Rileyla. We don't have time, so move aside."

"I can't. And you should know that. I can't go against orders. What? You've brought Orlando with you?"

"Marion is alive? How?"

Orlando looked at Roje with surprise. The other elf could only lower her head.

“It’s Van’s doing. He said he would return one person to me in exchange for my cooperation. That’s why Marion is...”

There were several other ways up the castle besides these stairs, but this was the most direct path.

“Leave this to me. This is the result of my weakness.”

Roje prepared herself to fight, and Orlando did the same.

“Marion is already dead. The departed don’t come back to life. This Marion is just an illusion. I won’t let you bear this burden on your own, Sanny.”

A gigantic humanoid soldier entered through a door behind us. It seemed we had one other enemy.

The creature was tall enough to reach the second floor, and its arms hung loose. Like the hunting hounds, it had three red eyes.

“Roland, you go on ahead with the others,” Orlando said.

“Human, take care of Lord Rileyla!” Roje declared.

I nodded and headed straight up the stairs.

“You can’t go up. Our master will be upset.”

I activated Unobtrusive and easily passed by Marion to reach the second-floor landing. While she searched for me, Elvie and Almelia got past her, too.

◆Roje◆

When faced with the gigantic weapon of sorcery, Orlando’s jaw dropped.

“Orlando, that’s a rock-giant soldier.”

“I figured as much.”

“Oh, you’re pretty quick-witted.”

“No, you only think that because you’re not smart, Sanny.”

“Tch.”

They were fighting back-to-back, just as they had during the battle that drove

them from their home in the woods.

“Dyooooon!”

The gigantic soldier cried out as one of its massive hands reached for the pair.

“Orlando, can I leave this one to you?”

“Sure.”

With several bangs, red bolts shot from the rock-giant soldier’s fingers.

Roje and Orlando split apart, with the former dashing for her sister.

“It’s been so many years, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, Marion.”

The two sisters had fought often, but always only with words. Today would be different. Marion had summoned a bow and nocked an arrow already.

Roje still wasn’t certain whether Marion was serious. She and Marion had competed for being the most skilled in their woods. Death had done little to dull Marion’s prowess. An arrow lanced for Roje with deadly precision.

“Tsk...”

Roje hurriedly cast Shadow Edge. The spell created a sword that she wielded to whack the projectile away.

“Dark magic from an elf?” Marion asked.

“You have no idea what I’ve gone through. I had to work so hard after we lost our home.”

“So losing our homeland has robbed you of your pride as an elf, too.”

“Yeah, if only we could have protected our homeland with pride, things would have been easy.”

A century had passed since Roje left the forest. Back then, her mind had been consumed by thoughts of revenge. Picking the humans off one by one when they weren’t in a group had been easy.

Orlando, who Roje had assumed to be dead at the time, was now locked in battle with the giant sorcerous weapon.

“Dyguoo!”

A red blast shot from the construct’s arm.

She nimbly evaded it and manipulated her wind magic to hit the weapon with her sword.

“Your attacks are so boring. This is monotonous. Magical beasts are more unpredictable.”

When they’d reunited, Orlando had told Roje that she was an S ranker. That title was for more than show.

Marion, who watched the fight, asked Roje, “Sis, why are you defying the master?”

“I cut a deal with Van, but I only serve Lord Rileyla. He put her in harm’s way, so it’s my duty to act as captain of her guard and save her.”

“But you have me. You can live here with us, with that demon Rileyla, too.”

Roje shook her head at this proposal.

“I tried to pretend not to know... I tried my best to pretend you were the real one.”

“But aren’t I? What’s changed?”

“You’re just too similar to how you were on that day. You haven’t grown, and your memories are exactly the same. It’s completely different from when I reunited with Orlando. It really felt like seeing an old friend again. It feels like you were reanimated and nothing more.”

Marion shook her head as though she were no longer interested.

“Fine. I don’t need you anymore, Sis. I’ll have Master make a new you.”

Marion created three arrows and drew her bow.

“That’s...,” Roje started to say. She also summoned up a magical bow and created dark magic arrows.

They both fired at the same time.

Marion’s three arrows raced through the air, writhing like snakes.

“Marion, magic bows and mana arrows are already behind the times. The world has left the art of the forest behind.”

Roje’s arrows turned into particles of light and expanded, protecting her. As Marion’s projectiles moved through the particles, they headed in entirely different directions, embedding themselves in the walls and ground.

“What... What was that?”

“It’s a magic arrow type called chaff. It redirects the aim of any object that’s used as a projectile. It was widely employed by the demon lord’s army during the Human-Fiend War that erupted after your death. I developed it. It’s the elf-slaying arrow.”

“Why would you create something like that?”

“I’m no longer an elf of the forest. I’m a part of the imperial guard of the demon lord’s army; First Magic Regimental Commander Roje Sandsong. Do you hate me for killing our own kind? I think the issue lies more with those who come to the battlefield with outdated techniques.”

“Are you referring to me?”

“No, I’m referring to the entire elven race. I was embarrassed of them. They naively headed out to war with nothing but their old tactics and pride, and I decided to put them out of their misery.”

Falling behind meant being trampled and robbed. That was what Roje had learned from losing her home.

The sound of a cannon roared as it fired. Part of the building crumbled, and bits of wall fell around them. Orlando had cut off one of the soldier’s arms with her sword. Roje had no idea where Orlando had learned to fight, but she knew it wasn’t the traditional way of the elves.

Her way of battling was entirely different from the old days.

The rock-giant soldier’s arms both fell to the ground, and post-like objects extended from its elbows and knees.

It opened its mouth wide to reveal a cannon extending from its maw.

“Dygo!”

Red light burst from it as it fired a mana shot.

“Hragh!”

Orlando cut the shot in half with her sword, sending the two halves of the blast flying into the walls.

Undoubtedly, the castle remained standing only because Rila had reinforced it with magic.

It seemed the soldier couldn't recover immediately after firing, and it was powerless to Orlando's sword.

“It looks like Orlando doesn't fight like an elf, either,” Marion remarked.

“A hundred and fifty years have passed since you've died,” Roje said. “Of course Orlando and I have changed.”

Roje saw an opening and hurried to take it. Marion blocked a Shadow Edge with her dagger.

“I'm sorry I couldn't protect you,” Roje apologized.

“Stop! I didn't want to be protected!”

Roje was familiar with elf strategies. They struggled with close-quarters fighting.

Marion pulled back and readied her bow again.

“You haven't progressed at all. It's no wonder why elves are mocked and ridiculed for being a shut-in species.” Had Roje realized that in the old days, perhaps she could have protected them. The forest, their home, and her sister.

When Marion sent another arrow flying at Roje, she used two Shadow Edges to brush it aside.

“Tsk!”

Roje pressed in again, but Marion sent her sister's weapon flying with her dagger.

“I was happy to see you again. And I'm sorry to have put you through this because I was selfish.” Roje faltered at the sight of her sister's face and chided herself for it. After correcting herself, she thrust her sword through Marion's

chest.

◆Roland◆

We headed up the stairs to find Rila.

“Maybe you should have fought her, Roland,” Elvie said from behind me.

“Maybe. But people need to take responsibility for their choices. Roje was the one who asked for her sister to be reanimated. Taking care of it for her would’ve put me in an awkward position.”

Almelia agreed with me. “You have a point... Even if she’s a fake, they’re still siblings. Roje probably couldn’t have watched someone else do it.”

Marion hadn’t seemed like much of an opponent, anyway. The Roje I knew wouldn’t have trouble dealing with her. Orlando was also there, so they’d take care of the soldier, too.

We searched the second floor, then the third, for Rila. She was apparently somewhere high in the castle. Something blocked us from taking detours through the windows to climb higher. Perhaps it was Rila’s magic.

“We’ll reach the main hall before long...”

“Th-the main hall...?”

Almelia and Elvie scowled.

Apparently, the battle in the main hall during the Human-Fiend War was a point of trauma for both of them.

I’d heard that the hall was where the former royal family had invited nobles to dine. When we’d stormed the castle, hundreds of demonic knights were stationed there. It had been a tough fight.

We had to go through the main hall to get to the reception chamber, where the demon lord awaited, and it truly taxed us. It was following that skirmish that I’d elected to assassinate the demon lord on my own.

The main hall was beyond the old door at the end of the corridor. Someone

emerged from that very door before we reached it.

“...”

She was running toward us.

“Knavel!”

Rila?

“Rileyla?”

“Is that you, Madam Rileyla?”

“I—I have managed to escape Van.” Rila pointed farther into the hall.

“We heard from Roje that you were gravely wounded.”

“I found an opportunity to heal myself. Van must surely be in a panic by now.”

Rila looked triumphant as she spoke.

“I’m glad you’re all right, Rileyla.”

“Mm-hmm. We’ve accomplished our goal with little trouble.”

“...” There was no way Rila would be so overjoyed to see me right now.

“You’re a fake,” I said.

“H-how could you joke about that?!” Rila looked angry, even going so far as to slap me.

“You don’t seem right,” I stated.

“What? What’s wrong with me?”

“Al and I don’t see anything amiss,” Elvie offered. She looked to the hero-princess, who nodded in agreement.

Had Rila healed herself, she would have launched a counterattack. I knew she was tenacious enough to manage that much.

“Tell me how I am ‘wrong,’ as you say. I do not understand it.” Rila puffed out her cheeks, acting indignant.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward me. Her face came right up to mine, and I kissed her on the lips.

“Mm?”

“Ahh! Ahh! What are you doing?!”

“R-R-R-Roland?! Wh-wh-why did you do that?!”

I glanced at the two young women with me and saw them hiding their faces behind their hands. Their ears were red. When I released Rila, her face was flushed from embarrassment, and she averted her gaze.

“Why would you suddenly do that? This is hardly the time or place... You fool...”

“I don’t remember teaching you how to kiss like that.”

Rila sighed.

“Of course. The man I—no, we fell in love with would see through this deception.”

She tapped her heel, and a transportation array formed in the corridor.

“We shall meet in the great hall.”

I reached out a hand to catch her, but I was too late. She disappeared. I’d grown weak. I should have dispatched her without hesitating. Trying to catch her was a waste. Had I really lost my nerve simply because she looked like Rila?

Almelia and Elvie uncovered their eyes.

“Roland, leave it to us.”

“Yes. We’ll finish this next time.”

At some point, they’d started speaking more like adults.

“Your feelings for Rila must be so strong that you can’t take decisive action.”

Was that it? Maybe I hadn’t realized that in time.

“Okay, let’s go,” Almelia shouted as she opened the door.

Beyond it, we saw Rila alone. Undoubtedly, it was a duplicate.

I turned to Almelia and Elvie.

“We can’t hesitate, not for a second, okay? Hurry and go to her,” Almelia

urged.

“Yes. The real one must be waiting for you, Roland,” Elvie agreed.

Dey bested a fake Rila before. If this one was the same as the last, Almelia and Elvie would do well.

“I’ll leave it to you.” I took off running without waiting for a reply. The fake Rila gave no indication of trying to stop me. Or maybe she knew there was no point in trying. Regardless, I easily got through the hall.



◆Almelia◆

I felt warm. It felt as if my face were flushed. All my nerves seemed to be worked up as Roland ran and left us.

“So it’s two against one,” the fake Rileyla said. She seemed almost disappointed.

“Sorry, but we don’t have the time to delay. We need to do whatever it takes.” El readied her shield.

Her breathing sounded more ragged than normal. Perhaps she felt the same way I did.

“I am not calling you cowards. Quite the opposite. Are you certain you wish to face me with only two?”

“Now you’re underestimating us?!” I exclaimed.

“I could say the same to you,” replied the impostor.

I felt overpowered in the same way I had when facing Amy. But with El, I could do this!

“Get lost, fake!”

“And how pitiful you will be after failing to this fake.”

Roland entrusted this to us. And that made me really happy.

It had lifted my spirits, and El’s too, it seemed.

El kept her shield raised as she moved in slowly. She used a hand signal to convey that she’d invoked her skill. I launched myself out from behind El and drew my sword, bringing it down on Rileyla from a blind spot.

I used Indignation on part of my sword to increase the range of my enchanted attack, Lightning. I was proud of this technique because it wasn’t easy to dodge.

“Hraaaagh!”

“You are being much too flashy.”

Rileyla scoffed at me. That was fine. She needed to laugh now, while she was still able.

I caught her—or so I'd thought. The top half of my blade vanished as though swallowed by something.

"Dimensional Wall does not allow any magic or physical attack to pass through it. You would do well to realize you are fighting against the demon lord."

She ought to have been focused on El because of her skill, but somehow, Rileyla faced me.

"She must have undone your skill with some kind of spell," I called.

"I see!" Elvie replied.

I swung my sword again, and just when I thought that it was back to normal, I was blocked by that defensive spell yet again.

"..."

"Do you not understand? It will not work."

I invoked Magic Barrier and tried to rush Rileyla's defensive wall once more.

"What are you—?"

"Just try to cancel this skill!"

Rileyla scowled. "Tsk."

I knew it. If she used the same spell she had to negate El's skill, it would counter not only mine but also her own magic.

I increased Magic Barrier's mana output and steadily pushed into Rileyla's wall. I saw her do something with her hand, but it took me a moment to realize what it meant. Then I heard the crash of something hard behind me.

"Al, cover my back."

Rileyla had attacked El's shield several times with some black thornlike things.

"She's canceled my skill's effects on herself, but it looks like the long-range spells she casts are still being affected," Elvie remarked.

My Magic Barrier finally got through Rileyla's wall. I could reach her!

I dismissed my skill and attacked with my sword. Rileyla stepped back and somehow managed to evade the tip of my blade.

I couldn't let her escape, so I closed the distance between us, desperate to land a strike. She blocked me with a sword made of mana. If this was all she knew about sword fighting, I stood a chance!

Roland was several times stronger than this!

I struck with Lightning repeatedly. When Rileyla blocked, her expression betrayed pain.

In the past, Roland had told me that if I kept someone on the defensive, they'd try to turn the tables by coming on strong with a big attack when they panicked, and that would give me an opening. So maybe, just maybe...

"What insolence!"

Her maneuver was just a little broader than before.

This was it! This really was it!

"You're finished!"

I called upon Gale, a wind-type sword technique, to strike her.

"Hngh! Gah..."

My sword pierced through Rileyla. I withdrew the blade immediately and traced a diagonal cut across her. I thought she'd collapse, but instead, she turned into sludgy stuff.

It looked like Roland was right. This was the fake.

"Huff... Huff... I—I won! But only against a fake!"

I dropped and sat on the ground but pumped my fist. El ran to me and helped me up.

◆Roland◆

I ran down the corridor I'd skipped the last time I was here and opened the door to the audience chamber.

"You must be Roland."

The man was in his late twenties and carried a sword at his hip. He seemed like the sort of young guy you could find anywhere. I didn't think sitting on a throne suited him.

A bloody Rila was slumped beside him.

"Rila!"

"She's fine. She's got preservation magic cast on her. She'll survive for a time. It's the same spell that kept your arm in good condition."

The fake battling Almelia and Elvie had likely cast the spell. At least Rila was alive.

The blood around her mouth and wounds had dried already.

I needed to get her to a doctor as quickly as possible.

"I am Van Galliard. I used to live here until I had to immigrate to Rubens to escape the war. I was a tradesman at the blacksmith guild there. Now I manage this country."

"This country? Really? It must be fun playing king. Has collecting all your corpse puppets satisfied you?"

"I'm not causing trouble for anyone. I'm revitalizing a ruined nation. I've even cleaned up all the monsters and thieves in the area."

"I don't intend to deny you your pleasure. Yorvensen is dangerous, but if you've cleaned it up, then I should thank you for that, at least."

Van looked pleased by the praise, even relaxing a bit.

"Roland, you really do belong by my side."

"Why?"

"We can create a new country! With Diakitep, too!"



What was he going on about? Was that his goal? He seemed like such a child... Why was he playing at creating his own kingdom?

Did he truly wish to restore Yorvensen, or did he merely desire to show off his power? Based on his words, it seemed to be the latter.

I shook my head slowly.

"I'm a guild worker. I have no interest in building a country or a government."

"Too bad. I guess originals just refuse to listen to me."

"I didn't come here to talk. I'm here for the demon sleeping next to you. Give her back."

"What is there to return? She came here of her own free will. I didn't force her."

"Those details can wait. You've hurt Rila. That's unforgivable."

Elvie's stubbornness had allowed Van to manipulate her. I didn't care about that as much.

"Diakitep wished to remake this country. I can't have you take her."

"Don't talk about what Rila wants."

Van's excuse was flimsy. There had to be something else to it. Did the original Rila possess something that the duplicates were incapable of?

"I need her to stay by my side." Van stood.

"What about Rila has caught your interest?"

"She makes you desperate. That alone is a sign of her talents."

"I won't deny that, but I didn't come here because of Rila's abilities."

Now that I thought about it, quite a bit of time had passed between my right arm going missing and the assassination of the king. If Van really wanted me, he could have created another one from the fake. He'd certainly had the opportunity. Yet as far as I was aware, he'd only duplicated me once.

"..."

The dead people and sorcerous weapons had been reconstructed through

physical materials. The doppelgängers he'd made of Rila and me were just that—perfect reproductions. Perhaps the duplicates could only be forged from the originals. That made sense.

My fake was crafted from my right arm. To put it simply, the copies were formed from a part of the living original.

That being the case, I understood why Van kept Rila around. The duplicates crafted from living people were hardier and more potent than those made from the deceased. Van didn't seem the type who was capable himself, so I understood why he wanted the original at hand in case his duplicate Rila disappeared. It was a natural precaution.

Well, that was only true if my assumptions were accurate.

Perhaps as a result of my working as an exam proctor, whenever I came across a skill, I always considered its effects and limitations.

"Give Rila back. I can't have her playing ruler with you."

"She doesn't need your permission to be here."

"Yeah, but I want Rila at my side. This is just my selfishness talking."

On the day I fought the demon lord, the assassin part of me died. Since then, I'd finally found my own voice, though it was still faint.

Some dozen hunting hounds bounded in through the door, followed by rock-giant soldiers.

Van was attempting to leave with a few servants who were carrying Rila.

I sighed. "Did you think this would buy you some time?"

I activated Unobtrusive.

While the metal hounds searched for me, I called upon Magi Raegas to pierce through them one after another to render them useless in battle.

"The hounds!"

"They've all been defeated in the blink of an eye?!"

"I—I knew he was powerful, but I never thought he'd defeat them so quickly!"

Van's astonished underlings offered their thoughts.

The confused hounds took to shooting blindly and hit the rock-giant soldiers. Then the rock-giant soldiers returned fire in kind.

I'd seen this often. This was what happened when soldiers became confused during battle. I didn't even need to get involved.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" Van exclaimed, furious.

While he was taken aback, the people behind him who were carrying Rila disappeared one after the other. They all liquefied.

"What?!"

As Van's eyes went wide in surprise, I whispered into his ear.

"Did you know that a wolf commanded by a sheep is weaker than a sheep commanded by a wolf?"

Van broke out into goose bumps.

"Y-you little!"

He turned and attempted to hit me with the back of his hand. It was the action of a man who'd never fought before. I blocked it easily, to the point of feeling embarrassed for him.

"Stop that." Van gnashed his teeth as he glared at me. "My skill, Army Maker, can bring people happiness! Don't compare it to a loser skill that only allows you to make yourself unnoticeable!"

"I agree. It's a great ability. Far better than mine." That much was obvious. "But you can't make a claim like that when you've never actually made anyone happy with your skill. Not when you're incapable of making even a single woman happy. Although I'm still working toward that myself, so I'm really not one to talk."

"Shut up! Shut up!"

Van's body began to glow. Steel like that which made up the hounds formed over his body. Unsurprisingly, three red eyes formed on the helmet.

Roje had told me she didn't know much about Van's last weapon. This was

likely what she'd been referring to.

"This is a sorcerous weapon called Gear."

Van unsheathed a sword and threw away the scabbard. In his other hand, he held a gun. His blade was identical to the demonic sword Elvie had wielded.

"Come get me!" I said, and Van dashed forward.

Bang, bang!

The gun cracked, firing bullets.

When I twisted to dodge, the sword was waiting for me. It wasn't within range, but my relief was short-lived. Van gathered mana around him to loose a powerful ray.

"Tsk."

Whenever I dodged, he struck again. He shot with the gun, used the beam of mana from the sword, and sliced at me in succession. I knew he was an amateur, but he moved like he'd already mastered all his attacks. He also had fast reaction times.

Was this the power of the Gear?

"It increases my intellectual capabilities by several times and also improves my response speed! I can also call upon the movements of the previous wearers!"

"I see. How useful."

"Diakitep was no match for the gun!"

Van sounded like a kid with a new toy. What benefit did he get from showing his hand—and so proudly at that?

The demonic sword consumed some of my mana as well, but it was mostly drawing from the unconscious Rila. If it took any more, it would begin to hurt her. I didn't have any time to waste.

I used a feint to get behind Van, but he reacted faster than expected.

"Do you think you'll catch me so easily?!"

I activated Unobtrusive again. At the same time, I released part of my mana arm and hit him directly in the face with it.

“Guh! What was that?!”

He’d probably never figure it out. Even my fake, who was familiar with my skill, had been unable to deal with the mana arm.

“You may have great equipment, but you have to remember that humans are the ones who wield weapons.”

And as long as someone was human, they had a weakness.

It was easy to steal the gun from Van now that he was panicking. I employed the same method I had when removing the underwear from a certain branch manager in the past.

When I examined the projectiles, I noticed unfamiliar glyphs on them.

Rila had likely been shot by one of these.

“Can your Gear, or whatever you called it, block these, too?”

“Wha—?! Sto—”

There was a burst, and one of the projectiles raced forward.

The Gear cracked.

“Uh... N-no...”

Van put a hand on the fracture in his armor as he dropped to his knees.

There were multiple shots left, and I used them all.

As Van screamed and writhed in pain, I told him, “I didn’t hit any vitals. You won’t die right away.”

He hyperventilated and spoke to me on the verge of tears while sweating profusely. “Am I going to die?”

“I just told you that you wouldn’t.”

Presumably, this was the first time he’d been injured.

Since Van was making such a fuss about it, I gave him first aid. Almelia and Elvie arrived soon after, and I had them help me carry Van and Rila. We met

back up with Roje and Orlando after a bit, and Roje broke into tears when she saw Rila.

“Lord Rileylaaaa...! Don’t die!”

“Van said that she has a preservation spell on her. She should be fine for a while.”

We took Van and Rila back home.

“It doesn’t look like a bad wound.”

We had Serafin come from the castle to examine Rila and Van and mend their wounds with healing magic.

The injuries repaired themselves right before my eyes.

Van had lost consciousness by the time we got back to the house. That made things a lot quieter, and I much preferred it that way.

Meanwhile, Roje stood over Rila, watching with obvious worry the whole time, at least until she tried to sneak into Rila’s bed.

“Hey, you perverted elf, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I was going to warm her up.”

She looked entirely serious.

Serafin told us she was heading to the living room.

“Human, why did you heal Van?” Roje asked.

“I thought it’d be better to let Elvie deal with him.”

Van was responsible for the demonic sword and King Rubens’s assassination.

Had he chosen not to harm anyone, we could have made him an adventurer. He possessed a great skill. Unfortunately, I bore a grudge against him now, although mine likely paled in comparison to Elvie’s.

I left Rila to Roje and headed to the living room, too.

“What do you think we should do about Yorvensen?”

The group was already discussing the topic when I entered, and Almelia tossed the question my way upon my arrival.

“First, we could decide not to accept the reanimated people and return the place to its previous state. Second, we could allow them to stay and let it be a neutral territory. And third, we could put it under the management of some other country. Those are the most obvious options,” I replied.

Some kind of compromise seemed best to me.

Almelia sighed. “I suppose you’re right. But we can’t go with the first option.”

“Mm-hmm. They’re reanimated copies, but those people still haven’t done anything wrong.” Serafin joined with a bottle of wine and glasses in hand. It was one of Rila’s bottles, but that was probably fine.

“I don’t understand option two, Roland,” Orlando said.

“We’d leave things as they are. The people wouldn’t be part of any country or be subject to the whims of one. We’ll need to do something about the criminals in the area, but if their leader makes use of an Adventurers Guild, things will clear up fine.”

I would need to explain the Adventurers Guild system to the resurrected Yorvensen people.

They likely wouldn’t be able to pay much, so the rewards would be low.

“Roland, I can help out,” Orlando offered.

“That’s generous, but the pay will likely be low.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Then when we have a quest, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay!”

I could consult King Randolph, but that would push things toward option three. The Felind Kingdom would wind up seizing control of the territory. If people found out that the former capital of Yorvensen was safe, then they would steadily migrate there. I thought it best to keep the king in the dark.

“I’ll leave Van to you, Elvie.”

“Understood.”

After a while, Roje and Orlando left for home.

They definitely had a lot to talk about. Almelia and Serafin departed not long after, and Elvie left with a restrained Van in tow.

The living room door opened while I sipped wine.

“Want a glass?”

“I set that aside and meant to enjoy it later, you know. Yet here you are drinking it as though it were yours.”

After admonishing me, Rila took a seat across from me instead of beside. Our eyes met. It felt like she wished to say something, but she turned away.

At last, she said, “I am sorry for the trouble.”

“Did you want to remain in Yorvensen?” I asked.

“No, nothing like that.”

“I think reviving a fallen nation was a noble cause,” I said. Rila evidently gathered I wasn’t really praising her. Her face clouded over. “But don’t make it an outlet for your guilt. Don’t look for salvation in punishment. No matter what happens, you need to carry the burden of your crimes until you die. Don’t try to escape through atonement. Don’t rely on any of that.”

Though the scale of our transgressions differed, Rila and I were both criminals. It’s why we understood each other.

“I intended to return once Yorvensen was revitalized.”

“If that’s true, then you should have said so from the start. I was worried.”

“Truly?”

Rila’s expression finally brightened.

“Why would I lie about that?”

“You traveled all the way to Yorvensen just to find me?”

“Thanks to that idiot elf not coming home.”

Rila laughed. “How very like Roje.”

“I also met the copy Van made of you.”

“And what did you think of her?”

“She was just like you. I understood why you mistook my duplicate for the real me.”

“Don’t tell me you took her...” Rila cast me an angry sidelong glance.

“I didn’t have time for that.”

Rila sighed heavily. She’d always claimed she didn’t mind infidelity, but apparently a doppelgänger as competition was too much.

“How did you know it was not me? Your duplicate had his right arm. That was how I realized he was not the genuine article.”

“She wasn’t good at kissing.”

Rila stood, came over, and slapped me.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“You kissed her!”

“I did.”

“Do not simply say ‘I did!’” She mocked my voice when she repeated the phrase. “I do not know why, but it does not sit well with me! If it makes no difference to you, then kiss only the real me!”

“I didn’t have any other way to tell for sure.”

“In order to make sure this never occurs again, I shall teach you the spell See-Through, which will allow you to recognize when a spell or skill has been used to create a duplicate.”

“That would be helpful.”

“Why you...” Rila sighed but soon laughed. “I will never be bored by your side. W-would you like to confirm whether I am the original?”



She wriggled and drew her knees together as she looked up at me with an expectant look.

I shrugged.

“Come to think of it, the original wasn’t very good at kissing, either.”

“Then you may check and see if that is the case.”

I wrapped my arm around Rila’s back, and Rila playfully fell on top of me.

Rila kissed me on the cheeks, the lips, and the neck as though she were inspecting me.

“Your reward for saving me,” she said, her head on my chest as though to listen for my heartbeat.

“Can’t you just give me a straightforward ‘thank you’?”

“I will do anything you desire tonight. Ask for anything.”

“Stay by my side.”

“Oh, you hopeless man.”

“Just stay with me.”

“All right...”

Rila laughed bashfully, and our lips met again.

To be honest, her kisses were about the same as her doppelgänger’s. I wondered aloud how I’d told them apart, then.

“Obviously it was love,” Rila said confidently.

12

The Demon Lord Is Sealed Once More

When I visited Wawok to have him analyze Elvie's demonic sword, I'd told him all the details of what had happened.

Today, I returned to tell him everything that had transpired since and to pick up something I'd asked for.

"Oh? Army Maker, huh? Sounds like a wonderful skill. I could see the results of my research immediately with that at my disposal," Wawok said as he fiddled with something small in his hands. "Though I guess it would be unfulfilling in a way, too."

"Why is that?"

"The results are important, of course, but I think the memories and devotion you put into something are critical, too. The attachment you form, you know?"

Attachment, huh?

I remembered the first knife I'd been given. It was a perfectly common dagger, but I kept it for so long that I grew attached to it.

Wawok reached a stopping point with his work. He began to inspect my armband. "Have you noticed any trouble? Ever find your arm isn't listening to you or isn't functioning correctly?"

"Not in particular. It's working well enough for me."

"Ah, is that right?"

Wawok nodded a few times, looking satisfied.

"Thought so. I know you'll use it properly. If anything is off, it's likely a fault on my end, but I'm confident nothing is wrong."

He asked me whether I wanted improvements, but I was pleased with my arm, so I had nothing to request.

“I’ve finally met a human who can use and understand my work. I’d like to make one with further improvements...”

“It’d be a problem if you adjusted it and made it worse.”

“That’s true.” The pale man laughed. “What happened to this Van fellow, then?”

“He was taken to Rubens. I haven’t heard about what they’ve decided yet.”

I hadn’t asked Elvie to keep me in the loop. Perhaps Van had already been executed.

“I’d like to go see these sorcerous weapons that Van re-created sometime.”

“That should be easy enough.”

Wawok had been most interested in those when I told him the story about Yorvensen. Since learning of the sorcerous weapons, he’d started to make rather overbearing requests. He’d asked me how they moved and what they were made of, and about their shape. I’d tried to tell him everything I could remember.

“Let’s leave the rest for next time.”

“Aww.”

Now he was acting like a child.

“I have something else I need to take care of today.”

Iris had offered me a meal as reward for solving the issue of the incorrect guild payouts, and all the trouble with Rila had pushed that dinner to tonight.

“Oh, wait! I finished the thing you requested last time.”

When I tried to leave, Wawok rushed after me and handed over a small box.

“This will be helpful. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing. When you have time, take me to see the sorcerous weapons. Perhaps they’ll serve as inspiration. And visit again soon. I never grow tired of

talking with you.”

“All right. See you later.”

Wawok returned to his endless pursuit of knowledge. I heard he was much older than any human. He was an oddball, even for a vampire, but that might have been a good thing.

“It’s an amazing place,” Iris said as she led Rila and me to the restaurant.

“Ah yes, Miss Iris Negan. This way, please.”

A formally dressed waiter showed us inside. The deep-red carpet matched the rest of the decor in the restaurant. It was indeed as amazing as Iris had claimed.

“I had no idea a place like this existed in Lahti,” I remarked.

“Right? I hardly ever come here, though,” Iris replied.

“This seems a most appropriate restaurant for myself,” Rila said. She nodded as though this were normal.

We followed the waiter to the farthest seats in the establishment. Once seated, we ordered drinks and clinked them together.

“Have you known Miss Orlando for long?” I asked.

“Yes. Since I was young.”

Apparently, Iris met her before coming to Lahti.

Orlando had helped Iris when she’d drunk too much and later came back to her for quests. This was when Iris still worked at reception.

“Orlando’s kind, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“She ought to have been more upset with the reduced quest payments, but instead she grew depressed. I knew I had to do something.”

Although Rila knew that Orlando was an old friend of Roje’s, she seemed to have no interest in the conversation and occupied herself with eating and drinking.

“It’s been a long time since Miss Orlando left the woods. She’s experienced

the worst of discrimination, so maybe she's grown accustomed to poor treatment. Perhaps she assumed making a big deal out of a relatively small issue wouldn't get her anywhere," I remarked.

"There are fewer of them, but bigots still exist. Still, I'd never heard the branch manager in Imil was one," Iris said.

"I think we ought to consider elf and beastperson employees at the guild," I stated.

Iris nodded. "You should work your way up in the guild and institute that change, then."

"You'll climb up the ladder before me, Branch Manager. You should be the one to make change happen."

"You have a point, but I don't really want to climb too high..."

Iris stared at her tilted glass of wine as she gave me a troubled smile.

"You would do well to cease speaking only of work and rudely leaving me to my own devices!" Rila was already several glasses in and on the verge of slurring her words. "Diswrrespect!"

"Okay, okay," I said, placating her.

Her face all but commanded us to bring her; into the conversation.

In the days that followed, Orlando showed up at the Lahti branch on occasion. We had no S-rank work for her, so all we did was talk. Apparently, she and Iris had drinks together after work sometimes.

Rila ordered us to pass the crackers, then the cheese, then the dried fruits.

Each time, she opened her mouth after commanding, "Feed them to me." Then she would wait.

I fed her a cracker, then tilted her wineglass for her; next was the cheese... I went along with all her requests.

"Oh, Rila, it sure must be nice to have Roland feed you." Iris laughed. It was clear she was teasing.

However, Rila was drunk and didn't pick up on that. "Indeed." She chewed on

her food with great contentment.

The following morning, I received a letter from Elvie informing me of Van's demise.

"A public execution, then," Rila muttered as she peered at the missive.

"His official crimes aren't stated, but he is the one behind the king of Rubens's assassination."

This seemed like the appropriate call.

"He was too simple-minded and regarded himself too highly, like a child," Rila said.

"That's what happens when you have a skill that's *too* useful," I added. "He successfully replicated you and confirmed his Roland's skills through an assassination. As he climbed higher, he was consumed by greed."

He'd wanted to create his own new country. Something like that would have been the stuff of dreams without the power to make it happen. But Van's power was an exception.

His Army Maker skill could make dreams a reality.

Had we not interfered, perhaps he would have succeeded.

As for Yorvensen, I went to meet the elder who'd taken up the position of leader. Luckily, he knew about the Adventurers Guild already, so I left some quest-submission boxes and regularly went to retrieve them.

"It seems the sorcerous weapons he re-created are gone. When I went to visit, the Yorvensen leader told me that they don't have any."

"I see."

"It's unknown technology, so I understand why they wouldn't want to use it anyway."

Too much power would sow the seeds of turmoil. Rila herself had said something to that effect at some point.

"I said you could put on the mana-restraining collar whenever you like, but I think you should put it on now. You never know who else might come along to

try to make use of your power.”

“You have a point. Then I shall.”

Rila stood to retrieve the collar, but I took her wrist to stop her.

“Hold on. I’ve got it here.”

“No, I left it in the bedchamber...”

“I gave that back to Wawok already. I asked him to make something else in its place.”

“Hmm? A new style of collar?”

“Well, in a way.”

I opened the small box that Wawok had given me to reveal a simple, glittering silver ring.

“It is beautiful...”

“I’d be happy if you wore it.”

Rila gave me a bashful smile and nodded.

She offered me her hand. I hadn’t told Wawok the size of Rila’s finger, but it fit perfectly. Rila held her hand up to inspect the band from various angles.



She started to laugh, yet never took her eyes from the ring.

“Knave, what is the meaning of this?” she asked, beaming expectantly.

“Hmm? It restrains your mana.”

“...”

The smile disappeared off Rila’s face.

“Apparently, it won’t break, and you can’t take it off, just like with the collar.”

Rila cleared her throat as though to gather herself. “Yes, very good. I must thank Wawok.”

“Right,” I agreed. “I realized that the demon lord needs to be tied down, considering everything that’s happened.”

“Mm-hmm. Yes, I won’t leave you ever again.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Our fingers intertwined, and Rila leaned her head against my shoulder.

Afterword

Hello. I'm Kennoji.

Seven volumes is the most I've ever gotten for a series. I never even imagined that I'd be given an opportunity to write such a long series.

I've included many elements I like, so this was fun to work on.

I've got several other projects, but I think this is the only one where I can say I've used elements I enjoy personally. If you'd like to confirm if that's true, I invite you to look into my other creations.

I thought that a long series would become more difficult to write as I ran out of material, but that hasn't been the case.

This applies to all my work, but one day I'd like to be able to say, "Wait a sec. I've run out of ideas and can't add anything else."

Then again, the only reason I'm able to create new works or continue series is because of the readers and others who help me.

It really makes me realize how many people support my efforts.

This isn't relevant to this series, but one of my other works, *Drugstore in Another World* (published by Brave Bunko), has an anime adaptation airing, and it's been received very well.

The content is slightly different from this series. It's a relaxing, everyday life story. I hope you'll check it out!

Well then, looks like I'm out of things to discuss, so I think I'll wrap up the afterword here.

Thank you to everyone who has read this far.

I'd be so happy if you would read the next volume when it comes out.

Until then,

Kennoji

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Hazure Skill: The Guild Member with a Worthless Skill Is Actually a Legendary Assassin,
Vol. 7

Kennoji

Translation by Jan Mitsuko Cash Cover art by KWKM

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HAZURE SKILL “KAGE GA USUI” WO MOTSU GUILD SHOKUIN GA, JITSU WA DENSETSU NO
ANSATSUSHA Vol. 7

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