Vol. 5
The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic
KUROKATA
ONE PEACE BOOKS

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Aruku
Usato
Amako
Nea
Blurin
Character Introductions

Rose
“So, you must be the kid who wants to join.”

The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic Vol. 5

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	Calamity Resurrected! The Dragon of Pure Evil!	007
CHAPTER 2	The Overwhelming Power of the Dragon!	016
CHAPTER 3	All or Nothing! A Last-Ditch Effort!	050
CHAPTER 4	A Feared Future Comes to Pass!	066
CHAPTER 5	A New Companion! An Owl Familiar?!	086
Aside	Welcie's Report	099
Side Story	Of Endings and Beginnings	108
CHAPTER 6	Arrival at Samariarl, the Prayerlands!	226
Chapter 7	A Sudden Air of Disquiet! The King Who Knows Usato!	240
Extra	Upon the Dragon's Demise	257
Side Story	The Strength to Face the Mirror	261

Rescue Team Guidelines:
Stance on Those Who Wear the White Uniform

- Never rely too much on your healing magic.
- Stand strong no matter the situation.
- When you decide to save a life,
you run until you're done.

Chapter 1: Calamity Resurrected! The Dragon of Pure Evil!

On our journey to deliver Llinger Kingdom's letters across the lands, we saved a girl by the name of Nea from zombies. Her home, Ieva Village, was at the whims of a necromancer, a monster that could control the dead. She asked us to save everyone, and so we found ourselves sneaking into the necromancer's manor only to realize that we'd walked right into a trap. It turned out that Nea *was* the necromancer, and she'd put on the guise of an ordinary villager to trick us.

To be more precise, Nea was half necromancer and half vampire. This gave her the power to control both the dead *and* the living. It was these powers that had allowed her to take control of our companion, Aruku.

After a hard-fought battle, we released Aruku from Nea's grasp, and right when we thought that she was all out of options, she revealed that she still had an ace up her sleeve in the form of a black dragon. It stood more than fifteen meters tall, was missing a wing and an eye, and breathed a poisonous purple gas. The monster stood before us and roared—the sound almost knocked me from my feet.

The dragon looked like a picture I found in a notebook—one that I'd taken from Nea's manor. There was no doubting that this was the dragon from the picture. As I looked up at the dragon, I felt myself freeze for an instant, but then I nodded calmly as our best course of action was revealed to me.

"Should we make a break for it?" I asked.

"Yep, let's do that," said Amako.

"Gwah!" added Blurin.

We came to our shared conclusion swiftly. Amako leaped onto Blurin's back, and I hefted Aruku onto my shoulder.

"No way we're going to stick around to fight *that* thing," I said. "We've got Aruku, so let's make tracks."

Fighting something as dangerous as that dragon wasn't worth the effort. I faced Nea and flashed her a grin, then laughed.

"Nea!" I shouted. "You went to all that trouble to raise your evil dragon, and it was all for nothing! You really thought that thing would be able to catch *me*? You idiot! You're a weirdo shut-in and a klutz!"

"What?!" she cried, unable to believe we were fleeing. "You're too righteous!"

It didn't matter what she thought. I'd given her a piece of my mind, so as far as I was concerned, we were done. That whole song and dance about a zombie attack was all a made-up story anyway. There was no zombie attack at all. It was all just Nea's lies. And sure, the villagers were under her control because of her vampiric powers, but on the other hand they were quite safe under her control.

The way I figured it, I could always come back and check on things when our journey was over and we'd delivered all our letters. Right now, there was no need for us to get caught up in any more trouble. But as we started running for the village to grab our bags and our horse, I noticed a change in the air.

"The wind," I uttered.

It was being sucked up behind us. It gave me the creeps, so I turned around and saw the dragon. It was sucking the surrounding air into its lungs. Which only meant one thing . . .

“Blurin!” I shouted. “Look out!”

Blurin was still running, but when he heard my shout, he spun around so he could react to what was coming. When the dragon stopped sucking in the air, its throat expanded, and a purple gas began to spill from the open cuts on its neck and the edges of its mouth.

“If you’re going to do it, then do it!” I said.

The dragon opened its mouth and, with a rasping roar, launched a slimy purple hunk of sludge into the air. Blurin and I instinctively flattened ourselves on the ground in a panic. The sludge flew straight over our heads and landed in the forest, unleashing a horrendous odor as it sprayed across the trees.

“Looks like luck saved our butts,” I said, wiping the sweat from my brow and sighing with relief.

Whatever muck the dragon was spitting, we were fast enough to dodge it. That said, you could tell by the color and the stench that it wasn’t something you wanted to touch. Fortunately for us, the dragon’s aim had been way off, and we’d emerged unscathed. I hefted Aruku back onto my shoulder and looked to make another getaway, but then I noticed the effects of the dragon’s sludge.

“Oh no, the forest!” I said.

The trees were withering away.

They’re rotting! And that stench!

“It’s poison! I knew it!”

Bile bubbled up in my throat, and I was hit by a light dizzy spell. I quickly covered my mouth with my sleeve and healed myself. I frantically looked for the others and saw that Amako was looking deathly pale. Blurin was still fine,

but getting any closer to the sludge was a dangerous move, especially with Aruku still unconscious.

“Don’t worry Amako, I’ve got you,” I said.

“S-sorry,” she uttered.

I lifted Amako from Blurin’s back and away from the wind carrying the poison, then healed both her and Aruku. Unfortunately, I knew that my actions were little more than a stopgap solution. As long as something was still producing the poison that blocked our way, we’d still be in danger of inhaling it.

“We have to get away from here, and fast!” I said.

But as I looked for a detour, another clump of sludge blocked our path.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

The dragon’s eyes narrowed as though it were evaluating us while looking down on me at the same time. I knew that look in its eye. I had seen it before, in the Llinger Forest, when I fought that snake. The gaze was exactly the same.

“Now! Catch him! Catch Usato!” cried Nea, cackling with laughter.

She was grinning and clearly delighted by the chaos, but I was really sick of the girl. I put Aruku and Amako on Blurin’s back, then put a hand to Blurin and gave the grizzly a heal.

“No choice but to fight, then,” I muttered.

There was nowhere to run, but I wasn’t about to let Nea just have her way with me.

“Blurin, get somewhere far from the poison and look after Amako and Aruku. As much as I’d like your back-up here, we can’t leave them alone.”

Blurin nodded.

“Usato,” said Amako, her voice filled with worry.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m just going to see if I can take that thing out with a good, solid punch.”

“Can you *please* stop solving all your problems through physical violence? Please?”

Wow, I didn’t think she’d choose now as the time to scold me so kindly. And I guess it is true that I make lots of my decisions based on whether I can hurt something or not. Maybe not a good sign . . .

Right then, the dragon let out another tremendous roar. It was done waiting. According to the record of the past hero that I’d read, there was no way I could take down this dragon. But I couldn’t avoid fighting it, either. If Aruku had been conscious, we might have been able to raze the sludge with his fire magic, but we didn’t have that luxury—not while he was still unconscious.

That meant it was up to me.

“But man, talk about scary,” I uttered.

Fear ran through me, just like it did when I fought the snake in Llinger Forest. Back when I was far less experienced, I’d come face to face with the snake after it killed a Grand Grizzly. It was the first time I’d been forced to truly confront death. Even now, I can’t forget the way my senses froze right through to the core of my very being.

“Just punch it, Usato,” I muttered to myself. “We’ll work out the rest afterward.”

In the end, it didn’t matter what I was up against. It didn’t change what I had to do. Yes, it was a dragon of pure evil, but it was a zombie now. I didn’t know if it was still as strong as it was in the record I’d read. So, as the dragon stomped

toward me, roaring, I ran straight for it.

“Here we go!”

It was fifteen meters tall; that made it about the size of a four- or five-story apartment building. But it crawled along the ground in a sluggish manner, and its size and slow movements told me everything I needed to know—the dragon would give me openings. As I closed in, the dragon’s big, clawed hand came rushing down toward me.

“Size alone won’t help you!” I shouted.

With a stomp I dove out of the way of the dragon’s hand, which collided with the ground. The sound of the impact was deafening, and the earth ruptured from the shock.

I can’t let myself get hit by that!

The dragon let loose another roar. It was like a million bugs clawing their way out of the dragon’s throat.

“Ugh, that sound is so disgusting!” I said, wincing.

At the same time, though, it almost sounded like the dragon was laughing. Even though it was a zombie under Nea’s control, I felt a unique presence and will inside of it.

The dragon’s hand once again came hurtling down toward me.

“Whoa?!!”

I jumped backward, and the dragon’s claws carved through the earth where I had once stood. I felt a cold sweat beading on my neck. But the dragon wasn’t done yet. It began slamming the ground with both hands like a child throwing a tantrum. All I could do was leap and slide out of the way. My goal was to close

the distance, but the force of the dragon's attacks and the wind they created kept on pushing me back.

I jumped away to make some distance, then looked up at Nea, floating in the sky.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"Hm? Ready to give up?" asked Nea.

"Not on your life! Clarify something for me—is that thing really under your control?!"

Because it looks to me like it's completely out of control!

"Hmph. Of course it is," replied Nea. "Controlling dead creatures without souls is my power. And no zombie can defy my orders!"

She looked awfully proud of herself.

"So they have to obey you, huh?"

That meant that even though the dragon looked like it was going crazy, it was moving as Nea wanted it to.

Which means . . .

"Blinding Heal!" I shouted, launching a healing bullet right for Nea's smug face.

It hit her right in the kisser.

"Wha?!" she cried. "Ah! My eyes!"

"Yes!" I shouted.

Aiming still wasn't my forte, but I'd hit the mark when it counted most.

And with Nea down, the dragon will stop moving.

I watched as Nea was thrown all the way over to the manor roof, screaming the whole way. She sounded anything but ladylike. I turned my attention back to the now silent dragon, clenching my fist and filling it with all my power.

“Now’s my chance,” I said.

There was no need for healing magic now. I would hit this thing with everything I had. I pulled my fist back like I was readying an arrow in a bow and jumped at the dragon. The monster’s black scales drew close as I was reminded of the scales of the snake. But I was different now. I had trained. I had grown.

“Eat this!”

I launched my first right at the dragon, and it went straight through the monster’s chest.

“Same, hero . . . kill.”

Chapter 2: The Overwhelming Power of the Dragon!

I felt my fist plow straight *through* the dragon's scales. I had no idea what kind of power I was capable of unleashing, but I knew I could at least punch the arms off a zombie. It was the kind of strength I could never allow myself to use on a fellow human.

Against the black dragon, however, I barely felt any shock at all from the impact. It felt more like punching straight into thick rubber.

"Ugh. I'm stuck!"

This wasn't like one of Nea's hexes. It was like the dragon had simply taken my blow and absorbed it. My punch was completely useless. It reminded me of a line from the old book I'd read.

". . . but even his powerful spells were useless against the dragon's thick scales."

It wasn't that I'd completely forgotten the line when I threw my punch. Rather, it was just that they'd fought hundreds of years ago, and living creatures rot away and deteriorate with time, and so I'd admittedly been pretty optimistic about my first strike. Now that I'd punched it, I could confirm that the dragon had, in fact, deteriorated. Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that my fist was still stuck inside of its body.

"Hrngh!"

The dragon shook, but I need to get clear before Nea recovers.

But just as I tried to pull my fist free, I felt a rumble through my arm.

"What the . . . ?"

At first, I thought I was just imagining things, so I tried to pull my arm free again, but suddenly *something* blocked the moonlight that had been streaming down upon me.

"Uh . . ." I muttered.

Nea was still wailing somewhere, probably covering her eyes. There was no way that a zombie under her control could move of its own free will. And that's what I kept telling myself as I clenched my fist and looked up.

We made eye contact. The dragon was in profile with its one good eye meeting my own as it peered down at me. In the dragon's dry, cracked eye I felt the movements of a consciousness. As the corners of its mouth curled upward, I got the distinct sense of a derisive, scornful grin.

This is so bad. I have no idea what's going on, but I don't like it one bit.

I knew then that the dragon was so much more lethal and even more dangerous than the snake I'd fought. I'd never been very eloquent, so I was no good at describing it with words alone, but now I knew how it felt to be a frog trapped in the glare of a predatory snake just before it was killed. That's the position I was in. The dragon's one-eyed stare was like chains locking me down. I was frozen in place.

I'm done for if I don't get moving.

It no longer mattered whether the dragon was conscious or not. I was about to get ground into paste by a dragon while Nea was still writhing around on the roof of the manor.

I can't let that happen!

"Hrngh . . . gah!"

I pulled hard and finally my fist came free, but in my haste, I also punched

myself straight in the face. For a second I felt my consciousness about to fade, but instantly I was back, body and mind working together. I could move again.

“Alright,” I said to myself.

When I hit myself, I’d accidentally split my forehead, and now blood poured between my eyes down to my jaw. But it wasn’t anything my healing magic couldn’t fix. I wiped the blood away with my hand and leaped away from the dragon to put some space between us. The dragon, however, didn’t move. Instead, it simply continued to stare at me.

“Well, now what?” I asked.

The dragon’s poison was life-threatening, its claws weren’t any better, and I didn’t like the idea of having to deal with its tail. On top of that, my fists were useless against it. My chances of winning were practically zero.

“So, I’ll start with Nea,” I said to myself.

If the dragon really was under her control, then taking her out of the fight would take the dragon out of it too. And while the dragon was much more powerful than Aruku, it was also much slower. It wouldn’t be able to stop me from getting to Nea and knocking her out.

My plan was to shift my focus away from the dragon and put the hurt on Nea. But before I could put my plan into action, the dragon shifted its gaze, its neck twisting unnaturally as it peered off in a different direction.

“Des . . . tion . . . Bl . . . od . . . Forall. . . exti. . . on . . . nnnrrrrgghhh. . .”

It looked off into the distance behind me.

“What? Is it trying to say something?” I wondered aloud.

Are those murmurings just a zombie thing? Is the dragon working on some

kind of homing instinct? Or is it looking off at the place where it once battled the hero? But is that something zombies are even capable of?

As far as the record I'd read was concerned, the hero and the dragon had faced off in Samariarl, which meant the dragon was looking in the opposite direction. If it was facing anything at all, it was facing Ieva Village, where Tetra and the other villagers lived.

"Well, whatever," I shrugged. "If it's not doing anything, then I'm not going to worry about it."

I took off running for the manor, but I kept one eye on the dragon all the same.

It's not reacting at all. I guess it really is under Nea's control after all.

Relieved, I got myself a run-up and prepared to leap onto the manor roof. But at that moment, I heard what sounded like the most horrible chuckle. At the same time, the dragon's throat began to expand.

"Oh no . . ."

Was it a trap? Is the dragon going to cover me in that poisonous sludge?

I leaped away, but the dragon never turned to face me. It wasn't concerned with me at all. Instead, its throat continued to expand as it breathed in. I didn't know what it was doing, so I watched in confusion as I stood by the edge of the manor. That was when I heard Amako's voice, just faintly, shouting from where she was taking shelter. I looked over and saw her desperately trying to tell me something.

"What is it? I can't hear you over the wind!" I shouted.

I couldn't make out any words clearly. I raised a hand to keep sand and dirt from getting in my eyes and looked carefully at Amako's mouth while she

continued to shout in a panic.

“Vil . . . lage! Dan . . . ger! Poi . . . so . . . n!”

No way!

The moment I understood Amako’s words, I jumped up and kicked off the manor wall to leap straight at the dragon’s face. I clenched my left fist as wild winds whipped around me. This time, I had a clear target, and there was anger in my actions. I launched my punch and it collided with the dragon’s lower jaw, right under its one good eye.

“Not on my watch!” I shouted.

The dragon’s jaw slid to the left and let out a purple gas, which surrounded me. I healed myself as I fell back to the ground, but I wasn’t quick enough, and landed flat on my butt, coughing. The poison had gotten into my throat, and I spat blood with each cough.

“No matter how much training I do,” I muttered, wiping the blood from my jaw, “poison always sucks.”

I healed all the poisoned areas and looked back up at the dragon. It was holding its jaw, having crashed into the manor and fallen over from the force of my blow. But it wasn’t out of the fight yet; it was just rattled, and it quickly stood back onto its feet.

“Guess that means me too,” I said, standing up.

Now I knew for certain: I could not just leave the dragon here like this. I had to finish it off, no matter what. That was when Amako ran up to me, her face pale.

“I’m so glad you heard me,” she said.

“Thanks, Amako,” I replied. “Things would have been really bad if you hadn’t gotten through to me. But that dragon . . .”

It had ignored me entirely and tried to attack Ieva Village. When it had turned its head to look elsewhere, it was toward the lights of Ieva, glimmering in the darkness. I didn’t know why the place was important, but I *did* know that it wasn’t the work of Nea. There was no way she would have used the dragon to brazenly massacre all those people.

“Looks like I underestimated this dragon,” I said. “And now I know what it was trying to say earlier.”

It had spoken its words while it stared at Ieva. I hadn’t understood it at first, but now that I had seen the cruelty of its actions, the meaning was clear.

“Destruction . . . Blood . . . For all, extinction,” I said. “The dragon is driven by a need to destroy. It treated me like a toy, but when it saw the village, it found something even better to play with.”

When the dragon couldn’t land a strike on me, it had turned its attention elsewhere. That made the situation all the more dire, and clearer. The dragon was far too evil and cruel a creature for me to abandon and run away from.

“Nea resurrected a truly horrendous beast,” I said. “And for better or worse, she still has no idea what she’s done.”

That thing was way better off dead. It was irresponsible to bring it back.

I could tell that to Nea, but also to the last hero, who had not killed it. Either way, running away was no longer an option.

“Well, it looks like my fists *do* work to some extent,” I said. “See how the dragon’s jaw is dislocated? It can’t close its own mouth anymore. It’s got a tough outer shell, but the bones inside can still be broken. And I have the

strength to break them.”

Just as I was about to take off, Amako grabbed my arm.

“Usato, let’s run,” she said.

The words left me stunned.

“What?” I uttered. “Run? If we leave that thing to its own devices, it’s going to be a massacre here. On top of that, with all that sludge around us, there’s no way out.”

“Some of the trees still haven’t been hit by the poison. We might be able to use those openings. Usato, I’m as worried as you are about the villagers, but some problems you can’t just punch your way out of.”

I dropped into silence.

“That’s not an ordinary monster. And no matter how strong you are, that dragon’s going to need way more than just punches.”

She’s right. It is overwhelmingly powerful.

Until now, the dragon hadn't even been taking me seriously. Confronting it head-on was practically suicide, but I had made up my mind. I was *not* going to leave it to rampage through the lands.

"Amako, you saw it yourself," I said. "It tried to cover the village in poison. It didn't hesitate for a single moment."

"But—" she started.

"That poison even left *me* unable to move for a few moments. Imagine if it gets on a woman or a child. They'll be dead in minutes."

Not to mention how harmful it was and the way it could rot trees away. It is aiming for Ieva this time, but what if it tries the same thing on the Llinger Kingdom or Luqvist? It would be a complete slaughter. Llinger had the rescue team, so it could still save lives, but the kids in Luqvist wouldn't stand a chance.

"And what if a poisonous monster like that makes an attack on a neighboring country?" I said. "If that is the same dragon that I read about, then it's going to leave nothing but destruction in its wake. Not even the Demon Lord's army could control it."

"But you'll die, Usato," said Amako.

I couldn't bring myself to say that I wasn't in danger. I couldn't even find the words to put Amako at ease. All I could do was put a hand on her head to express in some small way how I felt. There was no deep meaning in the gesture, but I knew then that I wasn't alone, and a little of my fear dissipated.

"Get clear and get somewhere safe," I said.

Amako was sad, but she nodded, and she ran back to Blurin. When I turned

back to the dragon, it was frozen in place unnaturally.

“Huh?” I uttered.

The dragon was trembling. *Was something interfering with its movements?* That was when Nea appeared on the roof of the manor, holding her nose and glaring at me, her face bright red with anger.

“How dare you! I won’t stand for it!” she cried. “You always aim for *me*! Why?! Do you have some kind of grudge against me?!”

I sighed.

All I have are grudges.

I looked back over at the dragon now that Nea was back. Just as I thought, it was restrained. That meant that Nea *did* have some control over it. The reason it was free to move as it wished earlier was because I’d stunned Nea and she’d momentarily lost control. In that brief period, however, the dragon had been free.

Which means we might still have a chance if I can get through to Nea.

“Nea, that dragon has a soul!” I shouted. “You can’t control it forever. You have to turn it back into a dead corpse while you still have the chance!”

“Huh? A soul?” she replied.

The situation was precarious. The dragon would make a move as soon as Nea’s concentration wavered, so I couldn’t simply attack her anymore. And for all I knew, the dragon was slowly escaping from her control anyway.

“You think a lie like *that* is going to fool me?” she shouted back. “Corpses don’t have souls to begin with!”

“But that dragon just tried to poison the village! If I hadn’t stopped it, Tetra

and the other villagers would have died in a flood of poison!”

“You think I care? I’m a monster. I’ve lived for three hundred years. Why would I care about humans? And seriously, you really thought you could use the villagers to get to me?”

Ugh, she’s so freaking annoying. It’s hard to believe she’s really older than me.

“Are we done, then?” she said. “Come on dragon, go get him.”

“Done? We never even got a chance to get started,” I muttered.

The dragon glared at me, its jaw still dangling, dislocated. *Was it really going to obey her?* Just as the thought crossed my mind, the dragon began to breathe in. But there was no way it could spit anything with its jaw in such bad shape.

So what is it trying to do?

I readied myself to make more distance if I had to, and the dragon looked upward.

“No!”

Nea had ordered the dragon to attack me. Exactly how it chose to do this didn’t matter. What mattered in the end was whether it was successful or not. Knowing that, I knew exactly what the dragon was attempting to do.

“Nea!” I shouted. “Get clear! Now!”

“Huh?”

I pitched a healing bullet at her and took off running as I covered myself in healing magic. At that same instant, an eruption of purple gas exploded from the dragon, covering the area around it and filling Nea’s lungs.

“Damn it! Did I make it in time?!”

I didn't care anymore that she was my enemy. If something happened to her, it meant we would lose the only chains that kept the dragon under some semblance of control. In my efforts to get to Nea, I plunged into the poisonous gas. But at the exact same time, a tremendous force slammed into my body.

"Gah!!" I shouted.

It was a tail, slithering like a snake.

Did it . . . use the gas as a tactic? It was never going to hit me out in the open, so is that why it clouded my vision?!

I could barely see, and I was surrounded by toxic gas. There was nothing else I could do but take the blow, which sent me flying. As soon as I landed, the tail whipped around and smacked me into the ground.

"Ow!"

Somehow, I managed to block the brunt of the attack, but the poison had gotten into me, and I could barely concentrate. The dragon had attacked me and freed itself at the same time. It was unbelievable.

I have to get out of striking range.

I tried to stand up, healing my aching body as I went, but the dragon stood over me. It pinned me to the ground with its hand. I grunted from the pressure of it, while the dragon began to cackle.

The sound was awkward on account of the dragon's still dislocated jaw, but nonetheless I could see that it was looking down at me. It kept me pinned with one hand while it used the other to push its jaw back in place with a *crack*.

"I've . . . got you," it said.

The dragon's voice was a gravelly rasp.

“So you can talk, huh?” I spat.

The dragon brought its face down close to my own and grinned.

“Kill . . . the hero. Leave not . . . a trace,” it said.

“What?”

Hero? Does it mean the last hero? Why is it saying that to me? It can’t possibly think I’m a hero, can it?

“No,” I said. “I’m not one of the heroes.”

“You are . . . inhuman. So . . . you are a hero.”

“Inhuman?”

This thing doesn’t get it at all! I’m not a hero, I’m just a regular guy who got wrapped up in all this hero business! And what the heck are you talking about, inhuman?! If that’s how you’re judging heroes, then the whole rescue team are heroes!

Admittedly, I was more shocked by the dragon’s mistake than the fact it could talk.

“And so . . . you die,” said the dragon.

I am in a really bad spot.

Still trapped underneath the dragon’s hand, I racked my brains for a way out. But before I could come up with anything, the dragon wrenched me up into the air. I instinctively knew what it was going to do next and prepared myself for the shock.

“Well, let’s hope this doesn’t kill me,” I said.

And then I was hit by a force that rivaled, or perhaps even exceeded, one of

Rose’s own punches.

* * *

The poisonous gas that the dragon breathed was carried on the wind and surrounded the manor. Usato shouted at Nea to get to safety, then dove straight into the gas. But he had healing magic, so he was okay. He had to be. He was tough, so he would be fine. That’s what I told myself as I held back the urge to run over to him.

Then I noticed a black figure emerge from the roof of the manor, flying. It was coughing as it went.

Nea.

She was crying and coughing from the small amount of poison she’d ingested. She put a hand to her chest. Her face was filled with confusion.

“What the heck,” she said. “You didn’t have to poison me too. But why did Usato . . .”

Nea was the least of my concerns at that point, so I turned my attention back to the purple gas. It was more poison than any ordinary person could handle, and I worried about Usato who was lost inside of it. Just then, I saw something fly out of the gas. It was one of the dragon’s hands, and when I saw what was stuck in its grasp my blood ran cold.

“Usato?!” I cried.

He was trapped in the dragon’s claws, unable to move. Suddenly, my concern turned to full-blown fear. The dragon threw Usato with unbelievable force

through the roof of the manor. He broke straight through it, then smashed through the third floor and the second floor before colliding with the first floor and sending a shockwave through the ground.

“Oh no . . . Usato . . .” I uttered.

No human could withstand such an impact. It would have destroyed them.

Is Usato . . . dead?

I fell to my knees. I didn’t want to believe my eyes.

“No, it can’t be,” I said. “I didn’t see this. Usato couldn’t have . . . he couldn’t have died here . . .”

I still hadn’t foreseen his death. We still hadn’t arrived at the future I saw in my vision. I kept telling myself that as I stumbled toward the manor where he had fallen. But I didn’t get very far. Blurin stopped me.

“Blurin?” I asked.

“Gwah.”

There was no anger or sadness in the grizzly’s eyes. What I saw was something like trust.

“We don’t have to worry about him?” I asked.

Blurin nodded confidently and looked over at the manor. It was like the grizzly was convinced that there was no way such a fall would have finished Usato off.

“He’s going to be okay?”

I had heard about how Usato and Blurin met. It was in a forest called the Darkness of Llinger. They had joined forces to fight the snake that killed Blurin’s parents. In the end, it had been Usato’s teacher Rose who landed the killing blow, but even then, they had met under fearsome conditions. With death’s

door threatening to open before them, Usato and Blurin had formed a bond. Blurin understood Usato in a way others perhaps couldn't.

Blurin knew that Usato was not someone who would ever go down easy. And when I saw that resolute confidence in the grizzly's eyes, I wiped the tears from my own and nodded.

"You're right," I said. "I can't lose faith now. Usato will be okay. That's not nearly enough to take him out of the fight."

I'd only known Usato for a short time, but I knew his strength. I'd seen it myself countless times. He did things that were inhuman. His personality could flip like a coin, and he was a bully *and* insane. But he had never once betrayed my trust. I didn't think he would betray me now. So I had to believe in him. I had to believe he would make it through this.

"Thanks, Blurin," I said. "I feel better now."

If I'd run over to the manor, I only would have poisoned myself. If Usato had been okay, then I would have made things harder for him. Right now, it was better for me to stay here with Blurin, protect Aruku, and use my powers to predict the dragon's movements. I took a few steps back and looked at the dragon. Nea was still shocked and confused, staring at the manor that Usato had partially destroyed.

With a swipe of its tail, the dragon dispersed the poison in the air. It looked into the manor, and it let out a delighted roar. It lifted its arms up high.

"You have to be kidding!" I said.

Even after slamming Usato right through the manor, it was going to attack him *again*? Could Usato even survive such a blow? I was ready to shout at the dragon, hoping to make it stop, but before I could Nea froze it in its tracks.

“Stop!” she said. “You’re not to attack him any further without my permission!”

The dragon growled.

“Look at the mess you’ve made! This is a disaster. I’ll be sleeping at the village tonight, that’s for sure. But let’s patch Usato up first, okay? He *did* save me, after all.”

Nea’s hand was alighted with magical energy, and she pointed it at the dragon. Concentration etched itself onto her face as she focused. She looked at the dragon and tilted her head, confused. The magical energy around her hand wavered suspiciously.

“Usato *was* right. You’re no ordinary zombie,” she said. “But as long as you’re under my control, you’re still just a puppet. Without magic energy, you’re nothing more than a corpse.”

The dragon’s body shuddered, and a purple magical energy seeped from its body and back to Nea, her hand illuminated by the very same color. It looked very much as though the chains that connected her to the dragon’s body were disappearing. That was how necromancers controlled the dead—by filling them with magical energy and using that energy to control them. By that logic it looked like Nea was taking her magical energy back.

It took about ten seconds for Nea to siphon all the magical energy. The dragon then stopped entirely. Nea looked at it, satisfied that it was once again just a corpse, and then she let out a sigh.

“Phew. And now you’re just another corpse,” she said. “What was that Usato was talking about, huh? He had me all paranoid for a moment there. Well, time to go get my new prisoner!”

She turned away from the dragon, and as she did, I glanced at Blurin. With the dragon out of the picture, all that remained was Nea and her zombies. Blurin and I could handle that much on our own. From what I'd just seen, it would require a significant amount of magical energy to bring the dragon back again. We could beat Nea up before she ever had the chance to do it.

I didn't really like the way my thoughts clearly stunk of Usato's influence, but it really was our best option. That made our first order of business clear: slap Nea upside the head. We walked quietly toward the manor so as not to be spotted. But that was when I noticed the dragon's eye.

It was pitch black in the moonlight, but it *moved*, and an instant later its clawed hand had Nea in its grasp.

"Wh-what the heck?!" she cried.

"I am free," said the dragon. "The interference of your magic is gone. The hero is dead."

It can talk?!

Why was it moving? Nea had taken back her magical energy. There was no spell anymore.

"You have my thanks, necromancer," said the dragon. "You gave me life. If you hadn't, I would have rotted away over the next three hundred years."

"Gave you life?! But you're a corpse! You're a dead body! You don't have a soul! How could you possibly have a soul!"

"I don't know. It matters not. None of it changes the fact that I am here, now."

With Nea still in its hand, the dragon stood up on its hind legs and scanned the surrounding area. Nea followed its gaze, and when she realized where it

settled, she went pale. It was looking toward Ieva Village, the place she sometimes called home.

“Now that I am back, I have but one goal: destruction. Everything that enters my field of view will be massacred.”

“No! You can’t!” cried Nea.

The dragon grinned at her pained cry.

“Why?” asked the dragon, tilting its head.

“Because it’s *mine*,” she said. “Don’t do anything to the village, please. I don’t care about anything else, just leave the village.”

“For you, humans are mere sustenance, no? I remember that village. I remember your father. That village is nothing but a farm. The people there are livestock, waiting to become meals. Their lives mean nothing.”

Nea’s face scrunched up uncomfortably at the dragon’s choice of words.

“Exactly,” she said. “That place is . . . it’s *my* farm. So I don’t want you laying a finger on it.”

The dragon turned up its nose and chuckled. It squeezed Nea tighter in its grasp and she groaned.

“I care not,” said the dragon. “I will kill them all. Your village. This country. The entire continent. All of it.”

“Stop,” Nea said. “You can’t. I brought you back, didn’t I?”

The dragon chuckled again.

“That means nothing, little bat.”

The dragon then threw Nea through the hole in the manor’s roof. She

slammed into the ground on the third floor, then bounced out of sight. I didn't know why she was trying to save the village, but I didn't care. She was the only one who could have stopped the dragon, and now she was broken. The situation was hopeless.

"What do we do now?" I uttered.

I tried looking into the futures in which we stood and fought the dragon, but in every single one we ended up dead. When the dragon looked at me with his dark black eye, I was frozen. I thought I would be killed.

Then something flew out from the first floor of the manor carrying swinging a spear with an axe blade on it right for the dragon's mouth. The dragon let out a roar and tumbled to its side at the impact.

"Consider that payback!"

I saw the white coat caught on the wind, the spear with the axe blade on it, and Usato. He was clutching the weapon as he landed on the ground.

"Are you okay?!" he asked.

I was glad that he'd come, but instead of words of joy I let out a scream of fright.

"You're terrifying!" I blurted out.

Usato's face was covered in blood. The fierce stare in his eyes was beyond frightening.

* * *

The force of being thrown through the manor roof and colliding with the floor had sent a tremendous shockwave through me. It took everything I had just to remain conscious. From underneath all the rubble, I looked up and realized I could see the sky. That dragon had really done a number on me. I ached all over. I could barely move.

The first thing I did was heal myself and get rid of all the rubble. Pain throbbed through my right shoulder. I couldn't lift my arm.

"Ouch!"

It was agony just trying to move it. I must have dislocated it during the fall.

"Healing magic is no good for this kind of thing," I muttered.

I'd experienced dislocated joints in Rose's training several times. It was always the most painful thing to endure. I took my right arm in my left, gritted my teeth through the pain, and forced my arm back into the joint, immediately healing the area as I did. Only then could I let out a sigh of relief. Then I rolled my shoulder a few times and checked to make sure I didn't have any other major injuries. I'd cut my head and was bleeding a bit, but other than that, there was nothing serious. In my training with Rose, I'd taken similarly powerful attacks, so this dragon wasn't anything new. That told me exactly how horrendous her training regime had been. Not cool.

"Well, my body's okay. Now to work out whether or not I can take that monster down," I said.

The dragon's poison was one thing, but the beast itself was also cunning. The moment I realized that my attacks weren't effective, I knew I couldn't win in a fair fight. My only hope was that the dragon had a weak point I could exploit.

"Then there's the fact that it's freaking terrifying," I muttered.

I had never felt a sensation like the malice in that dragon. Perhaps part of the monster's feelings came from the fact it had mixed me up with the heroes. But nonetheless, it looked at me with an overflowing hatred. It wanted to murder me, and the weight of that feeling wore away at my senses. It threatened to shatter my will and break my spirit. I wanted to run away, just like Amako suggested.

"But right now, nobody can stop that thing but me," I stated.

If that dragon killed me, it would turn on Ieva Village. Then it would set its sights on somewhere bigger, like Luqvist or Llinger. Eventually, someone would stop it, but only after the dragon had feasted on countless lives. I had to stop that at all costs.

"Senpai . . ."

I clutched the omamori that Inukami-senpai had given me. I thought of her, and I thought of Kazuki as I looked up at the sky. I couldn't die here. I had to survive so we could all meet again. I took a deep breath and felt my determination settle. I was ready, but I still had a problem: how could I fight the dragon? I couldn't punch my way to victory, so I had to find another way.

"That reminds me . . ."

In the record I'd read, the hero had leaped straight into the dragon's mouth and plunged his blade into the dragon's heart. That was how he'd won. That meant that the dragon could be attacked from the inside.

“But now it’s a zombie. None of its organs will be working anymore.”

That, and its corpse had been left to rot over hundreds of years. For all I knew, its organs had crumbled away.

Oh, wait a second.

“But when I *did* punch the dragon, what was it I heard coming from within it?”

I have to check that out again. I have to make sure. It might mean I can defeat the dragon the same way the old hero did.

“Now to get back outside, asap,” I reminded myself.

I pushed the rubble off my legs and was about to head for a door when I knocked a suit of armor over. The weapon in its hands fell to the floor with a clang taking me completely by surprise.

“Oh,” I uttered, taking a closer look at the two-meter long spear with the axe blade at its end.

It was a halberd. You had to be big and strong to wield it because it was a hefty thing. Fortunately, it was just the right weight for me.

“I guess this is exactly the kind of weapon you need for a monster like that.”

That was when I heard something slam into the manor above me.

“What was that?!”

I ran into a nearby room and looked out the window. The dragon was right there. Beyond it I saw Amako and the others.

“Well, no time to sit here doing nothing!” I said.

I’m not going to let you lay a finger on my friends!

I leaped back from the window and gripped the halberd tight in my hands.

“No time to look for an exit either,” I muttered. “So I’ll just make one!”

I sliced sideways with the halberd, letting the momentum carry it. The blade collided with the wall and tore it open in a shower of broken glass and wood. But I didn’t wait for the dust to settle. Instead, I flew out of the manor and straight at the dragon. Before it had a chance to react, I swung the halberd at its jaw with everything I had.

“Consider that payback!” I shouted.

Several of the dragon’s teeth shattered and it tumbled to the ground. As soon as I hit the ground myself, I ran straight over to Amako and the others. I kept my attention partially on the dragon, but I still had to make sure she was alright.

“Are you okay?!” I asked.

For some reason, Amako’s face drained of color the moment she saw me.

What’s with that reaction?!

“You’re terrifying!” she exclaimed.

“I come to help you and *that’s* the first thing you say to me?!”

I couldn’t believe it, but nonetheless, I quickly turned back to the dragon. It was up on its feet again, and a poison gas wafted from its mouth as it glared straight at me.

“So you still live, hero,” it growled.

“Ha! You’re surprisingly eloquent for a would-be lizard!”

I zipped underneath the dragon’s arm as it made to swipe at me, then swung the halberd straight into its belly. Unfortunately, it was no better than when I’d tried to punch the monster.

Even blades are useless?! What is this thing made out of?!

“How about this?!”

I moved the halberd to my left hand and threw consecutive healing bullets at the dragon’s eye to blind it. The dragon roared, unable to see. It swiped at me with its claws. But now that I’d circled around behind it, the attacks were useless. I threw myself into a dropkick aimed square at the dragon’s legs, knocking it off balance. The ground shook as the dragon’s gigantic body fell.

With the dragon’s chest now wide open, I plunged the halberd into the ground and charged in empty handed.

“Let’s hope I’m right!”

This time, however, I didn’t punch the dragon. Instead, I slammed an open palm at its chest. But because I didn’t put very much power into it, there wasn’t much of an effect. However . . .

“I knew it.”

I could feel a thumping through the palm of my hand, and in that moment I *knew*. The dragon *did* have a heartbeat. I didn’t know how it worked, but I knew that it was a weak point. If I could get inside of the dragon, I could literally break its heart and kill it.

“And no better time than the present!” I shouted.

I weaved around the dragon’s limbs as it struggled to get to its feet. I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I was going to leap into its mouth and attack its heart directly. I called it the Tom Thumb Tactic.

However, the moment I was about to dive straight in, I felt my legs give out underneath me. I lost my balance and fell.

“I’m not fully healed!”

I'd pushed myself to my physical and healing limits, which dulled the effects of my magic. The dragon watched me fall, its face filling with rage.

"You attempt to do the same as the past hero!" it roared.

I clucked my tongue. Now it knew what I wanted. It had been defeated from the inside once before, and it knew instinctively that I intended to do the same thing. The dragon's shrewd intelligence was going to make things difficult. And as if to prove it, poison began to spew from the dragon's mouth to stop me from getting inside.

I knew I wasn't getting in through by way of its mouth anymore, so I gave up and grabbed a hold of my halberd. Then I jumped back to where Amako and the others were.

"Usato! Are you okay?" she asked.

I kneeled and healed myself while I answered.

"To be honest, not really," I replied.

The poison and my injuries had taken a heavier toll on me than I'd thought. Although I still had it in me to fight, my healing magic was weaker now. That was clear enough from my fall just moments ago. I also knew that I couldn't enter the dragon's body while it was filled with such strong poison. Trying would kill me.

"What happened to Nea?" I asked.

"The dragon got her. It threw her at the manor. She couldn't stop it."

"I see."

So even she couldn't do anything.

I quickly told Amako and Blurin about the dragon's weak point. The monster

was cautious for the time being and giving me space, but it wouldn't wait long. We needed to come up with a plan as soon as possible. When she heard about the dragon's heart, Amako frowned.

"If the heart is the weak point, how do we get to it?" she asked.

"That's the problem," I replied. "Look at that thing. It knows I want to get to its heart, so it's playing things cautiously. That tells us how important its heart is, but its mouth is the only way in, and we can't get close to it.

If everything had gone to plan before, this might all be over already.

I hated that I let a chance like that go to waste. But regret wasn't going to help me right now. I had to put my focus on working out a way to attack the dragon's heart.

"Then perhaps we bet it all on a last-ditch effort to get in through the mouth," I said.

"But even *I* can tell how tired you are, Usato," said Amako. "You can't do something so risky."

"But if I make it past the poison . . ." I started.

Then I saw the sorrow in Amako's face.

"No, you're right," I said. "I'm sorry."

Sacrificing myself wasn't the right way to solve this problem. I'd made a promise to Rose, and I was intent on surviving so I could continue my journey and help Amako too. The chances of me dying from the dragon's poison were high, so it wasn't worth trying. We needed some other way.

The dragon's going to stomp over here any second now. I guess I'll just have to do what I always do: think on my feet.

“Sir . . . Usato,” came a voice, surprising all of us.

It was Aruku. He was standing up thanks to the support of Blurin. One look at his eyes told me that he was free of Nea’s brainwashing.

“Aruku, you’re awake!” I exclaimed.

“I am. I know what’s going on. Even while I was being controlled, it was like a hazy dream, but I was conscious. I also heard your conversation just now, and I know how bad things are.”

Aruku stumbled and stood up straight, then went on.

“Sir Usato, I have an idea.”

“An idea?”

“If it works, it may well help us stop that dragon. But we’ll have to work together to make it happen.”

Work together . . .

I looked around at everyone—at Blurin, Amako, and Aruku. Our journey had only just begun, but already they were all important to me. They were my companions on this journey.

And if getting out of here means all of us playing a part, then . . .

“Let’s do it, Aruku. Let’s bring that dragon down, together.”

I would give it everything I had left. Aruku and Amako nodded, and Blurin let out a confident roar.

We’ll do this together.

I let the words play over in my mind. They gave me confidence and strength. I looked over at the dragon, glaring at me, and shot it a bold grin.

Chapter 3: All or Nothing! A Last-Ditch Effort!

“Let’s do this, Blurin!” I shouted.

“Gwah!”

The two of us charged at the dragon. It was clearly taken off guard and suspicious of our sudden movements, but all the same, it raised its head up high, roared, and prepared to crush us.

As soon as Blurin and I entered the dragon’s striking range, we quickly split up. As I sped around to the dragon’s side, I glanced at Amako and Aruku hiding nearby.

“I’m counting on you,” I said.

Draw the dragon’s attention.

That was the first step in Aruku’s plan. Blurin and I would run circles around the dragon to keep it confused and on its toes. This task would have been difficult alone, but together with Blurin, it was a piece of cake.

“No need to do anything reckless, Blurin!” I shouted.

“Gwah!” roared the grizzly, letting me know it understood.

Blurin looked more alive and energetic than ever. Now that he was essentially let off his leash and free to run wild, he was utterly delighted.

“Over here!” I shouted, punching the dragon to break its concentration.

All we had to be concerned about was not getting hurt too badly. We weren’t trying to stop the dragon here. We just wanted to keep it occupied.

“You pests! You maggots!” roared the dragon.

It swiped at me again and I rolled underneath it.

“Better watch out when you swing big like that!” I shouted. “Blurin! Now!”

Blurin charged in and tackled the dragon on its right side, which it had left open trying to get me. The dragon rocked sideways on its feet and roared again.

“Now it’s my turn!” I shouted.

I slipped into the dragon’s blind spot and then punched it straight in the leg. The monster toppled and fell. A tremor ran through the ground as the dragon collided with the earth. I grinned in triumph.

“Great work, Blurin!”

Two heads are better than one! Especially when . . . one of them’s a grizzly?

We’d only fought side by side on two occasions, but we’d spent enough time together to understand one another. I could sense what Blurin was going to do, just as the grizzly could easily read my own movements. *What more could you ask for in a partner?*

Whenever one of us moved into the dragon’s line of sight, the other launched a surprise attack. Because the dragon only had one eye it had no way of responding when one of us attacked from its blind side.

“Now that’s what I call a combination!”

Though I couldn’t easily get close to the dragon on my own, with a partner it was all too easy to keep the dragon on its toes. At the same time, the dragon still had a mouth full of toxic gas, so we still couldn’t land any truly decisive blows.

“Do you think your dancing will defeat me?! You are not a hero like the one I fought last time! You are weak!”

Well of course I'm weak if that's what you're comparing me to. But given the circumstances, you just sound like a kid throwing a tantrum over losing a game.

"You sure like to talk!" I said as I weaved under some sludge the dragon spat at me. "Is that because you've been asleep for hundreds of years? Were you lonely?"

When it came to teasing and bullying, I was one up on most. That was because my repertoire for pushing buttons to frustrate and annoy had expanded when I joined the rescue team. I could tell that the dragon hated it, and that just made it all the easier to push around.

"Your attacks mean nothing! Not even the hero could scratch me! And you are so much weaker! No matter what you try, you will fail!"

"Ha! Keep talking, lizard! All your ranting and raving is because you're scared, isn't it? Just admit it!"

"Why would I fear a maggot?!"

Every time I looked at the dragon, I saw the snake from Llinger's forest. Rose had landed the finishing blow. If she hadn't been there, Blurin and I would have died. But through that experience I learned what it means to be on the edge of life and death. I also found my partner, Blurin. When I thought back on it, there was a great frustration in me. I hated that in the end I'd had to rely on Rose's help. It made me feel pitiful.

I felt shades of that fight all over again as we ran circles around the dragon. But I wasn't the person that I was back then. And more importantly, I had two *other* companions by my side.

What was it you said? Not even the hero could scratch you?

"Look, I'll admit that when you were alive, you were a fearsome beast," I said.

“And even here, deteriorated as you are, you’re still formidable. I’ll bet you wielded unimaginable power. But!”

And with that, Blurin slid in front of me. I used his back as a platform to leap in the air and throw a roundhouse kick straight at the dragon’s jaw. Poison spewed into the air like a fountain. The dragon fell with its hands on the ground from the blow. It looked at me in astonishment as I landed before it.

“But I know what real heroes are,” I said. “To them you’re nothing more than a pesky lizard.”

Inukami-senpai would simply raze the thing to the ground with her overflowing lightning. Kazuki would have had the dragon wrapped around his little finger as he deftly wove his light magic around it. Those two were *true* heroes. If this dragon was having trouble keeping up with the likes of me, then it really was nothing but a pest.

“Damn you!” the dragon roared.

With its throat crushed, and poison leaking from its mouth, the dragon flew into a blind rage. It came straight for me. I wasn’t strong enough to withstand the toxic gas wafting all around its mouth. I knew that if it bit me, the power of its jaws, combined with its poison, would kill me.

“Did you forget I’m not alone?” I asked.

“Gwaaah!”

The dragon was focused on me alone. But when it was right on the verge of reaching me Blurin charged at it again, flailing. The shock of the impact sent the dragon reeling off to the side and straight past me. Once again, it crumpled to the ground.

“It’s not just *me* you’re fighting,” I said. “You shouldn’t underestimate my

partner. He'll fight anyone, any time, any place. He doesn't know the meaning of fear."

Well, except when it comes to Rose, anyway!

But even after all these attacks, we still hadn't hurt the dragon. It was insanely durable, and on top of that, it was also a zombie. When a monster like that zombifies, it's almost unkillable.

"But even zombies have their weak points," I whispered to myself.

"Usato!"

Aruku and Amako shouted to me just as I was about to dive into another round of dancing around the dragon.

"It's ready?" I said. "Blurin, draw the dragon away!"

"Gwah!"

Blurin dashed off while I returned to Aruku and Amako. Calling me meant that they'd finished with their preparations. Sweat was beading on Aruku's forehead as he thrust the halberd at me.

"Sir Usato," he said. "The rest is up to you!"

"Got it!"

The weapon was imbued with his magical energy, and the halberd's axe blade was superheated. It was so hot it lit up the area around us. I clutched it in my hand, then looked out in the direction of the dragon.

"With this, you can finish things," said Aruku, still holding the halberd with me.

It was the last part of our plan to finish off the dragon. It was reckless, but it was a plan.

We'll tear through its scales with a fire-imbued slice of the halberd.

Now zombified, the dragon would be weaker to fire. However, given how strong it was, we needed something far hotter than an ordinary flame to get through. Aruku knew that if my punches were ineffective, slicing the dragon open was going to be a truly difficult challenge.

Aruku was the only one of us that could wield fire magic. I could heal his wounds, but I could not replenish his magical energy. The truth of the matter was he was in no shape to fight the dragon himself.

"That's why *you'll* do the fighting," he'd said when sharing his plan.

The halberd we held between us was imbued with the entirety of Aruku's magical power. He had turned the halberd's axe into a blade of pure flame. The plan now was to get close and use that axe to slice open the dragon's chest. We were betting on the combination of Aruku's fire and my brute strength. It was our only way through the dragon's scales. We didn't know for sure if it would work, but if there was a chance, then we had to take it.

"Once I let go of the weapon, the heat in the blade will start to dissipate," Aruku said. "I'm all out of magic now. If the blade returns to normal, there's nothing more I can do. So . . ."

"So we only have one chance," I said.

"Yes."

I turned my gaze once more to the dragon. I didn't know if it had noticed me yet, but at least Blurin still had it running in circles. If I wanted to cut that dragon open, I would have to hit it straight on. If I wasn't strong enough, the blade wouldn't get through. If I waited too long, the blade would lose all its heat. If I hesitated at all, our plan would be for naught.

“It’s now or never,” I said.

Failure was not an option. I gathered up my courage one last time and gripped the halberd tight in my hand.

“Here we go,” I said.

“Good luck!” said Aruku.

He released his grip on the halberd, and I took off running, heading straight for the dragon. I was focused on its chest, but I kept one eye on the light emanating from the halberd.

“Now to . . . huh?!”

Even though Blurin was still running around the dragon, the dragon suddenly turned to face me.

It saw me coming?!

In the next instant, the dragon spewed a huge amount of poisonous gas. It was hiding itself.

“No way! You’re kidding!” I exclaimed.

I stopped in my tracks and grit my teeth. I could cover myself in healing magic and work my way through it, but the problem was that I couldn’t see a thing through it. I wouldn’t know where any of the dragon’s attacks were coming from.

“Damn it! How did it know?!” I shouted.

The dragon had realized what we were up to. That was why it didn’t try to stop Aruku from imbuing the halberd with magic. That was why it kept its attention on Blurin and me. The dragon had a plan of its own. It knew that it couldn’t hit me with any ordinary, straightforward attacks, so it opted instead

for poison, knowing that would kill.

“But I have to take the chance!” I grunted.

I would only have one shot, and if I stopped now, our chances of victory dropped to zero. I was ready to take the risk to leap into the poison, but before I could I felt something clutch my back.

“Amako?!” I exclaimed.

She’d ran after me and jumped on my back. Now she had her arms wrapped around my neck. For a moment I was confused, but before I could say anything Amako spoke.

“I’ll be your eyes!” she said. “We can do this!”

I knew in an instant how serious she was.

“Alright. Hang on tight,” I said, covering us both in healing magic.

At least for a time, both of us could move and function within the dragon’s toxic gas. I took a deep breath, then dove in. The gas was so thick I could barely see my own feet, and we were right in the thick of it. But now I didn’t have to worry about how the dragon was going to attack because on my back was a girl who could see anything coming.

“Duck!” Amako shouted.

I did as she said and something huge passed over our heads.

“Jump back, then circle wide to your left!” Amako ordered.

I leaped backward and ran around in a circle, listening and obeying her every word.

“I told you,” I said to Amako. “We’re an unstoppable combo!!”

Maybe it wasn't exactly the time to be gushing, but I couldn't help it. I was impressed.

"We're going to come out of it! Dragon, dead ahead!" Amako said.

"Let's do this!" I shouted.

I gripped the halberd tight in hand and swung it behind me, ready to strike. The gas parted before us, so I picked up my pace. Moonlight shone down upon a space free of gas, revealing the dragon. Its tail swinging through the air, it aimed straight for us. For a moment I froze, but Amako's grip tightened.

"It's okay," she whispered, her voice reassuring. "*He's* here too."

"Gwaaaah!"

Blurin burst out of the gaseous cloud and charged straight into the dragon's tail, blocking it with the force of his body.

"Blurin!" I shouted.

It was just like the first time we fought together against the snake. The grizzly looked at me as it flew by, and in that moment, we shared a silent nod.

"You got it," I said.

It's not just me and Amako. Aruku's fighting with us and so are you. This is not my battle alone. I've made it this far thanks to the help of my friends! It's through our efforts combined that we'll take this monster down!

I let out a fierce battle cry as I charged onward straight for the dragon. The dragon seemed surprised that we'd made it through the gaseous cloud. In its confusion, it swiped with both arms. But it simply wasn't fast enough. I quickly got within three meters of the dragon, and with the halberd at the ready, I swung it in a huge horizontal slice from left to right.

“Take this!”

The moment the blade collided with the dragon’s scales they burned bright red.

It’s working!

I kept going, letting the momentum of the strike carry me all the way through. Then I heard the high-pitched sound of metal snapping. The halberd’s blade broke at its base and went flying into the distance. But I wasn’t looking at the blade, I was looking at the dragon’s scales. The next few seconds felt like an eternity.

No, we’ve failed.

But then sparks crackled from the dragon’s scales.

“No, that’s impossible!” growled the dragon.

A horizontal fracture was visible along the dragon’s chest. Our combined efforts had allowed us to cut the beast open.

“Yes!” I shouted.

The dragon howled in agony. The sliced area along its chest was turning to white ash. Beyond it a strange light glimmered.

“Is that . . .?!” I exclaimed.

I was looking at the dragon’s beating red heart.

Strangely, no part of the heart was connected to the dragon. And yet, somehow, it was still right there, still beating.

“That’s . . . the dragon’s heart?” I uttered.

Could you even really call it a heart? It was moving like its own living thing apart from the rest of the dragon’s body. It looked alive, unnaturally so, with no other organs surrounding it. On top of that, there was a sword running through it even though it continued to beat. It was a silver blade with a golden hilt and a black handle. Having lived most of my life in my other home of Japan I knew it to be Japanese.

“A katana?” I uttered. “How?”

Was this what kept the dragon’s heart beating? But that would mean the person who put it here . . .

At that point the dragon roared.

“Usato! What are you doing?!” cried Amako.

There wasn’t any time to think. Amako’s voice shunted me back to the present. I shoved my hand in through the open cut along the dragon’s chest and grabbed hold of the katana. I could feel immediately that it was no replica. This was the genuine article. I took a short breath, then with all the energy I had left in me I ripped the sword free. Surprisingly, it came out smoothly. The roaring dragon suddenly stopped.

“No, it can’t be,” it uttered. “I haven’t destroyed anything yet. Haven’t killed anything. Have I fallen to a hero, again?”

We watched as the dragon’s body quickly turned to ashes. It was as if the

chains binding it to this world were now free. It was dissolving the way it had always meant to.

“I have been . . . used . . .” uttered the dragon.

Those were its last words. Its body broke down and crumbled, leaving only a pile of ashes. I sat down right there where I stood, overcome with a feeling of relief.

“Is that it?” I asked, incredulous. “Did we get it?”

“You did it, Usato!” cried Amako on my back, her hands wrapped tightly around me.

I looked around. Aruku and Blurin were both okay too.

“We did it,” I muttered.

But as I looked down at the katana in my hands, it wasn’t the joy of victory that filled me. Instead, I was filled with questions about the hero who had last fought the dragon.

“What was the last hero thinking when he stabbed this into the dragon’s heart?”

The sword was about forty centimeters long. It was, technically speaking, a wakizashi. A Japanese short sword. But the details of the sword weren’t important. What bothered me was that the moment I pulled it free, the dragon turned to dust.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

In the notebook I’d read, the hero thrust the sword into the dragon’s heart to defeat it. But from what we’d seen until now, and the fact that the sword was still impaled in the dragon’s heart, the hero had done more than just “defeat”

the dragon.

“In any case, we still killed it in the end,” I muttered.

We’d had no choice, but nonetheless the truth of what had happened was undeniable. We had taken the dragon’s life. I didn’t feel good about it.

“No, you’re wrong, Usato,” said Amako.

“Huh?”

“You didn’t kill it,” she stated. “At least, I don’t feel like you did. I think it’s more accurate to say that you . . . released it.”

I chuckled.

“Thanks, Amako,” I said.

I released it.

I felt glad for Amako’s words, and I gave her a pat on the head. She looked embarrassed and turned her head away from me, but she was smiling too. A mere moment later, however, her features hardened.

“Usato,” she said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

I haven’t forgotten, don’t worry.

Defeating the dragon didn’t mean this was all over. None of this would be over until we faced the person who caused all of this chaos.

“Take me to her, Amako,” I said.

It was time to end this. The future Amako had foreseen lingered over us, growing closer with every moment. I looked up at what remained of the manor as Amako’s premonition swirled at the back of my mind. I was exhausted, but I

stood to my feet. I knew there was still one last job to do before this day was through.

Chapter 4: A Feared Future Comes to Pass!

My father told me that living humans are nothing more than food. My mother told me that the dead humans are nothing more than toys. He was a vampire, and she was a necromancer. I was their offspring. I inherited all of their strengths and none of their weaknesses. Nothing could have made my parents happier. They taught me about the world—the ways of the vampire and the necromancer, the instincts of our monster heritage, and the unshakeable, eternal hostility that existed between us and humans.

My parents were kind. My memories of our life together, just the three of us, all those centuries ago, are memories of happiness. But when humans killed my parents, those happy days came to an end.

I was ten years old. My parents had been murdered, and their energies returned to the earth. They were gone. When I look back on things, it was only natural that things ended the way they did. My parents had gone too far. They had shirked the natural order of the food chain and taken human lives for fun.

All I had left once they were gone was the books my mother left me, the village my father had ruled over, and the manor in which the three of us had lived. I was at a loss for what to do. *Revenge?* The people who killed my parents had died in their efforts, so there was nobody else to take vengeance upon. It was meaningless. For days, I could do nothing but cry.

And yet the manor was far too big for me alone, and nothing made me lonelier than sleeping in my bed, entirely alone. I was the descendant of a vampire, a creature of the night, and somehow, I had grown afraid of the dark.

But what else was there? I was lonely.

I hungered for contact, for connection. I felt starved of it.

Unable to bear my solitude, I tampered with the memories of the villagers my father had controlled. I lived among them as a young girl. The first thing that struck me during this time was just how weak they all were. The children cried at the tiniest of injuries. The adults could be left broken all too easily when attacked by monsters.

But when I was with them, my loneliness disappeared.

First, I was the youngest daughter of a village family. Then I was a young girl living on her own. Then the older sister of a girl who had lost her parents. Then an owl watching over the village. Then the daughter of another family. Then the guardian of a girl with no relatives at all. By my seventh life in the village, I was a woman who had lost her husband.

I controlled the memories of the villagers and became one of them. In that way, three hundred years passed. I mastered three sorcery hexes and read almost the entirety of my mother's book collection. But I grew bored of the small world that was the manor and the village. Although I tried to sate this by kidnapping passing travelers and listening to their tales, even that had its limits. I craved further stimulation. Everyone I met lived ordinary lives. It bored me. I wanted the sort of tales that would make my heart race.

And so, when such people came, I simply had to have them. A healer from another world, and a time-reading princess with incredibly rare powers of precognition? I would have them at any and all costs. Or so I thought.

* * *

But now I was a mess. “I’m just going to end up like my parents,” I muttered, coughing.

I was so beaten up I could barely move. All the magic in the world didn’t mean a thing when your body was practically in pieces. It took everything I had just to sit up, but even then, the only part of me I had any real control over was my right arm. The dragon was so powerful that just holding me in its grasp had broken almost every bone in my body.

How did Usato manage to keep getting up after all of those attacks?

I’d been crushed and tossed into the manor like trash, but when I thought about how much more of a beating Usato had taken, I was once again reminded that the guy was anything but an ordinary human.

“And he even defeated the damned thing . . .” I uttered.

The ominous, overbearing presence of the dragon had disappeared just moments ago. I felt some relief at the fact that it was gone. I leaned back against the fractured wall. It was weird to feel relieved at having the ace up my sleeve annihilated, but I couldn’t deny that that’s how I felt. I was the idiot who brought that thing back to life. I was the idiot who put myself here in the position I was now, all broken and beaten up.

They’re coming here, I just know it. They’re coming to slay me. To slay the “monster.”

I chuckled at myself and the state I was in. In the end, I was no different from my parents, who had used humans as their personal toys and paid the price for it. I had used both the living and the dead to capture visitors and imprison them, only to erase their memories and let them go when I grew bored. I didn’t think I’d done anything that was too worthy of revenge, but all the same, it was

along the same path that my parents had once walked themselves.

“I’m alone again, just like when it all started,” I muttered.

I wanted nothing more than to just disappear. Everything had gone to plan up until the dragon. I had just never expected the dragon to be so bloodthirsty, so cruel, and so hungry for destruction. I had severely underestimated it. I had assumed it was little more than a soulless corpse, abandoned for centuries.

It might sound like an excuse, but until then, I’d never seen or even heard of a corpse with a soul. Souls made their homes in living bodies. Souls were the life that moved them, and so bodies were their vessels. Without one, you could not have the other.

“Someone, somehow . . . they bound that dragon’s soul to this world,” I stated.

Ordinarily, such a thing was impossible, but it was the only possible answer. People *had* existed who could do such things. It was in the legend of the hero. With such incredible power, he had even sealed away the Demon Lord. If the record of the hero’s past was true, then sealing away a soul would not have been outside the realm of his abilities. But there was no way to confirm that anymore.

“Not that it makes any difference to me. Not anymore . . .” I muttered.

There was no point in thinking about someone who died hundreds of years ago. In the end, I’d been rash and thoughtless, and as a result, I’d nearly lost my village entirely. That was all that mattered.

“I’m worthless.”

As the words left my mouth, I recalled a long-forgotten memory from when I had been left here, in this manor, all on my own. I saw myself crying and afraid

of being alone, having lost the parents I relied on for everything.

What will happen to the village if the girl known as Nea vanishes completely?

The thought flitted across my mind, and all I could do was laugh at myself. It made me sad, and it hurt, but still I had to laugh.

“How stupid,” I uttered.

Nea had never even really existed in the first place. If she vanished, nothing would happen. It was just like I’d said. I was worthless. Nobody needed me. There was no point in using the village any further or raising any of its dead—not when my own demise was the only thing waiting for me on the horizon.

That was when I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. I gulped as the sound echoed, growing closer. I couldn’t run, not in the state I was in. So instead, I wiped at my eyes with my one good arm, and I closed them to await my fate.

* * *

I headed up the stairs with Usato and everyone else. Everything was shrouded in darkness as we made our way up the manor stairs. The place was broken and in a state of complete disrepair. I used my magic to see the future as I led the way. Behind me was Aruku, Usato, and Blurin.

“Are you okay, Aruku?” asked Usato.

“Well, I’m all out of magic, but otherwise moving isn’t a problem. But you’ve been fighting nonstop for a while now. Your body must be at its limit.”

“I’m, well . . . I’m fine,” Usato replied. “And I’ve still got some magic left in me yet.”

I frowned at Usato's reply. He'd fought Aruku when Aruku was under Nea's control, and then he'd had to fight the dragon right after that. The dragon also attacked with a powerful poison, which Usato had breathed in. I knew that he was even more exhausted than I could possibly imagine. He would have been physically *and* mentally spent. It was crazy that he could still move. But Usato still insisted on going to see Nea.

"Gwah," growled Blurin, worried about Usato.

"I'm fine, Blurin," Usato repeated, patting the grizzly's head. "But I have to see this thing through. I have to see the girl who started all of this."

Before we stepped foot inside the manor, Usato made sure to heal all of us. That was when I told him that Nea had tried to bargain with the dragon when it had a hold of her. Usato listened to me quietly. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. We would know once he and Nea met face to face. But it left me feeling very uncertain.

"It's just like I saw it," I said.

We were nearing the place of my premonition, the hall. The walls would be wrecked, the chandelier shattered, and the windows cracked. In among it all would be the figure draped in shadow. Usato knew who that person was now. Usato was crazy, but he wasn't stupid; he knew that we were nearing the future I'd told him about. But even knowing what was to come, he kept on going.

"Here we are," said Usato, looking out past the stairs.

I readied myself and climbed to the top of the stairs, then headed for Nea. Usato kicked the door open to the hall on the third floor.

"So you came," said Nea.

She looked hurt as she sat leaning against a wall, the hint of a smile on her

face.

“You don’t look so hot,” she said.

“Look who’s talking,” said Usato, shaking his head.

He walked on over to Nea with such abandon that I wanted to scream at him to stop, but when I saw the smile on Nea’s face, my breath caught in my throat. The dragon had left her in critical condition. Perhaps it was that she was simply a fragile monster to begin with, but it was clear that she could barely move.

“You really put us through the wringer,” said Usato, chuckling.

Usato looked beaten up. His uniform was covered in dust, and although he’d healed his injuries, his face was pale. He looked weakened.

“Funny,” Nea replied. “You don’t look all that mad.”

Usato’s chuckling came to a sudden halt.

“What?! I. Am. Furious!” he said.

I couldn’t see Usato’s expression, but Nea’s face filled with horror and terror. Tears streamed from her eyes, and even though she couldn’t move, her body trembled.

“Our mission is hugely important, and you almost sabotaged the whole thing. You took control of Aruku and forced him to do the unthinkable. But more than anything else . . .”

Usato stopped for a moment to cross his arms before he went on.

“You put countless lives in danger the moment you resurrected that dragon.”

What would have happened if Usato hadn’t been able to stop the dragon? I know that I’d been the first one to suggest we flee from it immediately, but if we’d followed through on that, a huge number of people would have been

massacred. Nea hadn't even considered that. She'd brought the dragon back without even thinking. That's what made Usato so mad.

"You didn't think that would happen, did you?" said Usato as Nea remained silent. "But don't think that means we can just overlook what you did."

Nea still didn't speak. Usato sighed.

"Amako told me what happened. Why did you try to protect the village? Aren't all those villagers just puppets for you to play with?"

"Yes. That's what they are."

"Then why didn't you use them? If you'd used the villagers' lives as your shield, catching me would have been all too easy. You heard all about me from Aruku; I know you did. So, you also know that as a member of the rescue team it's my duty to help people. I would have been completely helpless if you'd used the villagers as your hostages."

He's right.

I'd only been thinking about the dragon, but if Nea *had* used the villagers, even Usato would have had to obey her.

"I didn't need them," Nea said. "That's what I assumed. I guess I assumed wrong, didn't I?"

"Hm," remarked Usato, unconvinced.

Nea let a self-deprecating smile drift to her lips.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said. "If I'd been able to control the dragon, everything would have been fine."

"Yeah . . . no," Usato laughed. "A zombie that's nothing more than a puppet on strings? We wouldn't have lost to that. I would have knocked you out before

you could have given any proper orders.”

“You’re a real monster, you know that?” said Nea.

“Don’t change the subject. The dragon isn’t what’s important.”

“What is wrong with you?!” Nea growled, her voice rough but shaky. “What do you want me to say?!”

“You regret it, don’t you?” said Usato, his voice unwavering. “You regret that things ended up like this.”

“But I . . . !” Nea started, then paused. “Yes. But all I did was give it everything I had. I did what I had to do to get what I wanted. While I regret how it ended up, if you’re asking for an apo—”

“No,” said Usato, cutting her off. “That’s not what I’m talking about. You regret raising the dragon, that’s for sure, but not because you failed to catch me in the end.”

He glared at her, completely sure of himself.

“You regret putting all of the villagers in danger,” Usato stated.

“Why would I even care about them in the slightest?” Nea shot back.

“If they meant nothing to you, you never would have tried to talk the dragon out of attacking Ieva. I fought that thing myself. I know exactly how terrifying it was. The village *had* to be important to you for you to show that kind of courage.”

“Important? No, it’s just . . .”

Nea was shaken by Usato’s words.

“You realized it straight away,” Usato said. “You knew what the dragon would do and where it would set its sights the moment it broke free of your control.

Ieva is full of people, and the dragon would have trampled on it, flooded it with poison, massacred everyone, and left nothing standing in its wake."

Nea's eyes wavered, but Usato ignored them and went on.

"Breathe in that dragon's poison, and your body breaks down from the inside. Your throat festers, your lungs rot, and you die while struggling to take a single breath. The dragon's claws and tail were powerful enough to leave huge cracks in the ground. Any ordinary human would be crushed flat under that power."

"Stop," Nea uttered.

"But worst of all? The dragon's cunning and cruelty. All living creatures were just feed for the massacre. All it wanted was destruction, and it would have spared no one. Not the elderly, not the women, and not the children. Every—"

"I said stop it!" Nea cried.

Usato's words had taken shape in her mind. It was clear by the sorrow flooding her face.

"I'm sorry," Usato said.

He ruffled his hair. He knew it wasn't a nice thing to consider. He knew he'd gone too far. But now I knew, just as well as Usato, why Nea had tried so desperately to save the villagers from harm. But that didn't make what she put us through okay. As I watched her there, broken and scared, I suddenly thought of her as pitiful.

"You're an idiot," Usato said.

The moment he spoke the words, I knew I'd heard them before.

You're an idiot.

They were from my vision, three days ago. I looked around. Aruku was leaning

on his sword to keep standing, and the ballroom was strewn with rubble. Above us, the full moon shone through the gaping hole in the roof.

“Regret? Why didn’t you realize sooner? You already have everything you wanted, but you ignored your own wishes. You tried to let go of it all.”

Impatience itched at every part of me while Usato spoke the words from my vision. I tried to scream, to make him stop, but Usato raised a palm and stopped me in my tracks. He *knew* that he was making my vision a reality.

But why is he willingly stepping into danger?

As I struggled to work out what he was doing, Usato took another step closer to Nea.

“I’m not here to kill you,” he said.

“Huh?” Nea uttered.

Usato’s shoulders slumped at her reaction.

“What? Why is that so surprising?” he exclaimed, kneeling to look her in the eyes. “You asking us to take down the necromancer was all part of your scheme to catch us, right? So don’t do it again. Don’t kidnap any passing travelers. If you can promise me that, then you can go right back to just being a villager.”

Usato paused to chuckle.

“But I’ll be checking in from time to time to make sure, okay?” he added.

Nea went wide-eyed with surprise.

Did Usato change the future that I saw? The one where he was stabbed?

My visions left no room for change. But there were always exceptions to the rule, and I wondered if perhaps this was one of them.

“Go back to being a villager, huh?” said Nea, laughing.

Then she looked down at the floor and mumbled something to herself. For a brief instant I was relieved, but then I saw Nea’s lips curl into a smile. The moment I saw it, I cried out.

“Usato!”

I saw something sharp, like a blade in Nea’s right hand. It sped through the air. At the same time, Usato’s own right hand moved like a flash. It all happened right at the moment in which, for the briefest of moments, I felt like the future could change. But now, I felt only panic. I watched, stunned, as drops of blood fell around Usato’s feet. Aruku, Blurin, and I all rushed to see what had happened.

The sight that met our eyes was not at all what I had expected.

“What are you doing?” grunted Usato.

Nea giggled.

“What, you ask?”

Usato’s hand was clasped over Nea’s own. The blade that I saw was in fact Nea’s claws, which had sprouted to a length of twenty centimeters. They weren’t pointed at Usato at all. They were pointed at Nea’s own throat! The end of her claws had just barely pierced her skin, and blood flowed down her claws to Usato’s hand, before dripping to the floor.

“Sir Usato,” uttered Aruku. “What . . . is this?”

“She tried to stab herself in the neck,” replied Usato.

He sounded gruff and annoyed. He gestured with his eyes to Nea’s throat. She’d tried to commit suicide.

“But why?”

I couldn’t understand why she would try to throw her life away like that, but more than anything else, I was simply relieved that my premonition had never been about Usato getting stabbed.

“Just how much do you want to belittle me before you’re satisfied?” Nea asked. “I’m ready to die. I’m ready to be killed, just the way my parents were. And you’re telling me to just go back to being a villager? After the danger I put the whole village through? I can’t go back. I can never go back. Not anymore.”

Usato let out an exasperated sigh. Nea was stubborn and ignorant, and he was tired of it. Although her suicide attempt had been thwarted, Nea nonetheless grinned.

“But you know what?” she said. “Thanks to you stopping me, I’ve finally made up my mind.”

“Huh? About what?” asked Usato.

“Blood is information. It is a contract and a payment. If you hadn’t stopped me, I’d be dead. But now you have my blood on your hands, and with that, another condition has been met.”

“Huh? Wha?”

Nea’s claws receded and her hand returned to normal. She then clutched Usato’s hand tightly. I tilted my head in confusion. I didn’t have the faintest idea what she was doing.

“Monster and human, acolyte and leader,” she said. “By the proof of their own blood the ancient pact is written.”

“Whoa, hang on a sec,” said Usato. “What’s with the ominous chant?!”

A white light shone from Usato’s hand. It was a light I’d seen before. It looked like the light of a magically powered contract. My face went pale at the sight of it.

“No way!” I cried.

The contract wasn’t going to hurt Usato. At the same time, it was going to make things extremely annoying and very complicated.

“Usato!” I shouted. “Let go! Nea’s—”

I tried to run over to Usato, but all of a sudden I couldn’t move. I looked down at my feet and saw that Nea had bound me with the same hex she caught Usato in. Somehow, she’d done it through the carpet.

But when?! And why is she so insistent on this?!

I looked over at Aruku, but he was holding his head and struggling against something. His gaze was locked on Nea, her eyes alight with a dull glimmer. Usato saw that Nea was up to something again.

“You’re trying to get to Aruku again!” he shouted.

“I just want him to sit still for a minute!” she said, coughing.

Usato pulled back his free hand and clenched his fist.

“Oh? Are you sure about that?” Nea snapped. “Hit me like I am now and I’ll almost certainly die. Sic Blurin on me and it’s the same.”

“Blurin!” Usato said. “Stay back!”

Nea enjoyed the pained look on Usato’s face even as she spat blood. Between their hands, a magical seal was forming from the white light. The sight of it brought Nea to life.

“You are going to regret trying to save me!” she cried. “Now you’ll never get rid of me!”

“What?!” Usato exclaimed. “Why would you even say something like that?! Let go of me!”

“Never! Never ever!”

“Ow! Ow?! Quit digging your fingernails in!”

Nea laughed maniacally while Usato struggled to free his hand, and in the next instant, the light between their hands grew brighter still, illuminating the entire room.

Chapter 5: A New Companion! An Owl Familiar?!

The long night finally came to an end. I was so completely exhausted that I summarily collapsed and fell unconscious. When I woke up, I found myself in bed back at Tetra's house in Ieva Village.

While I'd been asleep, Nea's manor had burned to the ground, leaving only the remains of a charred, smoking frame. The books burned completely to ashes. As for the dragon, it too was nothing more now than dust on the wind.

I spent a day recovering. When my health and magic power were back to normal levels, I went with Aruku and Amako to visit the village chief.

"You didn't *all* have to come out like this to see us off," I said.

"We wouldn't dare do anything less," said the village chief. "We're nothing but grateful! The necromancer is gone, and the zombies too! We can finally live our lives in peace, and we owe it all to you!"

I looked past the chief to Aruku, who was packing all our luggage. Some villagers were passing him a big bag.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to take so much food?" I asked.

"We only wish we could give you more!" laughed the chief.

But I still felt bad about accepting so much. I tried to gently refuse the villagers who kept ambling over, arms filled with vegetables. That was when I noticed an elderly woman walking toward us with a big smile.

"Tetra!" I said.

“You’re looking well rested and fully healed,” she remarked.

“Thanks to you,” I replied.

I couldn’t help noticing the lack of a certain villager by her side. It brought a furrow to my brow, so I decided to ask Tetra about something that was on my mind.

“I hope I’m not being rude,” I said, “but do you really live in that big house all by yourself?”

It was Nea who was on my mind. Or more importantly, it was the fact that she was nowhere to be seen. Our fight was over, and I couldn’t help wondering what that meant for the village. I wondered what impact she made.

“You’re not being rude at all,” said Tetra with a chuckle. “I’ve lived there all on my own since about twenty years ago. I lost my husband and daughter to monsters. It’s just been little old me ever since.”

Just you, huh? So Tetra really has forgotten.

But I finally knew what it was that Nea said that bugged me. Maybe she called them puppets, and she said they meant nothing to her, but in truth she adored them. She was nice to them. She cared about them. But right up until the end, she just couldn’t admit it.

In any case, now that I knew what I wanted to know, I bowed politely to thank Tetra. But a hint of sorrow flashed across her face.

“But you know,” she said, “it’s the strangest thing. The house feels bigger all of a sudden. I’ve been living there by myself for years now, but yesterday it suddenly felt bigger. I guess it must be my old age.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “You’re so healthy, Tetra. I bet you’ve got a lot of life left to enjoy!”

I thought about her words for a time. Something welled in me that I didn't quite have words for. In any case, it was time to go.

"Damn it," I muttered to myself. "It's just never that easy."

People's memories didn't just vanish. I'd just seen the proof of that firsthand, in Tetra. I felt something clawing up from my chest, but I pushed it down. Amako tugged at the sleeve of my coat. She must have been listening to us talk, and perhaps she was worried. She was pretty observant like that.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm not so sentimental that I'll just burst into tears."

"I don't really care about that," replied Amako. "I was just wondering when we're going to leave."

"Can't you give me a little emotion here, Amako? Please."

Can't you be a little more considerate?

The warmth I felt creeping up from my heart cooled.

"She made her choice," said Amako, "so I've got nothing more to say. She brought all of this on herself in the end."

"Yikes, that's harsh. True, but harsh."

"That, and . . ." said Amako, shooting me a stern, reproachful stare.

But there's no reason for her to look at me like that . . . I think.

"You're *you*, Usato. You're too generous to your enemies, don't you think?"

"I don't know if I'd say that. It's my job to help people. You can't expect me to be completely heartless."

"Yeah, but that doesn't explain how things ended up."

I agreed with Amako, but that didn't make her any happier about it. But I

could deal with that later; I had to make sure we were packed and ready to go. I did a last check on everything I was carrying. I put the food we'd received on Blurin's back. We had more than enough to make it to Samariarl.

"We're all good over here, Aruku," I said.

"I'm all done too!" he replied.

He'd secured everything to our horse, so I turned back to the villagers.

"I know it was a short stay, but thanks for everything," I said. "Stay well, everyone."

"Do come back again, okay?" said the village chief. "We'll be able to treat you even better—I'm sure of it! In the meantime, we'll be praying for your safe travels."

Again, huh? Yeah, you know what? I think I might come back some day.

We waved goodbye to the villagers. Nea was nowhere among them, even as they faded farther and farther into the distance. Nobody thought it strange she was gone. In fact, they acted like she had never even existed in the first place.

The residents of Ieva had no idea what had happened. They didn't know they'd been controlled. They didn't know who the necromancer really was. They didn't know why the zombies had been roaming the lands around their village. And they didn't know that a young girl, a fellow villager, had suddenly disappeared from their midst.

* * *

When the village was out of sight, a black owl landed on my shoulder with a

hoot. It folded its huge wings and hooted again. The idea of an owl flying through the skies during the day was weird and unusual, but I went right on walking.

“Is this what you wanted? Really?” I asked in a whisper.

“Hoot.”

“Are you sure? None of them remember anything because of you.”

“Hoot.”

“Hey!” I said sharply, grabbing the owl and turning it upside down.

“Hoogwah!”

I stared at the panicking owl. The bird deliberately avoided my gaze.

This girl . . .

I shook it up and down until its eyes were spinning.

“St-stop that!” cried the owl, suddenly sounding like a young girl. “Stop shaking me!”

“Quit the hooting act! You can talk,” I said. “Don’t make me look like some weirdo talking to the birds.”

“But I’m an owl right now! Owls don’t talk! They hoot! Hoot!”

“Knock it off already! You don’t even sound like an owl!”

The owl struggling in my grasp had once been a villager, who in fact was a necromancer-vampire hybrid by the name of Nea. She flapped her wings wildly, so I tossed her over my shoulder. She then flew to Blurin and landed on his back. With a pop and a flash of light, she transformed into a girl with black hair and red eyes.

Nea no longer wore the dress she'd worn when we encountered her at the manor. Instead, she wore more modern traveler's garb. It was clear she was prepared for a journey, and I couldn't help but sigh at the sight of it.

"You're serious about coming with us?" I asked.

"Of course. It's a binding contract! Right?"

At the last word, she tilted her head, and with a cute, flashy gesture, she showed me her right palm. On it was a magical seal, like a tattoo made of light. I had the same seal on my own hand, and while it wasn't visible now, it revealed itself whenever I poured a little magic into it.

"How did this happen?" I mumbled.

"I told you that you'd never get rid of me," said Nea.

"But was it really necessary to burn the manor down?" I asked.

The contract between Nea and me wasn't a curse and it wasn't a hex. It was a familiar contract. However, the contract Nea used was an ancient one used centuries ago before more modern revisions were made. It was evil, essentially, and could be forced on someone or something at the cost of a blood exchange.

What made Nea's contract especially troublesome was that it was stronger than the modern version. It could not be easily undone. It shouldn't have been surprising that she'd know a spell like this. After all, she was intelligent. She'd already mastered a number of hexes.

However, I'd never imagined that she would cast a spell to make *herself* a familiar. On top of that, once I'd fallen unconscious, she'd wiped the memories of everyone at Ieva Village and burned down the manor she once called home. In other words, she'd made all the necessary preparations to leave and join me on my journey.

“Heh, what point is there to leaving a manor I no longer need?” Nea asked. “I took everything of importance anyway.”

She took a bag from Blurin’s back and opened it to show me. Inside it were several books with black covers.

“I *knew* I hadn’t seen that bag before,” I said. “So that’s yours, huh?”

“These aren’t like the other books. I couldn’t let them just burn.”

They looked to me like sorcery books. They had to be quite valuable, which I guessed was why Nea wanted to protect them.

“Well, whatever,” I said. “By the way, why an owl?”

“Because I’m a familiar,” Nea replied. “And more importantly, they’re adorable.”

“But aren’t vampires supposed to turn into bats?”

“Ew. No. I don’t want to drink blood as an animal too. If I’m going to transform, I want to transform into something cute.”

I guess she doesn’t think much of bats, then. Owls are cute; that’s for sure. But given that you’re the person inside of it, it’s so much less adorable.

Then again, the situation reminded me a little of Rose and Kukuru. I glanced at Nea, who was humming a tune while she patted Blurin. Perhaps because they were both monsters and perhaps because Blurin recognized that Nea didn’t mean any harm, the grizzly simply pouted and let her do as she pleased.

“Let’s make the future a bright one, Master!” Nea sang.

At this point, Amako, who had been walking along in a stony silence, kicked the smiling Nea in the shin. Nea yelped and promptly fell from Blurin’s back.

“What was that for?!” she cried.

“Don’t get a big head, Batty,” said Amako.

“B-B-Batty?! You rabid beastkin! Let’s get this hierarchy sorted right now!”

Nea pounced on Amako, but Amako saw it coming. She dodged Nea’s leap and, on top of that, tripped her over. Nea went sliding right along the ground on her head. This was followed by a few seconds of silence, after which Nea sat up, rubbed her eyes, let out a moan, then made another attempt to attack Amako.

It was like watching two cats fight. But I figured it was fine for them to sort it out themselves. I’d heard something somewhere about people being so close they fought like siblings, and this seemed like a sterling example.

“We’ve got a real weirdo tagging along now,” I muttered.

Aruku laughed.

“It’s certainly gotten livelier, hasn’t it?”

“But aren’t you against this, Aruku? I mean, Nea took complete control of you.”

“Well, love it or hate it, she’s coming with us. She’s a member of our party now. I’m not going to let my feelings ruin the harmony of the group. I think it’s fair to say that she paid the price for what she did.”

“Paid the price, huh?”

The dragon had put Nea through a world of pain, and now the villagers in Ieva had completely forgotten she existed. Nea had erased their memories herself. In that sense, she really had undergone a unique kind of punishment of sorts.

“I also think that her powers will come in handy,” said Aruku. “Call it a hunch.”

I nodded. The guy had a point. She had a binding hex and a resistance hex, and while these weren't attack-based, they were still helpful. The binding hex rendered an opponent unable to move, and the resistance hex was a strong protection from attacks.

"Oh, hang on a second," I said, thinking. "If I have Nea put me in her binding hex, maybe I can get a workout from just moving around normally."

"I never would have thought of something like that," remarked Aruku. "Using a binding hex as a workout? No ordinary person would even imagine doing something like that, but it's very you, Usato."

Is that . . . a compliment? It must be. It has to be.

I grinned at Aruku. Then Nea leaped away from her battle with Amako, and jumped onto my shoulder, back in her owl form. Given that she was covered in dust, I had a pretty good idea of who had won their little scrap.

"Oh, right," I said.

I reached into my coat and grabbed something that I'd just remembered. Amako peered at it from my side and let out a gasp.

"That's what you found inside of the dragon," she said.

"Yep. In my world this type of sword is called a katana," I said.

It sat inside a leather scabbard the villagers had made for me. I could feel a strange power in it even from just holding it in my hand. Nea looked at it with a wide-eyed curiosity.

"That was written about in the old record," she said. "You should take very good care of it, Usato."

“Hm? Why?”

“That weapon was wielded by the hero. It might come in handy later on your journey.”

I didn’t use swords, so I didn’t think there would be that many opportunities for me to use it. But if I gave it to Amako, it would only be extra weight for her to carry, and Aruku already had a sword of his own. For those reasons, I decided to wear the sword on my own belt. I thought it would come in handy for cutting fruits and vegetables. I put the sword back in its scabbard with a sigh, then glanced at Nea.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing,” I replied.

She’d controlled both the living and the dead to assuage her own loneliness, but now Nea had decided on a different path. She had thrown away all she once knew and embarked on a journey to the outside world. Whatever reasons she had for doing that, it wasn’t important now.

I thought about when I’d talked to Nea early in that one morning when I’d been working out. She’d hungered for knowledge then, but the truth of the matter was that she’d hungered for much more than that, too. Now she was finally taking the first steps to get there. The girl who had once toyed with the living and the dead was gone. So too was the girl who protected Ieva Village. All that was left now was, well . . .

“Just a quirky little familiar, I guess,” I said.

Nea was a little loud, and a little annoying too, but the rest of her wasn’t so bad.

Aside: Welcie's Report

I watched Kazuki-sama, Suzune-sama, and Usato-sama embark on their journeys, and then I returned to Llinger Kingdom. As a mage serving the Llinger Kingdom, I did not leave the country often. So while Usato-sama's journey was anything but calm, it was nonetheless very fun, too. Heading home was so quiet that I couldn't help but feel a bit lonely. It was just me, the gentle rocking of the carriage, and the knights guarding it.

Upon my return, I reported to King Lloyd that Luqvist had recognized our letter and agreed to support us. The king and his attendant Sergio were both relieved to hear the news.

"So, Gladys agreed, did she?" said the king. "I am glad for it; fighting off the Demon Lord's army will require teamwork with our neighbors. Their territory will also secure us a supply route."

Luqvist was home to a wizardry school. A huge number of its population were children, and nobody intended to send those children into battle. So, because Luqvist had so many people too young to fight, the youths would work to support communications and supplies between nations. If they showed themselves capable of rear support, it would give us an advantage in case the war with the Demon Lord's army dragged on longer than expected.

"Well done, Welcie," said King Lloyd. "I'm grateful to you and our three heroes for their work."

"I merely supported their efforts, Your Majesty," I replied. "It was their efforts, after all, that earned us Luqvist's support."

"Is that so?" said the king, nodding thoughtfully.

The man was overjoyed to hear that they were growing and maturing while they traveled.

“However, their real journey begins now,” I said. “They have since split up to visit their assigned nations.”

“That they have. Even now they are working hard for our home. So it is up to us to respond in kind and make sure that we are well prepared for the next battle.”

Another battle with the Demon Lord’s army . . . The last time we had gone to war, Kazuki-sama and Suzune-sama were badly injured. Usato-sama had saved them from death, but it was no exaggeration to say that their actions swayed the very tide of the war. The survival of our nation, then, rested in the hands of children we had summoned from another world.

King Lloyd naturally felt a sense of responsibility for them. But it wasn’t just him. Those who had seen the two heroes fight, and those whom Usato-sama had saved, were training to support their heroes when war once again reared its head.

“I apologize,” said the king. “I’ve gone and spoiled the mood, haven’t I? Welcie, do you have anything else to report? If Kazuki and the others got up to anything in Luqvist worthy of note, now is the time to bring it up.”

“Worthy of note, you say . . .” I uttered, my voice trailing off.

“What is it?”

In the back of my mind, I pictured the Luqvist healer, Nack, being pushed to his limits by Usato-sama, and I felt suddenly thrown into confusion.

Should I bring it up?

I knew that King Lloyd cared for Usato-sama, so I wanted to let him know

about it, but . . .

“Er, well, now that you mention it,” I said, “Blurin sent Suzune-sama flying in the midst of our travels!”

“I am well aware that you are trying to change the subject, Welcie,” replied the king. “And while I *am* curious about Suzune’s incident, I’m more concerned by what you’re hiding.”

“Oh? But I’m not hiding anything!”

“It’s written all over your face. It always is when you’re stressed.”

I gasped and tried to hide behind my hands. I couldn’t hide anything from the king!

“While we were waiting for Gladys’s reply, there was a . . . disturbance, of sorts.”

“A disturbance?”

I explained to King Lloyd and Sergio what had happened in Luqvist. Naturally, I started with the plan that Gladys and I came up with: to show the students the heroes’ powers in order to change their mistaken beliefs. Many of the children were convinced that magical potential trumped hard work. I told the king about Usato and Halpha’s sparring match—how in some sense this had been a success. But then, of course, there was the punishment and suffering that Nack went through and how Usato had saved him from the brink of death and made the decision to train the young healer.

“Hm, so Usato helped the young man to grow stronger,” mused the king. “And exactly how did he do this? I’m going to assume that he didn’t train young Nack the way Rose trained him, yes?”

Sergio laughed at the king’s words.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “If you were to train an ordinary young boy with Rose’s methods, it would be a disaster, surely.”

“Yes, you raise an excellent point.”

The king laughed, and the two men shared a smile. With such a calm air filling the room, it was all I could do just to keep my face from twitching.

What do I do? What do I do?!

There was just no way you could call Usato’s training ordinary or straightforward, not even if you wanted to paint it in a positive light! I had truly believed that Usato would just run Nack through the basics and not have him do anything ridiculous, but I should have known better. I should have known back when I saw flashes of Rose in his own features while we were traveling to Luqvist.

“That . . . disaster you speak of . . . it came to pass,” I finally uttered.

King Lloyd and Sergio froze in place. The king’s face was suddenly grave. He put his fingers to his eyelids.

“Let me rephrase my question,” said the king, his voice wavering slightly. “Did Usato train the boy Nack like Rose trains?”

“Though it is perhaps unbelievable, yes.”

“But we know that Usato is a gentle, kind young man! Surely his face did not show the sheer rage we have seen upon Rose’s?”

Unfortunately, Usato had shown more than just Rose’s rage; he had also shown her wicked grin too. King Lloyd must have noticed me look away, and more importantly, he knew why. His face immediately went pale. This was not at all surprising; it was the look of someone who now understood that the kind young man known as Usato had transformed into a beast not at all unlike Rose

herself. I had seen it myself firsthand, and it had left me frozen in astonishment.

“Usato-sama . . . grinned the way Rose does when she is putting her rescue team through their harshest training,” I said. “Perhaps it was intentional, but his actions were almost identical to hers, and to put it lightly . . . it was utterly terrifying.”

“Usato was . . . grinning maniacally?” King Lloyd asked.

“I can scarcely imagine it,” Sergio stated.

I knew how the two men felt. Usato-sama had chased Nack around town with Blurin on his shoulders. He’d skipped basic magic training and thrown Nack right into the deep end, forcing the boy to run while he circulated healing magic through his body. On top of that, he’d thrown balls of healing magic right at his student, and basically gone completely off the rails to make Nack stronger.

What I knew now was that Usato’s magic was anything but ordinary.

“Though I must add that his likeness to Rose wasn’t *all* bad,” I said. “Usato-sama has also inherited her will and determination.”

He held fast to the ideals of the rescue team. He now shared Rose’s iron will. That he was a spitting image of Rose was, in fact, a sign of his growth.

“I see,” said King Lloyd, nodding with some relief. “Which is to say that he has grown stronger himself, mentally and spiritually.”

“Yes.”

“That is good news indeed. Rose is wild both in terms of action and speech, but there is a deep kindness and generosity in her heart.”

The king let himself relax into his throne.

“Rose’s ability to continue forward so steadfastly is due to the fact that she

knows how precious life is and how sad it is to lose it. This led her to founding the rescue team and saving countless lives when we first went to war with the Demon Lord's army," he said. "I can barely even stand when I think of what might have happened had she not been there."

The truth of the matter was that we most certainly would have lost the war if not for her. We would have been overwhelmed by the sheer number of casualties.

"I admit that when I first heard of the rescue team, I doubted that such an organization was even necessary," I said. "Now, however, I realize that Rose was prescient when she put her group together."

The rescue team had been assembled before the war began. The team's entire goal was to heal the injured on the battlefield and save as many lives as possible. But in the beginning, many doubted the point of even having the rescue team. Rose had once been a Lieutenant Colonel, and so most people believed she was better suited to battle. Wasn't it enough that we had healers? Did we need more? Did we need to build a team around them? Many were skeptical, me included.

But the work of the rescue team was more important than any of us could have imagined at the time. Rose helped people as she sped across the battlefield. Her non-healer team members carried the wounded to waiting healers. It was crazy, but Rose more than proved the worth of her team in that first war with the Demon Lord's army.

"Perhaps she saw it coming," muttered the king. "Though I think there was a much simpler reason motivating her desire to assemble such a team."

"What might that be?" I asked.

I noticed a wave of sorrow flash across the king's face. I felt suddenly worried, but in an instant the king was once again smiling.

"It is nothing. Little more than a guess, really. If you want to know the truth, you'd best ask Rose yourself."

"Well, um, perhaps if the opportunity presents itself."

There was no way I was going to ask Rose directly. I felt myself withering away just thinking about it. There was no way I could muster up that kind of courage. That was when King Lloyd seemed to remember something.

"In any case, what ended up happening with the boy Usato trained?"

"Oh, right. Well . . ."

After his training with Usato, Nack went head-to-head with his tormentor Mina in a sparring match and emerged victorious. I didn't know anything about the past that the two students shared, but it was clear that Usato and Nack's training had been especially meaningful. The rescue team was, at its heart, all about treasuring precious life. Rose had passed that to Usato, and Usato, in turn, had passed that to Nack.

"Young Nack will be coming here soon. He wants to be a member of the rescue team."'

"Oh. Hm. Is that good news?" asked the king. "Will he be alright?"

I paused for a moment.

"I'm certain he'll be fine," I replied.

"Why the ominous pause?!"

Suzune-sama and Kazuki-sama had told me that Usato-sama's training was nothing compared to Rose's training. The most frightening thing was that

Usato-sama said the same thing. He'd experienced the training firsthand, so there was no doubting him. I was more than a little worried about Nack.

"Well, I daresay that Rose wouldn't put a young boy through the same training she put Usato through," mused the king.

"Yes, you're right," I said. "Rose herself was once a child, after all."

And yet, I couldn't help but doubt my own words. A long silence fell between the three of us. We all knew that under ordinary circumstances, Nack would never be put through a merciless training regime. But the rescue team was anything *but* ordinary. It was a place where anything could happen. A case in point was Usato's transformation, which I'd now witnessed firsthand.

"I can't help it! I *am* worried!" exclaimed King Lloyd. "When Nack does come to the kingdom, we must make sure to visit him to see how he's doing!"

Sergio and I nodded vigorously.

"I agree that is the best course of action!" I added.

The rescue team, known for the countless lives it saved, was getting a new member. And while we were happy for the fact—as it was thanks to the team we all had the lives we now lived—we couldn't help but feel a little scared when we thought of the life that soon awaited young Nack.

Side Story: Of Endings and Beginnings

Part 1: Nack, to the Rescue Team!

The Llinger Kingdom. It was a lively nation where trade thrived, but the threat of the Demon Lord's army loomed ever present. It was also home of the rescue team of which my teacher Usato was a member. I had come here by way of a merchant carriage, and while I was flustered by the sheer sight of the kingdom, I stood tall and strode boldly forward through its gates.

"Thank you so much for bringing me all this way," I said to the merchant who'd brought me here.

"My pleasure. It was fun to have some company for a change!"

I walked on to the kingdom's main town.

"Well, I'm finally here," I muttered to myself.

Getting to Llinger hadn't taken as long as I'd expected. I'd written a letter to my family thanking them for raising me and saying my goodbyes, then I'd informed the headmistress of my intention to leave the academy, and finally I'd received a letter from my sister, courtesy of Mina. All of it had happened in the blink of an eye, but the time had been precious to me all the same.

The town was bustling and lively, and I couldn't help but just stand there, gaping in awe. Unlike Luqvist, there were far more adults here than there were children. And unlike my home, people weren't bound by divisions of nobility and peasants. I could feel the aura of the kingdom as if it were touching me. I had to take a deep breath to calm my growing excitement.

"Wow, I'm nervous," I said.

I reached into my bag and took out a letter. I'd made sure to take good care of it, as it was *the* very reason I was here. It was the letter of introduction that Usato had written for me. Now that I was here in Llinger, my priority was to pass that letter to Rose, the captain of the rescue team. That meant I had to find out where the rescue team was stationed. I stopped by a fruit stall to ask for directions.

"Excuse me," I said to the young man at the stall.

"Hm? What's up, little man? You don't look like you're from around here. What can I do for you?"

"I came from Luqvist. I was wondering if you might be so kind as to give me some directions."

The young man laughed at the nervous quaver in my voice.

"Come on now, no need to be so formal around here. Where are you headed?"

I felt a little embarrassed, but I went on.

"Where is the rescue team?" I asked.

"The rescue team? Are you injured or something?"

"No, I'm fine, it's just—"

"Oh, so you're going on behalf of someone else, huh? But hey, the infirmary is much closer than the rescue team."

The young man seemed convinced I was here for healing.

I guess I should be a little clearer about my motives. Being so straightforward has never been my style, but it's time to pluck up my courage and make things happen.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, then looked the young man in the eyes.

“Um, I’m actually looking for the rescue team because I want to join them. So I don’t need to know where the infirmary is located. Could you please point me in the . . . huh? What’s wrong?”

I realized then that in my attempt to be more straightforward, I’d spoken rather loudly, and it had resulted in the smiling young man freezing in place. Not just him, but the people in the immediate vicinity too.

“Um, what is it?” I asked.

The sudden change in mood was awfully confusing. The young man suddenly gripped me by the shoulders. Everyone within earshot gathered around.

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” said the young man.

“You’re still so young,” added an old man sitting nearby. “There’s no reason for you to be so reckless.”

“If you’re looking for a place to work, I’ll happily hire you,” added a woman at a nearby stall. “So let’s not be rash, okay?”

“You are nothing if not courageous, my friend,” said a passing knight. “But that doesn’t mean you have to walk a road straight into the depths of hell.”

Everyone was trying to stop me from going to the rescue team. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. But at the same time, I could tell that they were all saying what they said out of kindness.

“Um, well, uh . . .” I stammered.

Usato?! Just what the heck do people here think of the rescue team?! They’re all acting like I’m about to leave on some kind of suicide mission!

“Look, I know you probably look up to the rescue team, and all of us here

think of them as true heroes. But they live in a different world than we do. They run the streets with monsters on their shoulders. They sprint around shouting battle cries. And to top it off, kids have seen them flying all over the place when Rose smacks Usa . . . I mean, their members around."

You were just about to say Usato, weren't you? So he runs around here with Blurin on his shoulders too, then.

"You're talking about Usato, aren't you?" I said.

"Oh, you know about him," said the young man. "He's out of this world. Literally, when you think about it. But how do you even describe the guy? If you had to, you'd probably use the word 'crazy', right?"

The young man gazed off into the distance, eyes glazed as he looked back on the past.

Just what did you do, Usato?!

I was curious, but I also felt that it might destroy my fragile sense of normality, so I opted not to ask.

"Anyway, who even gave you this idea of joining the rescue team in the first place? They must have been a bully to send a kid like you there, playing with your courageous spirit like that. I won't stand for it."

The young man looked angered. The crowd around him looked the same. It told me that the rescue team really was a crazy place. But the people of Llinger really respected and trusted the team, crazy or not, and that was why I knew I had to clear the air.

"Actually, it was Usato himself who told me about the rescue team," I said. "I'm a healer too, so . . ."

I paused in midsentence. I'd just admitted, out loud and to strangers no less,

that I was a healer. Back home and in Luqvist, admitting such a thing only ever resulted in cold gazes filled with contempt and disappointment.

What if it's exactly the same here?

Fear ran through me as I timidly waited for everyone's reactions.

"Usato himself?! Well then, that changes things!" said the young man with a smile. "Sorry, little man. I had the wrong idea completely!"

"Oh, uh, okay," I uttered.

I couldn't believe it. The reactions were completely different to what I got in Luqvist. Nobody looked down on me at all. Everyone responded with smiles. It took me completely by surprise. As soon as everyone knew that I was here on Usato's recommendation, their expressions relaxed. Usato had told me about the people of Llinger and how accepting they were. It wasn't that I didn't believe him, it was just that I couldn't help feeling hesitant and nervous all the same. I didn't really know what Llinger's people thought about their team of healers, or how that team was treated. But now that I was seeing it for myself, I knew that Llinger was a place that would accept someone like me.

"I've met Usato, so I should have known better than to judge a book by its cover," said the young man. "I guess I'm still just too tied down by living a normal life."

"No," I said. "I should have been clearer from the start."

That, and I think it's best for you to just live that normal life of yours.

Even though I'd only just arrived, I was well aware that the rescue team and Usato lived anything but normal lives.

Various people started making comments.

“If Usato gave his stamp of approval, then there’s no need to worry.”

“He’ll be fine if Usato gave him the okay.”

“But he looks like such an ordinary kid. Then again, with time he’ll end up just like the others, I suppose . . .”

It seemed there was no misunderstanding anymore. I couldn’t help but wonder just what Usato had done for the kingdom. I felt like he’d somehow won their trust, perhaps through extraordinary means.

“Hey, are you headed to the rescue team?” came a voice.

“Oh, yes,” I said.

The voice belonged to a girl about the same age as Usato. Suddenly, she was right there standing by my side, looking at me with wide-eyed curiosity. She nodded at my reply, then turned to the young man at the fruit stall.

“Don’t mind me,” she said, “I’m just going to take this one to the rescue team.”

“Hm? Oh! You’re Orga’s little sister! We can all rest easy now,” said the young man, who turned to me and added: “Good luck out there, little man!”

I could only assume by his reaction that the girl had some connection to the rescue team.

“Well, let’s go!” said the girl.

“O-okay,” I stammered.

Now I had a way to the rescue team. I waved goodbye to the townsfolk I’d been talking to and headed off with the girl.

“Hi! I’m Ururu!” said the girl. “I’m eighteen! What’s your name?”

Her voice was bright and cheerful, full of life.

“Oh, I’m N-Nack. I’m twelve!” I replied, a little more loudly than I’d planned.

Ururu smiled and gave me a light pat on the head. The gesture was so natural that I didn’t even react to it at first.

“Hm, Nack, huh? And only twelve years old? You sure are brave!”

“Oh, um, no need to pat me, uh . . .” I stammered.

I politely removed Ururu’s hand from my head. I was a bit embarrassed by the way she was treating me like a child.

“Oh, sorry. Recently, Kukuru’s been denying me pats, so I wasn’t even thinking.”

“Kukuru?”

“It’s nothing,” replied Ururu, waving me off. “Just thinking out loud. So you came here because Usato told you about the rescue team, huh?”

“You heard my conversation earlier?”

“I did. It’s not every day you hear someone shout ‘I want to join the rescue team!’ when you’re walking the streets. I was curious.”

Was I really that loud?

My face flushed red. Ururu giggled and then went on.

“Usato sure is an interesting one, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He’s amazing. And he saved my life.”

“Oh? What did he do?”

“He trained me. He chased me around, kicked me all over the place, and berated me too. But when I look back on the time, I’m incredibly grateful.”

“I have to admit, I’m not exactly sure how that experience led you to feelings of gratitude,” remarked Ururu.

Whoops.

That was how the training went, but the way I said it made Usato sound nasty.

“And you know what?” said Ururu. “Usato’s training sure does remind me of someone.”

Uh oh! Have to change the topic, asap!

“H-how do you know Usato?” I asked.

I could hear that from the way she spoke his name that he was someone close to her.

“How? Well, I guess I’m like a big sister? Maybe that’s going too far. I guess

we're friends?"

"I see."

"We've only known each other for about six months. But boy did he grow in that time. Practically a completely different person now. I think it was because when the Demon Lord's army was preparing to attack, he felt like he had to get stronger, and he had to do it *fast*."

The Demon Lord's army.

The military force from the nation of demons looking to invade Llinger. In a war that was fought not long ago, Usato and the rescue team captain had run through the battlefield, healing countless people. I could scarcely imagine it, having only trained for five days. They had fought to save people in battle, and now I was hoping to join their ranks.

"Miss Ururu, looking at things objectively, do you think I'm a suitable recruit for the rescue team?"

I suddenly felt so overcome with uncertainty that I couldn't help but ask. Ururu crossed her arms and dropped into thought, then smiled somewhat awkwardly.

"I don't know," she replied.

"Oh, I . . . see."

Then again, I guess I should be happy that she didn't just outright shut me down from the get-go, right?

"But if Usato recommended the team, then I'd say he did that because he saw something in you," Ururu said.

"Like what?"

“Usato knows how tough Rose’s training is. He knows better than anyone. He’s a healer, just like her, and he was strong enough to overcome everything she threw at him. So if he sent you here, then it means he thinks you’ve got the heart to endure her training.”

The heart to endure.

“I still don’t know anything about you, Nack,” admitted Ururu. “But if Usato himself gave you the okay, then I think you’ll be fine. In the end, it’s not me who will decide whether or not you’re suitable, it’s you.”

She’s right. Usato believes in me. He even wrote me a letter of introduction. I can’t just sit around worrying about things all day. I’m here now. There’s no turning back.

“If you want to worry about your choice, now’s the time,” Ururu said in a soft voice. “Once things get rolling, you won’t have the time or the mental capacity for anything but survival.”

“Huh?”

How could you go and say something so terrifying so casually? You mean I have to start mentally preparing myself already?!

But Ururu didn’t notice my concern, and simply started humming a tune as she walked. Eventually, the buildings that filled the town were behind us. We found ourselves surrounded by green grass and natural scenery.

“We’re almost there, Nack!”

We walked a path through the forest. A wooden gate came into view. It had small letters carved into it, which read . . .

“The rescue team,” I whispered.

Ururu smiled and nodded, then walked through the gates and spread her arms wide in a welcoming gesture.

“Welcome to the rescue team!” she said. “I’d love to show you around, but this is as far as I go! I look forward to seeing you again as a fellow rescue team member!”

“A fellow member? Wait, what?!”

“I’ll leave the rest to you guys! Bye bye!”

Before I could speak another word, Ururu was already on the path back to town. She was gone in moments, and I could only stare into the distance where she’d vanished. I thought back to my conversation with the young man at the fruit stall and laughed.

“The rescue team really is filled with unique personalities, huh?”

Usato himself looked like an ordinary teenager at a glance, but when training started, he turned into a completely different person.

“Wait a second,” I muttered.

I’ll leave the rest to you guys?

Ururu didn’t say that to *me*. She said it to someone *behind* me.

“Hey,” came a deep voice.

Suddenly I was lifted off the ground by my collar, just like a kitten by its mother. I turned timidly in the direction of the voice and saw two chiseled faces looking right back at me.

“You lost, kid?” asked one.

“That ain’t good,” said the other. “What’s a kid like you doin’ here then, eh?”

Both men were in ridiculously good shape, and were terrifying, both in terms of their presence and their expressions. The one holding my collar tried to smile as he spoke, his lips curling and twisting unnaturally. I was so overwhelmed I could do little more than squeal.

These guys don't just have unique personalities, their faces are otherworldly too! They're terrifying! It's just like when Usato was mad at me!

"Mill, it's your face. It's scaring the kid."

"My face?! But you don't look any different!"

"Yeah, but at least I'm aware of it, y'idiot."

He knows he's terrifying?!

With my shoulders trembling, I remembered the letter I was clutching in my hands. However scary these guys were, I had to show it to them. If I really had made it to the rescue team, then these guys were its members. There was something about them that reminded me of Usato, too.

"Uh, uh, here," I stammered. "H-h-h-here."

"Hm? A letter? You brought us a letter?"

One of the men took it, his voice and gestures far kinder than his expression. At first, he looked puzzled, but then his eyes grew wide with surprise when he saw the name on it.

"What's up, Alec?" asked the other man.

"It's from Usato. It's for the captain."

"For real? How's he doing? Well, I guess if he sent a letter he's doing alright, yeah?"

The grip on my collar suddenly relaxed. I was dropped back on the ground.

The guy named Alec kneeled to look me in the eyes.

“I saw that Ururu brought you here. You wanna join the rescue team?”

“Yes!”

“Alrighty. Then you’d best pass this letter to the captain yourself.”

Alec gave me back my letter and told me to follow him. He walked off before I even had a chance to reply. Mill then gave me a gentle shove to get me walking.

“So you wanna join the rescue team, huh?”

“Y-yes sir.”

“You’re small, but if you came here all on your own, then that shows you’ve got guts. The captain will decide if you’re ready, but I’m happy to welcome you.”

“Oh, uh, thank you.”

I know it was rude, but I couldn’t help being surprised at how much the guy’s personality differed from his appearance. I felt a little relieved as I stared farther into the forest where the rescue team accommodations were. As we continued down the path, I knew that we would meet the captain. I swallowed back my nervousness and I walked on.

“So that’s the rescue team dormitory,” I uttered.

Alec and Mill walked me to the front of the building, then told me to wait while they brought the captain over. But instead of going inside, they headed off down a different path, leaving me on my own.

“Reminds me a bit of Kiriha and Kyo’s house,” I remarked.

It looked like an old building. I thought back to the times I'd visited Kiriha and Kyo. I was standing there reminiscing when I noticed someone walking toward me from the path that Alec and Mill had gone down. At first, I thought they were coming back, but then I realized it was a woman with long hair, dragging something behind her.

The sight of the woman sent a strange shiver through my body. It was just like the feeling I got when Usato had decided to take my training seriously. I watched the woman closely, and when the light through the trees illuminated her figure, I couldn't help but shriek in surprise.

The woman had long green hair. She wore a white coat just like Usato's. She was casually dragging a girl across the ground. The girl had silver hair and tanned skin. She looked like a demon. I'd heard about them from Usato, but this was my first time seeing them.

"But that's not the scary part . . ." I uttered.

The woman with the green hair was far more concerning than the demon. Her hair covered her right eye, but her left impaled me with its sharp gaze. Most shocking of all, however, was her aura. Just like Usato had said, she oozed with the presence of an apex predator. I knew exactly who she was. The way she held herself was exactly like Usato.

"So, you must be the kid who wants to join," she said.

It was the captain of the rescue team, Rose. Usato's teacher and superior officer. The woman in charge of overseeing the running of the rescue team. She tossed the demon casually onto the grass by her side. The demon clutched her head and came back to consciousness the very instant she hit the grass.

"Huh?!" she shouted, startled. "Where am I? I don't remember a thing."

She looked awfully confused, but Rose didn't pay her any mind.

"Take a short break," she said, glancing at the demon.

"Huh?! Uh, okay! I will rest with everything I have!"

Rose's order left the demon girl looking very surprised, but she immediately and happily slumped onto her butt and sat on the grass.

What does it even mean to rest with everything you have? Nack, get it together! You have more important things to be doing!

For starters, that meant passing over my letter of introduction.

"M-my name is Nack!" I said, thrusting the letter out in front of me. "I'm a healer, and I'm here by recommendation of Usato!"

Rose did not make any move to take the letter. For a moment, I wondered if I'd done something rude without realizing it. I timidly raised my head, and right at that instant a shock ran through my forehead, and I was sent flying backward.

"Huh?! Whoa!" I shouted.

I landed on my feet, clutching my forehead. I looked up and saw Rose with her palm facing me, fingers open, a pleased look on her face.

Did she just . . . flick me in the head?

Are you kidding?! I felt like my head was going to fly off my shoulders!

"Hmph. Interesting," Rose said. "Looks like you've had the basics beat into you. I'm guessing Usato did that, yeah? Which means *he* wrote you this letter of introduction."

Rose smiled as she watched me, waving the letter in her hand.

When did she take it from me? I didn't even notice!

I stood there in a stunned silence, while the demon girl dashed over toward Rose.

"U-Usato?!" she cried. "What is it?! Is he coming back?!"

"Shut up. Bug me later," Rose said, flicking the girl straight in the forehead.

I could tell straight away that it was way more powerful than what she'd used on me. The demon girl flew through the air and slid to halt right back where she'd been resting earlier. She was also unconscious.

I understood at that moment that any careless comments came with a hefty punishment. Rose once again ignored the demon girl and walked over to me. I was petrified so badly I couldn't move. Rose kneeled in front of me the same way Alec had just a little while ago.

"Let's get one thing straight," she said. "I am not as kind nor as gentle as Usato. You can cry, you can collapse, you can beg for your life, but you will get no mercy. In our line of work, we deal with the lives of others, so I will not stand for slacking or for compromise. If you're happy with those conditions, then as of today, you are a rescue team member."

She didn't mince words. Rose was straight to the point. I knew that she was telling the truth. She would show me no mercy. It was right there in her powerful gaze, clear as day. But so what? I'd learned that lesson in my training with Usato, and my mind was made up.

"I will gladly serve as a member of the team!" I said.

From here on out this was the place that would make me stronger. No matter how painful or how hard things got, I would overcome all of it. It was the path Usato had revealed to me—the path I had chosen to walk.

* * *

Once I was officially a part of the team, I was given a room and some training clothes. Then one of the rescue team members, Mill, gave me a rundown of team rules. Contrary to his terrifying appearance and gruff voice, he explained everything politely and made it all easy to understand.

I was officially a member of the rescue team now.

I felt restless and nervous as the truth sank in.

That night, Alec arranged a welcome party for me. It was a little embarrassing, admittedly, but at the same time I was happy. I felt like this was a good sign that things would go okay.

However . . .

“So this is the guy Usato recommended, huh? He’s just a kid!”

“Whoa, even smaller than Felm, too. You eatin’ enough, little man?”

“Either way, this is where the feeding begins. Like it or not.”

The people surrounding me, and their comments, were terrifying. I was standing there unable to move, trembling, when Alec came out of the kitchen in an apron and sighed at the sight of the other rescue team members.

“Look at all of you with your freaky faces,” he said. “You’re scarin’ the new recruit!”

“Who are you calling freaky?! Like you’re any different!”

“Yeah, but it’s all about the danger levels! You lot look like you’re set to eat the poor kid!”

“You calling me an orc?! You want some of this?!”

“Quit puttin’ words in my mouth!”

All of my frightening new companions settled down at the table, arguing as they did. I knew they weren’t bad people, but that didn’t make them any less scary. I took a deep breath and tried to calm the rapid beating of my heart. That was when I heard footsteps from behind me. I moved out of the way slightly for them to pass. It was the demon girl with the tanned skin.

“Hm? You’re that . . .” she muttered.

She looked about the same age as Usato, maybe a little younger.

“Ah,” I exclaimed the moment I saw her.

“Finally,” said the girl, “someone is afraid of *me*. Well, you just shiver in your boots all you—”

“You’re that girl Rose knocked out with a flick of her finger,” I said, cutting her off.

The girl promptly stumbled over her own feet, then stomped over to me in a rage.

“L-listen up, okay? I’m a demon!”

“I know. Usato told me there was one in the rescue team. He said you weren’t a bad sort, and that I should be nice to you.”

The demon’s face flushed red.

“Hrk! Damn him!” she said, stomping her feet.

I was still a little worried that the girl might be dangerous, but I passed by her and headed to the table. It was covered with plates of food. I'd heard that Alec had made all of it, and as I took a seat at a corner of the table, I remembered again how important it was not to judge books by their covers.

"Hey Nack," said Mill, who was already at the table.

"Hello, Mill," I replied.

I took a look around. The dining hall was easily large enough for the whole team, and it looked very clean. Cleanliness was important for them, so they probably tidied the place often.

While I was thinking about it, two others entered the dining hall. I knew one of them already. She smiled at me.

"Hey there, Nack," she said.

"Ururu!"

She'd brought me here earlier. She wore a bright, ear-to-ear smile as she waved. She was dragging a man along with her. She had him sit in the chair opposite me.

"I'm so glad to see you're a part of the team. That's great!"

"Rose almost flicked me into another world, but I survived," I said.

"Oh, are you okay? No broken bones?"

I'd meant my words as a joke, but Ururu looked genuinely concerned.

Rose can break bones with a flick?!

I put a hand to my forehead. The man sitting next to Ururu chuckled.

"I'd wager that the captain was going easy, so there's no need to worry."

“Oh, right,” I said, and then: “I’m sorry, and you are?”

“Sorry, I still haven’t introduced myself. I’m Orga. You’re Nack, right? My little sister Ururu has told me all about you.”

“Ah, so you’re her big brother.”

I could see the resemblance in their blonde hair.

“Are you and Ururu part of the rescue team like Alec and Mill?” I asked.

“Not quite. Unlike Rose and members like Alec, Ururu and I work exclusively as healers. We usually spend our days working at our infirmary in town.”

“Oh, the infirmary.”

So Orga and Ururu must be the two healers that Usato told me about. The rescue team plays several different roles in terms of healing, then.

The demon girl slumped roughly into the empty seat next to Ururu. It looked like her anger had subsided, but she was still in a foul mood.

“Oh, Felm! What’s with the long face?” asked Ururu, not at all concerned about the girl’s attitude.

In fact, Ururu smiled just as bright as always and gave the girl a pat on the head.

“Huh?! Hey, knock it off! No touching the horns!”

Orga laughed. “As energetic as always, aren’t you Ururu?” he said.

“You’re not going to stop her?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine. Felm’s more bark than she is bite.”

Yeah, but she looks like she might cry.

Before I knew it, the table was full, and all the seats were filled except for the

captain's.

"Rowdy bunch, aren't you?" came a voice.

The dining hall went silent in an instant. Everyone stopped what they were doing and waited for Rose to take her seat. Even Alec and Mill, who were big and scary, sat up straight and at attention while they waited for what Rose would say next. I knew then that they held a great respect for Rose. She carried a weighty presence. Rose sat down. A few seconds passed in silence.

"So we're all here," she said.

Nobody spoke a word. I did the same as everyone else and waited for what she would say next. What was she going to say? I couldn't help but feel a nervous excitement well up in me.

"We'll skip the formalities," Rose announced. "Today we have a new recruit, so we're celebrating. But don't go off the rails, you hear?"

"Huh?" I uttered.

Don't go off the rails?

Rose's words were so simple and straightforward that I was left stunned. But while I sat there confused, Mill and the others jumped to their feet.

"The captain gave the okay!" Mill declared.

The others roared, and the silence of the room was completely shattered. It exploded with smiles and laughter as everyone reached for some food.

"I, uh, what the . . .?" I started.

I couldn't follow what had just happened, and simply looked around at everyone rambunctiously going about their meals. Then a plate was put in front of me with a little of everything on it.

“Here you are, Nack,” said Ururu.

“Oh, thank you,” I replied. “But I . . . All of this . . .”

“Surprised, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Nothing important was discussed, and there were no big announcements. It was just bam, let’s eat. It felt like it happened too fast for me to comprehend. It was exactly what I’d felt several times when I’d been with Usato.

“It’s not always quite this rowdy, but it’s a special occasion. You joined the team today. You’re a brother in arms,” Ururu said.

“A brother in arms,” I said. “I feel kind of embarrassed.”

It wasn’t a bad feeling, though. I felt myself blushing.

“You’ll get used to it,” said Ururu, smiling even more. “After all, as of today, this is your home.”

Home.

The word alone seemed to fill my heart. And for the first time, I really felt like I was a member of the rescue team.

“The name’s Alec. I joined the rescue team because I cracked the owner of the restaurant I was working at right in the kisser and got myself fired. I didn’t have anywhere else to go. I was at my wit’s end when the captain kidnapped me.”

The welcome party was in full swing. When things had settled down a little, Ururu suggested that everyone stand up one at a time and introduce themselves so that I could start remembering people’s names. The

introductions were short and sharp, but also unique.

Tong was a wandering brawler who'd visited Llinger to test his strength who had bumped into Rose. He'd lost a fight with her miserably, and she'd dragged him to the rescue team as part of what she called "reform." Gomul was just a thug who'd had the bad luck of running into Rose. She promptly made him a part of the team. Gurd had worked as a merchant's bodyguard, but he'd been arrested by knights who mistook him for a monster. After that, he was put under Rose's watch. Mill had been a knight with a bad attitude. When he quit being a knight, he'd picked a fight with Rose. After having the snot beaten out of him, he woke up a rescue team member.

This is all too much! How am I even supposed to comment on these stories?! Gurd wasn't even treated like a human! And some of you were kidnapped?! Or beaten into submission?!

I was calm on the outside, but in my heart was a storm.

"What about you, Felmy?" asked Ururu.

"Don't call me Felmy unless you've got a death wish," spat the demon.

Felm stared at me, then reluctantly stood to her feet. I was curious. How did she end up here? To say that a demon living among humans was rare didn't even begin to cover how strange it was.

"I'm Felm," she said. "As you can see, I'm a demon. Usato captured me during the war, and here I am."

Usato does exactly the same thing as Rose for recruitment!

I'd heard that students sometimes come to resemble their teachers, but even when it comes to beatings and the kidnappings?! Usato really *was* something else. I nodded to myself while Alec glanced at Felm with a cheeky look on his

face.

“You even tried to chase after Usato when he left the kingdom,” he said. “You would have preferred staying with him, huh?”

“Wh-what?! Don’t you dare go getting the wrong idea! I just wanted to escape *this* monst—”

“What?” asked Rose, cutting her off.

“Nothing! Nothing at all!” replied Felm, shrinking into her chair as she glared at the captain.

Rose wasn’t staring at me, but even I felt a shiver down my spine. I wondered if she was teaching me by example.

“Well, I guess I’m up next,” said Ururu, standing from her chair.

Ururu had already introduced herself to me earlier, but I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be able to stop her, so I didn’t say anything.

“I’m Ururu,” she said. “I’m eighteen. This is my brother Orga; he’s twenty-three. We’re both healers who work at the town infirmary.”

“Oh, you’re going to introduce me, too?” asked Orga.

“Quicker that way, no?”

“Well, yes,” replied Orga with a chuckle.

I could do little more than nod. Ururu’s energy was overwhelming.

“We’re a part of the rescue team because Rose invited us to join,” Ururu said.

“She did?” I asked.

Did she really mean that? Was it just an ordinary invitation, or was it more along the lines of being kidnapped or beaten?

“Yep,” replied Ururu. “Orga and I were looking for a place to work when we happened to meet Rose by coincidence.”

“You both had to work?”

“Well, four years ago our parents were attacked by monsters. They weren’t badly injured, thankfully, but they were merchants, and all their goods were ruined. Orga and I decided we’d look for work.”

Ururu glanced at her brother and shrugged before going on.

“As you can see, Orga is really frail. He couldn’t hold most jobs for very long.”

“You don’t have to make it sound so awful,” said Orga. “I mean, I can’t deny it, and it’s true, but still . . .”

It sounded like Ururu was the stricter of the two siblings.

“Okay,” I said, “so that’s how the infirmary came about.”

“We opened it a little while after we joined the rescue team,” said Ururu. “We had some help from Rose, of course.”

That meant the infirmary was a part of the rescue team’s operations.

Now I had everyone’s names and learned of their . . . unique personalities. Rose was in charge of everyone. Directly under her were the scary-looking rescue team members. The infirmary, meanwhile, was run by Ururu and Orga. In terms of appearance, Usato looked like he should be doing what Ururu and Orga did, but he was more like Alec and those guys. If I wanted to get to the same level as Usato, then it would all come down to how hard I could work from here on out.

“Your turn, Nack,” said Ururu, rousing me from my thoughts.

“Me?”

“We’ve all introduced ourselves to you, so now it’s your turn to introduce yourself to us. Tell us about yourself.”

“My story . . .”

Where to start? If I tell them about my upbringing, I’ll just kill the mood, so . . .

“How about I talk about how I came to meet Usato?” I offered.

“That sounds great. We’re all ears!”

Everyone at the table looked at me, curious as to how Usato and I came to meet. Felm, meanwhile, glared and ground her teeth the moment she heard Usato’s name. I tried to ignore her.

“It all started when . . .” I began.

My childhood friend Mina had turned into my tormentor. Usato had saved me from my bullying. Then he put me through an intense week of training. It was so hard that I even ran away at one point and was ready to beg Mina for forgiveness. But Usato found me and set me straight.

The training from the moment I came back was on another level. I thought my spirit was going to break any number of times. Usato berated me until I was in tears, but I knew he was doing that for me, and for my sake, so I refused to break.

Then the day came for me to face Mina at a school event. At first, I thought I had the advantage, but when Mina got serious, I felt suddenly overwhelmed. I had tried so hard to tell myself that I wasn’t afraid of her, but those lies crumbled to reveal my fear. I was left running around in circles, powered by terror as Mina launched her fireballs at me. It must have been a pitiful thing to watch.

But when Usato saw me like that, he shouted with such rage that it buoyed

my spirit.

“No more running away! Fight!” he had said.

That was when I realized that I had always been afraid of Mina. No matter how much I tried to hide it, and put on a brave front, the fear was there. So I swallowed it down along with all my doubts, and I turned to face my bully.

Naturally, I was scared. I was so scared I was on the verge of tears. But I refused to stop moving. And finally, I put all my fear into one last attack that put an end to our duel.

But Mina still wasn’t done. She crawled, forced her body to move, and did her utmost to beat me with her magic, no matter how reckless it was. That was when I realized that it wasn’t just me who was hurting. It was Mina too.

In the end, the week that I spent with Usato was priceless. Because of him, I had made connections with people I otherwise never would have met. The whole reason that I was here now, at the rescue team, was because I wanted to be just like Usato.

“I’m here now because Usato and I met,” I said.

Um, I kind of rambled on a bit, didn’t I?

I sipped some water to quench my throat after all the talking. Ururu had her arms crossed as she nodded to herself.

“That Usato. He really is the spitting image of Rose, isn’t he?” she remarked.

The rest of the rescue team chimed in straight away.

“No doubt about it.”

“When he flips the switch, it’s a terrifying thing.”

“Make him mad and he’ll try to knock you out flat. No hesitation.”

“I mean, he rivals even us.”

“And to think he was just some ordinary kid when he joined.”

“I guess we’re half-responsible for what happened to him, huh?”

“You got that right!”

The rescue team burst into laughter.

“Um, what?” I uttered.

While Ururu spoke with a heavy weight in her voice, the rest of the team were rowdy and rambunctious. Orga, for his part, cringed slightly.

“In any case,” he said, noticing my confusion, “Usato is clearly doing well, and I’m glad to hear it. Though I am surprised he recommended you for the rescue team.”

“Well actually he said I had a choice. He said it was here or I could work at his friends’ infirmary.”

“Oh, was he talking about us?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Perhaps he wanted me to have another place to go in case I broke during Rose’s training and couldn’t go on. Orga smiled kindly.

“That’s a pity,” he said. “We’d love the extra help.”

I laughed.

“But please, come and drop by when you’re in the area,” Orga said. “We can’t treat you to anything luxurious, but we’d love to see you.”

I nodded. In Luqvist, we had places to treat the injured, but probably nothing like the infirmary here in Llinger. I wanted to see it myself.

“Hey, Nack,” said Ururu.

“What is it, Ururu?”

“Usato put you through some of Rose’s training, right? Exactly what sort of training was it?”

“Oh, well . . . he spent a whole day chasing me around the academy with Blurin on his back, he showered me with insults while he made me run around casting healing on myself. He threw balls of healing magic at me that I was supposed to dodge.”

It was hell. He put me through layers of hell. My eyes probably clouded over when I thought back on it because the rescue team all flinched.

“Whoa, he really crossed the line. The kid’s only twelve.”

“Usato was hefting Blurin around in Luqvist too, huh?”

“Treating a kid like that. He’s the second coming of the captain.”

“That he is.”

“The spitting image, yep.”

“A real monster. He’s another captain alright.”

“Just terrifying.”

“I knew it all along. A monster’s disciple is always going to end up a monster.”

“Today is a day of celebration, so I’m not going to do a thing,” said Rose, a hint of anger in her voice, “but you are all in for it tomorrow.”

Everyone except for Ururu and Orga went completely pale.

“I had a hunch about your training based on how strong you are,” said Rose, crossing her arms to look at me. “But he really did adopt my training to help

you, huh?”

I felt myself withering under her gaze.

“You’ve got some legs, but nothing else. Given the limited time you had, it’s impressive, but we’ll have to change things up a bit now that you’re here.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll watch your training for a little while. If you keep training the way you have been, there’s a chance it could impede your body’s natural development.”

Rose is going to watch my training? I mean, it’s an honor, but it’s also so much pressure!

We were still a ways off from even starting that training, but already I was shivering.

“Does that mean I’m fr . . . that I can do my own personal training too?” asked Felm. “That’s what it means, right?”

“Huh? Of course not,” said Rose. “Nack is going to train together with you.”

Felm looked utterly dejected.

Then again at lunchtime she was being dragged back here unconscious. Then when she regained consciousness, she was knocked out by the captain all over again.

“You’ll get to train with Rose. Good luck!” said Ururu. “We’ll be rooting for you!”

“Oh, thanks,” I muttered.

“It’s going to be almost too much to bear, I’m sure of it, but we’ll be around if you need someone to talk to!”

The way she said “I’m sure of it” made me realize that the difficulty of the training was a given. Ururu was trying to be kind, but I could only respond with a twitching smile. Ururu smiled at me, then seemed to remember something.

“Rose,” she said, turning to the captain.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been curious about this for a while, but how did you come up with the idea of using healing magic to help you train and strengthen your body?”

“Ah, that. Come to think of it, I’ve never talked about it, have I?”

I was curious about it too. How did she come to develop this healing-centric training style? I guess Alec and the others didn’t know either, because they leaned forward in their chairs, filled with curiosity.

“Well, alright then,” said Rose. “I was never trying to hide it. Now, as for when I came up with the idea, it would have been when I was about . . . twelve.”

“But that’s the same age as me,” I said.

“Yep. I was just a brat, no different than you.”

The news came as a shock.

“I was a bit bullheaded, admittedly,” said Rose. “I’d knock a person out cold for picking a fight just because I was a healer.”

“Ah, so you were the captain even before you were actually the captain,” muttered Alec.

“Shut your trap. I’m not done.”

Rose went on to tell us that she wasn’t born in Llinger, but in a far-off, remote village. She was stubborn and headstrong from a young age. She beat up all the village ruffians, which made her the biggest ruffian of all. Nothing changed after

she discovered her magic type, either. Even kids who used magic were overpowered by her sheer physical strength.

To hear Rose tell it, she was a real piece of work.

Funnily enough, it kind of reminded me of Halpha.

But even though we'd learned about Rose's past, she had yet to mention using her healing magic.

"I can picture it now . . . a smaller, younger version of the exact same Rose," said Ururu.

"I'm a lot calmer now compared to then," said Rose.

"Huh?!" exclaimed the rescue team.

"So just how bad were you back then . . . ?" whispered Ururu out of earshot.

Everyone was suddenly silent with fear, unable to grasp the fact that Rose now saw herself as a calmer person.

"I was the top of the heap in my little village, but it was peaceful. Well, until company arrived."

"Company?"

"Monsters. And mean ones, at that."

Rose's village was attacked by monsters. I figured that when monsters attacked you simply had them exterminated. But I was curious as to what Rose meant when she said "mean."

"What sort of monsters were they?" asked Orga, intrigued.

"It was a huge deer with white fur. A Grand Horn. A monster just as dangerous as a Grand Grizzly."

“Wow, that’s one heck of a monster to have to deal with,” said Mill.

Even I knew that anything comparable to a Grand Grizzly was nothing to be trifled with.

“It was smart,” said Rose. “When it attacked the village, it didn’t kill any villagers. It took what it needed from our farms, then it left. Even when the villagers tried to fight it off, it still never killed anyone. It just left people hurt.”

“Aha,” said Mill.

“Yep. We were just livestock as far as the Great Horn was concerned. If we didn’t resist, then we didn’t get hurt. As long as we fed it, it wouldn’t do anything. So the village lived in fear while the Grand Horn essentially bled us dry. That became just a part of life for us.”

Rose spoke of it lightly, while the rest of us waited for her to go on. None of us believed that a twelve-year-old Rose could handle a beast so strong.

“So what did you do?” asked one of the rescue team.

“I was angry. This damned beast was messing up our village however it pleased. All the freaking adults just let it roam free and kept on feeding it.”

She was mad at the adults? That sounds a bit like misdirected rage.

“At the time, that Grand Horn looked at us like we were nothing. But when I saw our villagers quietly and fearfully obeying its will, I was incensed.”

Twelve-year-old Rose is beyond scary! Even Felm can’t believe it!

“I felt like I was going to go crazy with rage, so I used that. I decided to put my anger to use. I decided to strengthen my body.”

I was shocked. That didn’t sound like using your head, unless it was to headbutt things. It was the craziest thing I’d ever heard.

“When I look back on it now, it wasn’t the most sensible or practical way to handle things,” said Rose. “But that doesn’t change the fact that it was the best answer to the problem. After all, if we want to break the awful cycle we were stuck in, we first needed to break that Grand Horn.”

“So what did you do?” asked Alec. “I mean, there’s all sorts of training you could have done.”

Rose chuckled as she reminisced on the past.

“I ran, punched things, and kicked things,” she said. “I did that over and over, from sunup to sundown, then I went home and slept. I just kept on doing it. It was only much later that I realized I was using healing magic. I never noticed it at the time.”

It was, literally, a brute force method.

“Rage doesn’t just cloud your judgment,” said Rose. “It blinds you from pain and what’s around you. For a time, I even felt like I lost myself. All I could think about was beating up that Grand Horn, so I just kept breaking my own body down and building it right back up.”

She went all-out. And then she went beyond it. Rose would have been blind with anger, but that wouldn’t have stopped the pain and exhaustion wracking her body. There was no way I could have done the same thing. It was crazy to even imagine. And most crazy of all was the fact that she didn’t think up the training method. She was just doing it subconsciously.

That was why Usato had made me run while focusing on my healing magic; the whole idea started from Rose being able to use her healing magic without thinking.

“Weren’t your parents worried?” asked Ururu.

“If I was the sort of kid to listen to my parents and do what they told me, then I wouldn’t be here.”

Ururu laughed.

“Good point.”

I was still curious about the Grand Horn though, so I plucked up my courage and spoke up.

“What ended up happening to the Grand Horn?” I asked.

“Oh, that? Well . . .”

Rose flashed a wild grin and pointed to her coat with her thumb. It was a pristine white coat, not sullied in the slightest. It was the same coat as the one Usato wore. When I looked at it, it hit me, and I gasped.

“I skinned the thing and turned it into clothing,” Rose said. “It was almost too easy.”

Rose chuckled at my dumb look of surprise. If my logic held, that meant Usato’s coat was made of the same material. It was made of the Grand Horn that Rose felled, which meant that the coat held a special meaning for her.

The coat was a symbol of her strength. It was also something Usato himself was very proud of. Now I had taken it upon myself to grow stronger under her watchful eye.

Before I was even aware of it, my shoulders were trembling with anticipation.

Side Story: Of Endings and Beginnings

Part 2: Lieutenant Colonel Rose

Few people ever visited the rescue team. For one thing, many of Llinger Kingdom's citizens were apprehensive of the team itself. In other words, they were scared. A simple thing, but a decisive factor all the same.

Then there was the simple fact that it was rare for anyone to be hurt so badly that they required the rescue team's help in the first place. In the vast majority of cases, Orga and Ururu had everything covered at the infirmary.

These two reasons were why visitors to the rescue team were few and far between. But today, a young boy arrived at the gates. His name was Nack. He was twelve years old. He'd come with a letter of introduction written by Usato himself.

"Things have gotten a whole lot livelier around here," I said to myself.

I leaned back in my chair and looked at the candle that illuminated my quarters. A new team member was a good thing, but I never imagined that it was going to be some twelve-year-old kid. That said, it looked to me like Nack had guts. I could tell he was hellbent on getting in.

Back when I'd founded the rescue team, I never would have believed we'd grow to the size we now were. I had to laugh; even now, I still couldn't quite believe it.

A moment later I heard a knock at the door. I knew who it was by the strength of the knocks.

"Come in," I said.

“Excuse me,” said Orga, poking his head in a little hesitantly. “Do you have a moment?”

I watched him as he entered the room. His blonde hair was tied back into a ponytail, making his gentle features all the evident.

“Sure,” I said, gesturing to a chair. “What’s up? I figured you would’ve gone back to the infirmary already.”

“Ururu insists on staying the night. I’m worried she might get in the way of things, so I’ve decided to stay for a little longer.”

“I see. And where’s Ururu now?”

“She’s with Nack and Felm at the moment.”

“Hm.”

The ever bright and bubbly Ururu probably wanted to keep an eye on Nack. She always was fond of playing the big sister role.

“I’ll make sure things are fine and then return to the infirmary,” said Orga. “To be honest, I also wanted to make sure that everything is fine with *you*, too.”

“What are you, my mother?”

“I merely sensed that more was playing on your mind than you let on at dinner, that’s all. Like you were brooding over something.”

This guy. Puts on the aloof act, but he’s always got his eyes peeled.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I wasn’t brooding.”

“Oh, I apologize,” said Orga. “I couldn’t think of a more fitting word for it.”

He chuckled. I knew what he was referring to though. It was the story I’d told about the time I’d discovered my training methods.

“However, I couldn’t tell exactly what was on your mind. Was it your past? Was it Nack, the new rescue team member? Either way, there was something a little different about you today.”

For a time I said nothing.

A little different, huh? Well, he’s not wrong.

“And you want to know why, huh?” I said finally.

“Actually, I thought you might like someone to talk to about it.”

“Ha, you’re a funny one, Orga.”

“To be honest, I wonder if I’m being a little too bold in making such an offer.”

Well, there are worse ways to spend an evening.

I turned to the window, where the lights of the castle glimmered beyond the darkened scenery. I looked at them, hovering in the darkness, and I began to talk.

“Today marks the rescue team reaching a total of ten members,” I said.

“Indeed.”

This was good news. News worth celebrating.

“We have Usato, who was summoned together with the heroes. We have the demon girl he captured. And today we have the boy he trained for a short time. Usato just keeps on finding ways to get himself into trouble, over and over again.”

Orga laughed.

“Yes, everything Usato does is something of a surprise, isn’t it?”

On one hand, you *could* say that Usato’s actions lacked foresight. This was

fine, at least for the time being. He was young and inexperienced, so all he had to think about was running on ahead as fast as he could. But one day, I knew, he was going to slam straight into a wall. That was fine too. Impediments and challenges would mark a chance to grow. If for some reason his spirit started to break, then I'd be there to pick him right back up.

"What do you see in Nack?" asked Orga.

"He's still maturing," I replied. "He's got a base to work from, but he's also got a few problems."

"Problems, you say?"

I passed Orga the letter that Usato had written to me. He scanned its contents, then paused and frowned at one line in particular.

"Nack was unable to heal anyone except for himself for a period of time?"

"It would appear to stem from some kind of mental issue. He doesn't seem to have any such trouble at present, but he isn't completely back to normal, either."

"What are you going to do?"

"All we *can* do is get him used to things," I replied.

At present, Nack could heal others, but he had only just recovered from whatever mental block he'd been suffering.

"But there's also the fact that he's only twelve years old," I said.

"Still a child, you mean."

"Putting a child through rescue team training will only break him. In a worst-case scenario, it might even hinder his body's natural growth."

I'd been lucky to escape such a consequence, but it was true. Training Nack

irresponsibly could result in warped bones, or even stunted growth. If that happened, we'd have much bigger problems to deal with than simply making him stronger.

"How unexpected. You really care about him," said Orga, impressed.

"Of course I do. I'm not so monstrous that I'll just watch a boy destroy himself through impossible training and do absolutely nothing," I said.

"Though in Usato's case, you *did* look incredibly harsh."

"Usato is different."

Usato's spirit was unbreakable. He would yield to nobody. Having seen his training myself, firsthand, I knew that fact better than anyone.

"That's why he's the same," I added.

Orga paused for a moment.

"As you, you mean?" he asked.

"Ha. Funny," I replied.

"Um, what?"

Orga didn't get it at all. I ignored his confusion and went on.

"He's the same as a former soldier of mine."

"A former . . . You're not talking about Alec and the others, are you?"

"Long before them."

As it dawned upon Orga exactly what I meant, his expression froze. This wasn't surprising. He already knew that I'd served as a knight for the Llinger Kingdom.

"I see," he said finally. "So you see something of that soldier in Usato?"

“Not everything. But he’s growing and improving in a way that brings back memories.”

Usato was impudent, he didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘manners’, and he’d developed a warped sense of attachment. In that sense, he was just like *her*. And every time I thought of her, I was reminded of the fact that I could not let the same mistake happen a second time. I could not allow for a life to be lost again, not when it should have been saved.

I had vowed to myself that I would carry my past sins as punishment, until the day that I died, so as to never forget the faces of those who once served me.

“May as well tell you about her,” I said. “No better time than the present.”

“Are you sure?” asked Orga. “I’m sure it can’t be easy for you—”

“You idiot. I’m not so weak that I’ll let myself be crushed under the weight of old memories. It would be worse to forget it all and never be able to talk about it.”

I would never allow myself to forget. Not ever. I would never allow myself to look away from the past either. If I turned my back on it, closed my ears to it, and ignored the pain of it, then I would be no different from a walking corpse.

That was why I decided to talk openly of the past I so despised.

“What I am going to talk about happened five years ago,” I said. “Three years before the Demon Lord’s army attacked and one year before the rescue team was founded.”

“Five years . . .” Orga uttered, nodding.

I turned to look at the moon through the window.

They were old, nostalgic memories. Tragic and dark. But they were also

memories of brighter days. Memories of the people I trusted, who trusted me in return. In those memories was the story of how I went from “Lieutenant Colonel Rose” to “Rescue Team Rose.”

* * *

Lieutenant Colonel.

When King Lloyd awarded me the rank, I didn’t want it. It felt like a burden. I didn’t think of myself as a Lieutenant Colonel. I didn’t think of myself as a leader of battalions, companies, or platoons. But if the king trusted me enough to bestow upon me such a rank, then I would do my utmost to prove to him that he’d made the right decision.

Everything had changed for me when I turned twelve. I defeated a Grand Horn. It was a path my rage had taken me down, but the results left me craving more power. I did not bask in the glory of my victory in the peaceful village I called home. Instead, I simply went on training.

When I turned fifteen, I told my parents and nobody else that I was leaving home on a journey by myself in pursuit of further strength. That journey brought me to Llinger. It was there that I approached the country’s knights in search of a duel. There was no real thought to it; I simply wanted to know where I stood next to the kingdom’s army.

As it turned out, I had become far stronger than even I had thought. Nobody could land even a single strike on me. Nobody stood a chance. It wasn’t that the knights were weak. In fact, they were more skilled than the knights in the other countries I’d encountered, and they were excellent at working together. And

yet even they were completely overwhelmed.

I was struck by a sudden feeling of emptiness, like a hole bored into my heart. It was then that King Lloyd Vulgast Llinger spoke to me.

“Yours is a power with nowhere to go. No direction. Will you cease the pointless violence and instead wield your power for the people?”

I thought him weak, at first. I thought him an idealist and laughed at his words. But as I came to meet Llinger’s citizens, the words began to take root within me. And one day, I realized the truth. I was never looking for *someone* to use my power on; I was looking for a *reason* to use it. When the understanding hit me, I joined the Llinger knights.

From then on, I worked in the service of the kingdom, fulfilling my duties. With time, I rose through the ranks until I had assembled a group of knights to work under me as a unit. Together, we hunted the monsters that troubled the citizenry, and we sometimes delivered food and resources to villages in the midst of drought or starvation. As recognition for my services, I was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel at the age of twenty.

* * *

“I apologize for calling you all here so suddenly.”

Six months after my appointment to Lieutenant Colonel, King Lloyd gathered the Commanding General and all those ranked higher than company commander. Something was afoot; the Commanding General led the entire military forces, and it was usually enough to simply call upon him. Assembling all of us meant we were looking at something very serious.

“We’ve received eyewitness accounts of what appear to be demons on the plains,” said the king. “The sightings are getting more and more frequent. Fortunately, nobody has been injured or hurt, but we fear it is only a matter of time.

Demons.

The species was known for their tanned skin and the horns that grew from their heads. They lived in an area known as the Demon Lord’s Domain. We had no idea why they were appearing so close to human settlements, but none of us liked it.

The king addressed us. “To be on the safe side, we’ll be appointing armed guards to all merchant caravans passing through the plains. The general will handle the allocation of duties, but should you find yourself face to face with the demons, I urge you to please not take them on directly. Demons are physically much stronger than us. If you are not fully prepared for what you are facing, you will be throwing your lives away. So please, avoid any direct confrontations.”

It sounded like cowardice, but King Lloyd spoke the truth. An ordinary knight would struggle in a one-on-one battle against a demon. The gap in physical abilities was simply far too great. King Lloyd detailed the need for caution and planning. The impromptu meeting was brought to a close.

All of the attendees left, one after the other, but I stood in place for a time, mulling over the king’s words.

“What do you think, Rose?”

It was Lieutenant Colonel Siglis.

“Of the demons’ movements?”

“Yeah. You’ve got experience fighting them. I want your opinion.”

He was older than me, but he didn’t hold that over me. He treated me as an equal.

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” I admitted, raising my hands to show they were empty. “If you’re asking me why the demons might be leaving their home turf, I’ve no idea. I can’t even imagine.”

“Right.”

The hall was almost empty, so I headed for the door. Siglis walked with me, murmuring with worry.

“The only thing I can think of is an invasion,” I said.

“Impossible. An invasion? Now?”

“Who knows? I’m just saying it’s a possibility.”

“Well, the chances aren’t zero, I suppose. But without the Demon Lord, do the demons even have the power to launch such an assault?”

There was always a chance. In the distant past, the leadership of the Demon Lord had made the demons a powerful force to be reckoned with. But when the hero felled the Demon Lord, the battle between humans and demons had drawn to a close.

But that was, in some ways, simply a ceasefire. It was no guarantee. The battle had ended, but the demons were still out there. And as long as they existed, war was always a possibility.

“We should seriously consider the possibility of an invasion and have our knights ready to mobilize at a moment’s notice,” said Siglis.

“Might be a pointless endeavor.”

“I’d prefer that it is. However, if our worst fears come to pass, I want to be ready to move. I don’t want to be taken by surprise.”

“As uptight as always, I see,” I muttered.

“I can hear you.”

“That’s why I said it.”

And with that, I left the hall.

It would be so much easier for all of us if the disturbances simply stopped, but Siglis was right; we had to be ready to react to anything.

“Captain!”

First I need information. Should I do it myself or send my troops? Oh, wait. The General’s going to sort that out.

“Hey! Captain!”

That means there’s only so much I can do.

And first up . . .

“Cap . . . Captain?”

“Can you be any more annoying?”

“Eep!”

My fist collided directly with the girl walking next to me. She kneeled to groan in pain.

She had a youthful face. Her purple hair was so dark it was almost black. She was usually a bright, cheerful sort, but she held her head in her hands and glared at me standing over her.

“What if you broke my skull, huh?!” she cried. “Your strength is otherworldly! You could have killed me!”

“Like I give a damn. That’s what you get for disturbing someone who’s trying to put their thoughts in order.”

“You are beyond heartless.”

The girl stood to her feet and followed me as I walked away. She was eighteen years old and of average height and build. She was also the second-in-command of my personal unit.

“Can’t you be just a little quieter, Aul?” I asked.

“But talking is in my nature.”

I sighed. Perhaps fearing another fist to the head, Aul took a few steps back.

“More importantly, that stuff the king was talking about sounds like bad news. Nobody wants to see demons around.”

I said nothing.

“Lt. Colonel?” Aul asked.

An instant later, she was grabbing her head again, because I’d punched it. Aul was always breaking the rules.

“You spied on us, didn’t you?” I said.

I’d put her in my unit precisely because of that tendency, but I’d never been

able to straighten it out. In the end, I'd given up and accepted it was just a part of who she was.

"Ow. Sorry. But if the demons are up to something, then are we going to be moving out?"

"Perhaps. But not immediately."

We'd move if we got the order. We were not to move out on our own, by our own accord, and harm the order of the status quo.

"Yeah, but what are they actually doing out there, I wonder." Aul asked.

"Nothing good, that's for sure," I said. "If they're out there sniffing around in secret, there has to be some reason for it."

Demons weren't like other demi-humans. They were openly hostile to humans. So if they were up to something in the shadows, there was a very good chance that it was bad news for us.

"In any case, if we get the order then we move out, we'll drive them away. That'll be that, right?" Aul announced.

"Don't take them lightly, Aul. It's the fast path to death."

"Yeah, I know that. I mean, you've kind of literally beaten that point into all of us," said Aul, clutching her head and taking a few steps back.

I sighed again.

I had been, and was, strict on Aul and the rest of my unit in training. I would not stand for any mistakes when it really counted.

"So what now?" asked Aul.

"Well, after what you just said, I can tell you've gotten slack. I'll be overseeing the unit's training this afternoon."

“What?! B-but we’re fine! I mean, now that you’re a Lieutenant Colonel, you must be busy beyond belief! You have to use your brains as much as your body to do a good job, right? None of us want to hamper your responsibilities!”

“Look at you, being so nice all of a sudden. But don’t you worry. I’m ahead with work.”

“Oh man, this always leads to me getting beaten senseless by the rest of the unit . . .”

Aul tried to laugh it off, but her shoulders slumped and she fell into despair. We walked the castle halls, and before I knew it, a wicked grin had spread across my face.

* * *

There was something like joy in Rose’s face as she talked about her old friend. She was a person who none of us in the rescue team had ever known. We of course knew of Rose’s impressive achievements as a Lieutenant Colonel, but we had never had the chance to learn about the people in her former unit, or who they were.

“Aul was always bright and positive,” Rose said. “No matter the circumstances, she was the unit’s pillar of support. But she never shut up, and she was always rowdy.”

She talked about the girl in a pretty rough manner, and yet her tone of voice was calm and relaxed.

“What work did your unit handle?” I asked.

“We disposed of dangerous monsters on the outskirts of the kingdom. We captured bandits. Those kinds of tasks can be handled by regular knights, too, but in our case, things were a little different.”

“Different how?”

“We handled by far the most dangerous tasks. We didn’t handle the small stuff. We took on the monsters living in areas where the magic density was thickest. We were dispatched to handle whole gangs. My unit was the type that could capture large groups of bandits without injury and handle dangerous monsters quickly and effectively.”

But there were only seven of you, weren’t there?

Which meant that Rose’s unit was tasked with near-impossible missions, and they completed them admirably. The types of monsters that lived in dense magical areas were extremely dangerous. And bandits, too, were all the more of a threat when they had the advantage in terms of numbers.

“My unit did what regular units couldn’t,” said Rose. “We battled demons, too, when they encroached on human territory.”

“Amazing.”

“But the hardest part wasn’t the bandits or the monsters. It was keeping all my idiots in line.”

“Y-your idiots?”

“My unit was a gang of problem kids. I mean, I made it that way when I selected them all and beat some sense into them.”

So she was doing things rescue-team style even before the rescue team existed. That makes sense. There was something of a practiced ease to the way she handled Alec and the others back when I joined.

“Are you saying that you assembled your unit yourself?”

“Yep. All the ordinary knights simply gave up before we even began. I picked out all the ones with potential, and even then, it was only seven. But we became an elite unit.”

I had to imagine that there were a lot of people who looked up to Rose and wanted to join her unit. But as for what happened to the vast majority of them when the training began, well . . . it wasn’t even worth asking.

“The funny thing about it,” mused Rose, “was that everyone who had potential always came with extra baggage.”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“They ignored orders, they were lone wolves, they argued with their superiors, that kind of thing. They were the types you’d expect to be cut loose. But in terms of sheer abilities, all of them excelled.”

“Couldn’t have been easy for the men and women leading them, though.”

“You got that right. Those problem kids always leapt into the fray at will, carried out their work with a scowl, did what they had to do to get the job done, and came back without a scratch. Not the type that’s easy to handle for any leader. When I was putting my unit together, I didn’t care about age or gender. Every new recruit had a big mouth and a lot to say with it. But a few days of training quieted them down real good.”

“That sounds just like you,” I said with a chuckle.

I had to imagine that those knights all spent a few days in a hell of Rose’s making.

“That’s how I built my unit. It was a unit of misfits, to be sure, but all of them were strong. Well, until it happened . . .”

The calm look on Rose's face faded. I gulped back nervously and waited for her to go on.

"We eradicated monsters, and we beat up gangs of bandits, but all of us were still human," Rose said, each word carrying a heavy weight. "At one point, we were considered the strongest unit in the entire kingdom. That was when King Lloyd appointed us a mission."

"A mission?"

Now that I had heard of what Rose's unit had accomplished, I knew that the mission she spoke of had to have been something important. Something dangerous.

"That's when it started," said Rose.

"Oh?"

"For me, and for my unit, that was the beginning of the end."

Rose didn't even glance in my direction as she went on.

"They believed in me, and I believed in them. But that trust between us was also a weakness. We just didn't know it at the time."

And so Rose continued to tell the tragic story of the sins that still plagued her.

Side Story: Of Endings and Beginnings

Part 3: Aul, Second-in-Command

King Lloyd had appointed me a special duty. My unit was to investigate the Darkness of Llinger, a monster-infested forest some ways from the kingdom proper where demons had been sighted. It had been one week since the king had first warned us about the appearance of demons on Llinger soil. The most recent developments were troubling. Apparently, some thirty demons had been spotted attacking monsters.

Their behavior was strange to say the least. As a result, merchants were now refusing to bring their wares to and from the kingdom. The king appointed my unit to investigate due to our battle experience when it came to demons.

“That’s the long and the short of it,” I said, once I had explained everything to the unit. “Any questions?”

At that time, we lived in a forest near Llinger Castle. The eight of us, including myself, sat in the spacious dining hall. That was where I’d gathered them to detail our new mission. I saw the fierce determination in everyone’s eyes.

“Put simply, we’re to find out what the demons are up to and, if possible, drive them away. But don’t forget that they’ll have the advantage in terms of numbers, based on the information we have at hand. Make sure you are well prepared before we depart.”

Everyone replied confidently in the affirmative. I then issued each knight their individual responsibilities to ensure we were all set in time for our departure. When I was done, Aul was the first one to speak up.

“We’ll really have to put our game faces on for this one,” she said. “Check

everything twice, people. We can't afford to be caught off guard."

Aul was standing in front of all the others, her hand on her jaw, and was summarily kicked in the back. She let out a pitiful squeal as she fell. All I could do was sigh.

"Ow!" she cried. "Assaulting a superior?! What is the meaning of this?!"

"Like *you* are in any state to tell *us* to be ready," said one knight.

"It's because of *you* that the captain put us through a whole week of hell!"

"*You* messed up and we all paid the price!"

They all knew that Aul had won them a solid week of hard training. This kind of scuffle happened all the time though, so I was happy just to let it go. Aul stayed slumped on the ground, peering around for any further attacks.

"Hey, that's not what . . . It was because . . . Aha! Yes! It was because when I looked at you, I felt like you were all slacking off! And as this unit's second-in-command, I deemed it necessary to give you a kind of gift, in a roundabout way. Does that make sense?"

"Not a bit!" shouted all the knights.

"Captain!" cried Aul. "This is bullying! They're all being mean! Stop them!"

"It's got nothing to do with me."

"Why are you so cruel?!"

While the idiots went about their rowdy scuffle, I ignored it and sat down. Now that we had our orders, I had to make sure that I was just as prepared as everyone else. To be on the safe side, this time I'd be on the frontlines myself. That was what I was thinking as I reviewed the information I'd been given. That was also when a black shape jumped up on the table.

“Kukuru,” I said.

It was my black-furred Noir Rabbit, which had become my pet when I was traveling on my own. But Kukuru wasn’t just a pet, it was my trusty sidekick. Among monsters, Noir Rabbits had especially good tracking abilities.

“Perhaps you should come along with us,” I muttered, thinking.

With Kukuru along, we would find the demons in no time, this much was true.

“No, it’s too dangerous,” I decided.

Based on our intel, the demons were hunting monsters. That meant that Kukuru might end up as a target. I gave the rabbit a pat as it cleaned itself. Then Aul came to me crying, her clothes all dirtied.

“Captain! Look at what they did to me! I’m the second-in-command here!”

“Listen up, everyone,” I said. “In this mission, I’ll be on the frontlines. That said, I may well need your back-up. Stay ready.”

“Are you ignoring me?!” exclaimed Aul.

She was devastated, but I went on to explain the strategy I’d decided on. The rest of the unit broke into smiles.

“With a monster like you fighting by our side, we’re invincible!”

“She’ll be able to heal us if anything happens!”

“Did you forget what I just said?” I sighed, exasperated.

Usually, I would have shouted something along the lines of “I said stay ready! And I meant it!” to shock everyone back to their senses. But this time I figured I could save it for later. After all, with my healing magic, I *would* be able to heal them. On top of that, with me on the frontlines together with my unit, we really were that much more powerful. We could work in a near-perfect formation.

Our power was one built from trust. Nobody would break us, and no matter what we faced, we were ready to take on any threat. That's what I felt in the trust we shared. It was with that sense of comfort that Kukuru and I watched the knights get right back into yet another scuffle.

* * *

We left early in the morning for the Darkness of Llinger. As the sun was beginning to rise, we arrived at our basecamp location outside the forest. We put up our tents and readied ourselves for our demon hunt the following day. That meant checking our weapons and reviewing our mission parameters. Tomorrow was another early start. We didn't expect to find them quickly and knew we might be out in the forest for some time. We had prepared ourselves for a long search.

When I had checked over everything and made sure preparations were set, I had the unit sleep while I took the first watch at our campfire.

"We're ready," I muttered, looking up at the night sky. "Now, all that's left is to track down those demons."

I threw another branch on the fire and looked at the members of my unit, asleep. Within hours we might find ourselves facing demons in battle, and yet everyone looked fast asleep. I had to chuckle.

"You're all so carefree," I muttered.

But this, too, was what made them so special. They knew how important it was to look after themselves. It was one of the reasons they were all a part of my unit. If they went too far, then that same carefree nature would come back

to bite them. It was my job to put their talents to their best uses.

I put another branch on the fire, and it crackled as it lit up the surrounding darkness.

“Seems like one of you can’t sleep,” I said. “Should I put you to sleep myself?”

At first, there was no response, but as I began to stand up, one person hurriedly spoke.

“H-how did you even know I was awake?”

Aul walked over to the fire, tidying her messy hair. I turned my gaze back to the flames.

“I sensed it,” I said.

“That’s terrifying,” muttered Aul.

She sat down, then wrapped her arms around her knees and pulled them to her chest. The next guard duty shift was still a while off. Aul had waited for everyone to fall asleep because there was something on her mind. Still, I was in no mood to press her about it, so a few minutes passed in silence. We listened to the flickering flames until Aul finally spoke.

“Why did you pick me for second-in-command?” she asked.

“Huh?”

The question felt very sudden. I looked at Aul through narrowed eyes.

That’s what she’s worried about?

“Why are you asking?”

“It’s just, when you made the announcement to the whole unit, you didn’t even hesitate. More to the point, it felt flippant. You were just like, ‘You’re second-in-command as of today.’ I was so shocked I almost fainted.”

“I guess I had another hunch.”

“A hunch?! That’s what made you appoint me as second-in-command?!”

I didn’t have any special reasons for the decision. After I’d beaten the unit into shape, I just saw that I could trust Aul with everyone. I wasn’t thinking in terms of strength or leadership qualities.

“I know how it might sound coming from me,” said Aul, “but in our unit I’m just middle of the pack. Nothing special. I’m still not even twenty, and I don’t have any special skills to speak of, so why wouldn’t you pick someone more experienced for the position?”

“I see. So you think you’re unqualified to lead.”

“Yes.”

Aul. What a pain.

This wasn’t something you brought up the night before an important mission. And why did she wait so long to bring it up in the first place? A whole year had passed since I’d appointed her.

Aul must have seen the look on my face because she quickly averted her gaze.

“For the most part, you’re always leading everybody,” she said. “As far as my duties go, I’m pretty much just writing up reports and putting in orders for weapons. I just handle miscellaneous work when I think about it.”

“You idiot. That’s the whole job.”

“But it’s all just errands, basically!”

“It’s work that has to be done. What’s wrong with that? It’s what the people at the top have to handle.”

“I’m still not convinced.”

I could see her gritting her teeth, and it made me smile. Now that I was Lieutenant Colonel, I didn’t have time to handle the daily clerical work of the unit. I’d been giving Aul more and more work over the course of the last six months to make sure our unit could function without me. I never imagined that she wouldn’t have noticed that herself.

“I’ve been giving you more work since I was promoted,” I said, “particularly when it comes to reports.”

“I *was* thinking I had more work than usual recently. So that was your doing?”

“I made a point of not telling you. The fact that I haven’t noticed any errors in the reports this last half year shows that you’ve been doing your job.”

“Wish I could be happier about it,” mumbled Aul.

If she hadn’t noticed, that was on her for her lack of observational skills. That said, it *was* impressive. Aul’s workload had noticeably increased, but she completed everything she was asked without any issue to speak of.

“You’re on the right track,” I said. “In time, I may be able to entrust you with the leadership of this unit.”

“What?”

Aul’s jaw dropped, and her head tilted to the side. She could not understand what I had just said.

“Why the dumb look?” I asked

“Well, I mean, me? In charge of the unit?”

“It’s only natural, isn’t it? I’m a Lieutenant Colonel now. I can’t lead a single unit forever. In time I’ll have to leave the unit to you, and then you’ll lead them.”

“Nope! No no no! There’s no way! No *way* I can do that! If I’m put in charge, we’re going to break into infighting the moment our mission begins!”

Aul looked panicked as she waved her hands around, disagreeing with everything I’d said.

“Just who do you think your fellow knights are?” I asked.

“You should know that better than anyone! Before you formed our unit, every one of us were like wild horses. We were practically rampaging! The only reason we’re not now is because you’re here. And if you leave, the very first thing that’s going to happen is me getting beaten to a pulp!”

She was so animated I couldn’t tell if she was earnest or just joking.

Does she simply not want me to leave my post? Probably not. I’m giving myself too much credit.

“Ah, I see. So what you need is faith in your fellow soldiers,” I said. “Quit it with the crybaby act. You’re like a kid who doesn’t want to leave home.”

“But I can’t think of any other leader for this unit but you!”

“That’s no way to think about the issue,” I said.

When ranks changed, so too did the environment. With my new rank came new responsibilities. I would move from leading a single unit to leading multiple units. Aul and her fellow knights would become like my arms and legs on the

battlefield.

“Even if I leave, it’s not like the unit will just up and vanish,” I said. “All that will happen is that you’ll replace me as the brains of the operation.”

“But who wants that?!”

“You don’t like the responsibility?”

“It’s not that . . .”

For Aul and the others directly under my command, ‘responsibility’ was a word like a distant speck on the horizon. They didn’t do their duties for the Llinger Kingdom, they did them for their own sakes.

“I don’t feel any of that responsibility. It doesn’t bother me. What I don’t like is the idea of you leaving the unit.”

I waited for Aul to go on.

“I’ll be crystal clear; I’m as stubborn as they come. I won’t follow orders that I don’t respect. And if I want to do something, then I’ll do it no matter what. If I think it’s the right thing to do, then it doesn’t matter what anybody else thinks; I’ll push through and do it.”

“I know that,” I said.

That was the reason I’d put Aul in my unit in the first place. So what was she trying to tell me?

“Back when I started, I wouldn’t bow down to anyone. I got results my way, and my way *worked*, so I refused to listen to any complaints. And when anybody tried to say something, I shut them up even if it meant violence. That’s how I lived as a knight . . . until you showed up.”

Back then, Aul was a real handful for the kingdom. She had a reputation for

being a knight who didn't take orders. I could still remember it, even now. The general was all set to strip her of her rank, but I moved in and requested that she be put in my unit.

"When I first met you, I was all set to do the same as always," Aul said, going on. "I wasn't going to take any orders I didn't believe in. Nobody had ever been able to break my will or order me around. I wasn't about to change for you, but before I knew it, I'd been completely broken down."

Aul chuckled as she remembered the time we first met.

"When I faced you, everything I knew about common sense and violence went straight out the window. When I refused to obey, I was smacked. When I tried to run away. you followed me all the way out of the kingdom and dragged me right back. When I tried to hit back, you hit me so hard I can't even properly remember what happened before or afterward."

"I didn't hit you *that* hard," I said.

Aul let out a shaky laugh.

"Knock it off with the jokes, Captain," she said. "I told myself I would never lose to you. I was going to overcome your damned training, and I was going to make you regret your decision. That's what I believed, and you know me—I hate to lose."

When I thought about it, I could see it. At some point, Aul had become especially fiery and passionate about training. For her it might have been powered by her rebellious spirit, but for me it was simply funny. I enjoyed watching her grow.

"But you were crazy," Aul said.

I scratched my cheek with a finger.

“I didn’t really do all that much,” I replied.

Aul had bared her fangs at me, so I’d put her in her place. To me, she was like a cat playing rough.

“Yeah, maybe it wasn’t all that much to you, but to me . . .”

“To you it was what?” I asked.

“It was a first, that’s what. You watched over me the whole time, and you never gave up on me. I didn’t listen to anyone, so everyone else got sick of me and they gave up. But not you. You met me head on. At the time, I was about as annoyed as was humanly possible. But also, I was happy.”

When Aul didn’t listen, I repeated myself until she did. I did that as many times as was necessary. It was a simple thing, but Aul had never experienced anything like it before.

“Maybe none of the others will admit it, but they’re all exactly the same,” Aul said, pausing for a moment before looking at me with a resolve in her gaze. “They think the same as I do: you’re the only one who can lead us.”

I sighed.

“Was that a sigh?!” Aul cried.

“I’m allowed to sigh, aren’t I?” I shot back.

To be trusted was a good thing. It made me happy. However, it was wrong for Aul to think that only I was capable of leading our unit. I stood up and walked slowly over to Aul. She looked up at me cautiously. I flicked her lightly between the eyes.

“Ouch!” she cried, clutching her forehead.

“You’re soft,” I said. “In the end, you’re just a kid throwing a tantrum because

you don't want to leave your parents. But you've got to grow up. You've gotta be independent."

"I opened my heart to you, prepared for shame, and *this* is how you respond," Aul muttered. "I knew it."

I'm the only one who can lead you? That's just what you think. Wake up. You can't make that kind of a statement if you've never even tried another way.

"*I* choose the person who leads you," I said. "I know you all better than anyone else. You think I'd choose someone who's not up to the job?"

"No, but . . ."

"It's no different to when you asked me about why I chose you for second-in-command. It's not about abilities, and it's not about raw strength. I chose you because you were suitable for the job. I knew I could trust you with that duty."

My exact reasons were vague, but it wasn't like I just picked her name out of a hat. I chose Aul because I was certain of her, and I trusted her.

"You might think that the others don't trust you, that they don't believe in you, but you're wrong."

"Wrong? If you ask me, they're always pushing and kicking me around. That's one heck of a beating for a superior officer to have to take."

"Think about it. Every one of you is rude, no matter who you talk to, superior or otherwise. Name one person they'll obey politely."

"That's a horrible thing to say about us! Even though it's true!"

"Then tell me this: if I made someone else second-in-command, would you not push and kick them around?"

"Are you out of your mind? If somebody starts bossing me around, then of

course I’m going to push back. And kick, too.”

“I bet that’s what all the others would say too.”

“Huh?!”

“Oh, *now* you get it? You really are as slow as they come.”

I flicked Aul in the head a second time.

“Ouch!”

She’s been training so hard her brain’s turned into hard muscle.

I put a hand to Aul’s head. I had to imbue her with a little confidence.

“Aul,” I said. “You’re bright and energetic all the time, and it’s stupid, but at the same time, your spirit never breaks, no matter the circumstances. To others it might look like you’re reckless and carefree, and some would probably even call you flippant.”

“Are you trying to make me cry here?!”

“Will you let me finish? That said, those who know you well also know that you’ll never yield. So they’ll lean on you for support. They’ll trust you with everything they have.”

When I’d first met Aul, I hadn’t seen anything special in her. She’d gone off to train on her own with a carefree smile. I hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary. But when I’d learned more about what made her tick, I discovered that she was a problem child right down to her very core. She didn’t see herself as any different from the other knights, but that was her most extraordinary quality. It gave her the mental fortitude to stay resolute in any situation.

When Aul made up her mind to do something, she didn’t hesitate. Put simply, she was stubborn. She refused to lose. While this was a dangerous character

trait, it also had its uses. No matter how dire the situation became, she stood steadfast. It didn't matter if everything was falling into ruin around her, she remained resolute. She never let despair even touch her. This mental strength buoyed those around her. It was an extremely rare talent. When people knew there was someone to lead the way, this provided a certain security. All of Aul's teammates knew this. That was why none of the other knights complained when she was promoted to second-in-command.

The only person yet to realize this, unfortunately, was Aul herself.

"What I'm saying is it's not like you to worry about something like this," I said. "As long as you stay true to who you are, the others will follow your lead."

"Stay true," muttered Aul, mulling over my words.

I wondered if I'd said too much. Still, the girl required so much extra work.

"Why don't you just get it? Why do I have to spell it out for you?" I said, sighing.

"How am I supposed to know if you don't tell me?"

"Yeah, but what's with that grin on your face? Need another flick to the forehead?"

That smile creeping over her face irked me a little, so I readied my finger.

"N-no! I-I'm fine!" cried Aul, her face going pale as she shook her head.

I went back to my own place by the fire, now thoroughly exasperated.

"Nothing in this world is permanent," I said. "Everything has to change. If you can't accept that change, you'll never be able to move forward."

"Captain," said Aul.

"But even if there is change, I'll still be leading you guys. So you don't need to

let things bother you so much.”

Aul nodded.

“Okay.”

Well, that’s sorted.

“It’s time for a change in guard duty. I’m hitting the hay.”

“Oh, okay,” said Aul. “I guess that means I’m up.”

“Yep. The rest of you get some sleep already, would you?”

“Huh? The rest?” asked Aul.

She tilted her head to the side, puzzled, but I ignored her and laid down. Then she turned around and saw her fellow knights, all of them with cheeky grins on their faces. I knew they’d been awake from the moment she started confiding in me, but I let it go because I thought it would be a nice little wake up call for the girl. At first, she went deathly pale, but then her face turned bright red.

“Y-y-you guys . . . You w-were all a-awake?”

“We believe in you, oh glorious second-in-command!”

“And I don’t hate you, Vice-Captain.”

“I had no idea you were so worried, Boss. You’re surprisingly sensitive.”

“I can see you all practically bursting at the seams trying to hold in your laughter! Get out of here right now, all of you! I’ll give you a good beating before we head out to crush those demons!”

I listened as Aul had her tantrum and the other knights cackled with laughter. Seeing them all rowdy and smiling like that, I couldn’t help but let out the hint of a chuckle myself. It didn’t matter how many medals they earned or what

they achieved on the battlefield, our unit would always be a mishmash of kids in adult bodies. There was nothing to be done about it. All of us, in our own ways, were a bit twisted, and we couldn't take things too seriously.

But each and every one of us was growing and maturing, all the same.

One day.

One day when they were adults in the true sense of the word, I wanted them to be able to laugh about their pasts, their hopes, and their dreams. All of them had once been outcasts, avoided by their peers and not considered real knights. Maybe it would still be some time before they'd find what made them truly happy, but it was my job to make sure that they did.

That's why I let myself laugh a little. Their hopes and their dreams were probably a far cry from what I imagined, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing at all.

* * *

Early the next morning, as the sun was beginning to illuminate the darkness, we headed out. We rode into the Darkness of Llinger on horseback. The air was chilly, our breaths white. As I looked around, I noticed that I couldn't sense the presence of anything around us. I heard nothing but the wind rustling the leaves in the trees.

"Aul, do you feel that too?" I asked.

I wanted to confirm what I was feeling. Aul was following right behind me.

"Yeah, it's weird. I'm not sensing any monsters here—any living creatures,

even.”

Our unit had come here countless times as part of our duties. The forest was dangerous and always rife with monsters. Today, however, not a single one let its cry be heard. They didn’t make a sound. Not even a footstep.

“Maybe the monsters all became friends and, uh, went somewhere for breakfast together?” Aul offered.

This was no time for jokes.

“I asked you a serious question, Aul. Give me something useful.”

“Maybe the reason the monsters aren’t here is because they felt a more threatening presence?”

If they felt a threat, there were two possibilities. One, demons had come to the forest, as per our intelligence. Two, an extremely dangerous monster had appeared. If it were the latter, it would have to be from somewhere nearby, a place with dense magical energy. But there were only a few monsters like that in these parts.

“If it’s not demons, then it’s possibly a Grand Grizzly,” said Aul. “But they’re on the more placid side. They usually wouldn’t drive other monsters away. Which means it’s more likely that we’re looking at a Grand Horn of a Growolf.”

“It’s not a Grand Horn,” I said. “They always move with some intent. More likely it’s a Growolf, if it’s a monster.”

The Growolf was a red wolf, as powerful as Grand Grizzlies and Grand Horns. Grizzlies were known for their pure strength, while Grand Horns were intelligent and cunning. Growolves outdid them both in terms of outright brutal ferocity. If a Growolf or a pack had run rampant through the forest, attacking whatever moved, it could have created this eerie quiet.

I put a hand to my jaw as I thought.

“Captain? What’s up?” asked Aul.

I dropped from my horse.

“Uh, Captain?” Aul asked again, quickly grabbing my horse’s reins.

I looked closely at the environment around us, my eyes on the ground and the base of the trees.

“Isn’t this all just the work of a Growolf?” Aul asked, confused.

“Even if the chances are high, it’s still just one possibility,” I said. “Ah, found it.”

There were four straight marks carved out of a tree and blood stains covering the grass. The knights around me gasped when they saw it.

“Those claw marks are from a Growolf. Usually, they’d do that to mark their turf, but this is different.”

These claw marks weren’t intentional. And judging by the tree . . .

“Somebody fought a Growolf here,” I said. “But it wasn’t just one person. There were lots of them.”

“Captain! We’ve discovered many footprints here!”

A trail, so soon?

“And the blood isn’t dry either,” I said. “Which means the battle may still be going on elsewhere. Be on guard!”

“Understood!” replied my knights, jumping back on their horses.

We followed the footprints. Judging by the number of them, we were looking at a unit of at least thirty demons. But if they *were* hunting a Growolf, then why

were they doing it? I couldn't understand why they would enter Llinger territory to hunt monsters. Was it all for sport? That alone was odd, perplexing even. But if they had some other reason for it, it could mean very bad things for us humans, so we had to make sure it never came to pass.

"Someone fought this Growolf alone," I muttered.

There were thirty sets of footprints, but only one where the Growolf's blood and claw marks were. They were incredibly light, too; you had to really look to notice them. The Growolf was not a monster that just anyone could take down. You needed several well-trained knights. If one person really did take this monster on alone, even if they had support, it meant they were extremely well versed in battle.

I hope just someone reckless and stupid.

"But if they were unwaveringly confident in their ability to take a Growolf alone, then . . ."

That meant he was bound to be a real handful. I felt my hands grip the reins of my horse more tightly. Then I heard the metallic clang of a sword.

"They're close," I said.

At my words, the knights behind me all unsheathed their weapons and steeled themselves for battle. I, too, steadied my breath as we rode out into an open area among the trees.

The first thing we saw was the wide open plain. It made one think of a colosseum, all the more so because a group of tanned-skin demons in black armor were carrying bloodied Growolves into a cage.

"So, we've been found out."

The voice came from a demon man, standing a little apart from the other

demons. He wore much lighter armor than the others, and the only real defensive equipment he had were the gauntlets on both arms. But I knew from the moment I saw his blood-drenched blade that he was *not* to be taken lightly.

"You lot," I said to my unit. "Don't. Move."

Everyone stopped, their weapons still at the ready.

"Understood," said Aul.

I turned my gaze back to the demon with the bloody sword.

"You're from the Llinger Kingdom," he said.

"We are. We came to see what you were up to. You've been acting very suspicious. So, what are you doing? Are you capturing those Growolves to put on display?"

One of the demons didn't like my tone of voice and began to walk over, but the demon in charge stopped him.

"I must admit that I'd prefer that," he said. "I don't much like doing these kinds of requests, personally, but if it will lead to future benefits, then I'll follow my orders."

"What was the request?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you, do you?"

The demon man let an easy smile grow upon his lips.

Of course he won't tell us. It would have been weirder if he had.

"My name is Nero Argens. I lead the men you see here. May I ask your name?"

"It's Rose. I occupy a similar position to your own. Why are you even

bothering asking my name anyway?”

“Heh. I am a demon. You, a human. We both know what happens next.”

His lips curled into a grin as he let the slight waver of death drift from it. My knights, his demons—everyone had their weapons in hand. But I did not move. Instead, I went on speaking.

“We can still avoid bloodshed,” I said. “We’re not so stupid that we don’t see what’s going on. Leave now and we’ll overlook all of this. Stay, and I will not hold back.”

“Big words. It looks to me like you have the strength to back them up. Unfortunately, now that you’ve seen us, we cannot let you leave here alive. My apologies, but you must die.”

“Is that so?”

Nero readied his sword at his waist. Everyone on both sides raised their weapons a touch higher. I let out a deep sigh as I got off my horse.

“Aul, I’ll need you in charge of the unit,” I said.

“Huh? But Captain—” she started.

“I won’t have the time to issue orders to you while I’m taking on a demon like that,” I said.

Aul looked taken aback for a moment. It dawned on her just how dangerous Nero was. But she finally nodded. Perhaps because of what we’d talked about the previous night, I noticed a strong determination in her eyes. I did not think she would have any issues with these demons.

“I’m counting on you,” I said.

“Understood!”

I turned back to Nero and glared at him. It would have been enough to wither the spirit of any ordinary knight, but Nero merely flashed a smile and gripped his sword tightly in hand.

“One of us dies here. Let’s see who,” he said.

“Do it,” I said. “If you can!”

“Let’s do this then!”

The two of us took off running. At the same time, our soldiers also charged at each other, but I never took my eyes from Nero. I knew he was easily the strongest here, so the biggest threat.

“Wind, be my feet, protect me!” shouted Nero. “My body shall become the blade that slices through all who stand in our way!”

Wind whipped like a whirlwind around him. Suddenly, the speed of his movements increased dramatically. I clucked my tongue in frustration.

Wind magic.

This was an incredibly rare type of wind magic, one that was not fired by the caster but rather became their source of power. But it wasn’t just passive, it could also be wielded proactively.

I slipped out of the way of Nero’s sword and launched a punch at him. But with the wind powering his movements, he dodged me with ease. All the same, Nero’s eyes widened.

“What *are* you? Are you really human?” he uttered.

“Shut up!”

I spun around and threw an axe kick, my heel screaming down through the air toward him. But Nero dodged this, too, and slipped away out of reach. My boot

collided with the ground. Nero tripped as the ground fractured beneath his feet. He was knocked out of position, his face a mix of confusion and joy.

"Now I *know* what you are," he said. "You're a monster!"

"Yeah, I worked that out a long time ago!"

I leaped forward and closed the distance between us in a flash, launching a flying kick straight into Nero's guts. He was sent careening into the forest, but I didn't feel much impact in my foot.

"So he uses the wind as a kind of armor too, huh? And he's capable enough to deflect my attacks. What a pain."

Should I break through with a combination of strikes? Or put everything I've got into a single killing shot? Either way, I've got to keep up the attack.

But as I pushed off my right foot to move, blood spurted from my leg.

"The instant I kicked him, he used wind magic to counterattack . . ." I muttered.

My leg was opened as if it had been slashed by the air itself. My specially made boots were fine, but the middle of my thigh down was a patchwork of open wounds. I didn't give it much thought and healed it immediately, then turned to Aul.

"You lot!" Aul shouted at them. "Let's give these damned demons a taste of our teamwork!"

"Don't have to tell me twice!" shouted a knight.

"It's the same as always!" shouted another.

They'll be fine.

We were outnumbered, but our unit was clearly more skilled than the

opposition. I'd be able to back them up as long as I finished my own fight quickly and decisively.

"I'm counting on you, guys," I said, my mind made up.

Trusting my companions, I sped toward the depths of the forest in pursuit of my enemy. If the two of us had gone all-out in the open field, my knights might have gotten pulled into the fray. To avoid that, I'd kicked Nero deeper into the forest. Judging by his counterattack, it looked to be the right call. No ordinary warrior could respond at such speed. If it had been anyone else but me, she might have already died in a pool of her own blood.

I can't let him get near the others.

"I bet he's thinking exactly the same thing," I muttered to myself.

To a certain extent, Nero had *let* me kick him. He'd let his wind magic act as armor and then let it carry him with the momentum of my kick. As far as I could tell, the only reason to do that was to move the battlefield. That meant that both of us were gunning for a one-on-one battle.

As soon as I entered the forest, the trees to my side split in half as an invisible blade cut through them and headed straight for me.

"Resorting to tricks and traps now?!" I shouted.

I leaped over the wind blade, kicking off the trees to get closer to the source of the attack.

"Found you!" I yelled.

"That wind blade didn't even make a sound!" exclaimed Nero.

His sword was wrapped in wind as he brought it down in a diagonal slice. A huge crescent shaped wind blade filled my vision cutting down the surrounding

trees as it sped toward me.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” I shouted.

I kicked hard off a tree and barreled toward the ground, bouncing off it as a felled tree collapsed where I’d landed. But it didn’t matter; I was far quicker. I raced to Nero. The demon wasn’t going to just sit and wait, however. He launched more wind blades.

Nero’s attacks were slow. I easily evaded them. I grabbed hold of one of the falling trees in one hand and roared as I threw it at Nero. It was about seven meters long and as thick as a bear. I launched it with brute strength alone. Nero laughed, incredulous. Before that tree collided with him, I launched others about the same size and kept running.

In the next instant, the forest filled with the sound of those trees colliding with Nero. I took hold of another falling tree, this one bigger than the others, and brought it down hard with everything I had on the pile of trees that Nero was now buried under.

“Just to make sure you’re good and dead,” I said.

The attack would have killed anyone else. But now I watched as the trees were sliced into pieces and thrown through the air. In the middle of them all was Nero, his sword slicing around him with ease. I didn’t even blink, however; I merely clenched my fists and continued to close the distance between us. A smile crept over Nero’s face as he readied his sword to meet my attack.

“Rose, was it?” he said.

I ignored him and brought my fist back. I slipped around the wind that whipped and sliced the air around me and threw a punch that should have gone straight through Nero’s defenses.

But it was never going to be that simple. His movements were extremely light and quick with the wind supporting them. It didn't just speed up his footwork, it boosted everything: his speed, his defenses, and even his evasive movements.

"You humans are impressive," he said.

I knocked the tip of his red sword away with my fist.

That sword.

I knew that there was a very good chance that it was imbued with a curse. Even if I could survive a wind blade hitting me, I had to avoid that blade.

"I've never seen a human as strong as you," Nero continued. "It's astounding to think you match me with just physical strength alone. I may be your enemy, but you have my praise."

We had been fighting at a relentless pace, and yet Nero had yet to break a sweat. That was just as true for me too, though. I had been right to keep my knights away from him. Nero would have been far too much for them.

"Shut up," I said. "If you want to talk, do it after I've smacked you in the head."

"Harsh one, aren't you?"

I launched a kick powerful enough to knock Nero's head clean from his shoulders, so the relaxed look disappeared from his face. The kick was strong enough to blast straight through his wind armor; that was not something he could let the wind take care of on its own.

"You won't kill me with your cheap tricks!" I shouted.

"So it would seem!"

Nero barely dodged my kick, then stood with his sword at the ready in one

hand. He pointed the palm of his other hand straight at me. A fierce whirlwind surrounded me. It had the size and force of a tornado. I heard metal clangs as it whipped around with me at its center.

“He’s put blades in this thing,” I muttered.

The blades made it clear that the whirlwind was a cage designed to trap the target. Attempt to escape and get sliced into bits. But to me, this was just another of Nero’s cheap tricks. I locked on to Nero’s silhouette, just barely visible through the wind, and charged through the wall of blades.

“You will not trap me!” I shouted.

My body was wrapped in healing magic, so even though the wind sliced across me, my wounds closed just as soon as they opened.

“You’re prepared to critically wound yourself just to— No! Your magic! It’s—”

I launched myself at Nero and fired another kick right into his gut. He just barely managed to defend himself but went sliding some ten meters away. His voice rasped as he let out a chuckle.

“Never would I have thought you’d be a healer,” he said. “So your pure physicality and your incredible healing rates allow you to launch hugely destructive attacks. I’ll bet you make for a fine healer aside from all of that, too. Heh. You really *are* something else.”

“So? Are we done here, then?”

“Don’t be daft. All you left was a little rumble in my stomach. I don’t even consider it a scratch.”

Nero raised his sword again. I felt an incredible pressure emanating from his stance. I got the strong sensation that he had been holding back until now.

“I am going to slay you right here,” he said.

“I’d like to see you try,” I replied. “I’ll bash your skull in before that happens.”

“Then let’s make it clear who’s stronger!”

We leaped toward one another. Both of us threw all caution to the wind. Now it would simply come down to who was more powerful. We roared as our arms and heads collided. We were out to kill one another. The forest around us was our arena in this battle to the death.

* * *

“In terms of strength, we were even,” said Rose.

The battle of which Rose spoke was far harsher than I had imagined. I knew how strong she was. I knew it all too well. She was faster and stronger than any other living creature, and with her healing magic, she was nearly indestructible. I never imagined that someone might exist who could fight her on her own terms.

“But he was a better warrior than me, if I’m being honest,” admitted Rose. “He had a deeper repository of skills and techniques.”

“You mean his wind magic,” I said.

“Yes. I’ve never seen anyone as proficient. Our battle raged on because neither of us could land a decisive blow. The trees around us were all sliced up. They broke into pieces as they fell.”

So they really were dead even, then.

As someone who knew Rose’s strength firsthand, it was hard to comprehend.

“And while you were fighting Nero, what about your knights?”

“They would have been fighting too. I had to focus everything on Nero, so I couldn’t even glance in their direction, but I believed in them.”

“You trusted they would be okay?”

“Yes. In battle, they were far superior to even today’s knights. They would not go down without a fight.”

So how did they . . .?

Rose saw the question forming in my mind, and the hint of a frown creased her brow.

“When Nero and I found ourselves at an impasse, I think he realized something. He saw that if we all went on fighting as we were, neither side would win.”

Rose paused for a moment and put a hand to her right eye. She looked expressionless, but I saw in the minutiae of her face that she was struggling with something. It pained her.

“So he stopped fighting fair,” Rose said.

“Did he take your unit hostage?”

“Worse. Much worse. But I suppose to *his* kind, the actions were completely natural. That didn’t make it any less crazy. No ordinary person could comprehend such tactics.”

I saw in Rose’s face that horrible memories were flashing through her mind.

I’ve never seen her look like this before. Just what did those demons do?

“He stopped fighting fair, but he didn’t stop fighting,” Rose said. “When he stopped fighting fair, it meant that winning and losing in the traditional sense

no longer mattered. Victory now meant the death of his opponent. His own survival no longer mattered."

"Wait, what? But that means . . ."

"Yes. It's exactly what you're thinking. What decided the outcome of our battle was not our abilities in combat. It was a difference of resolve."

Side Story: Of Endings and Beginnings

Part 4: Tragedy and Revival

It had only been a few minutes since the battle began, but in that short time, the ground around Nero and I was gouged, torn up, and strewn with the remnants of fallen trees. We ignored it all and went on fighting, but as we did, the balance began to shift.

Nero thrust his hand at me, wrapped in wind magic. It sliced open my cheek as I narrowly evaded the blow to land an uppercut. The punch connected, sending the demon flying through the air. I heard Nero groan and followed him to launch a follow-up strike, but he blocked it with the handle of his sword and plummeted back to earth, right where his demons were fighting.

“Let’s end this!” I shouted, healing my cheek and leaping to meet him where he fell.

The demon forces my unit were fighting were clearly shaken by the sight of their leader slamming into the ground by their side.

“Quit playing,” I growled at Nero. “I know that didn’t hurt. Now get up.”

“This is never going to end,” Nero muttered, rising to his feet and letting out a derisive chuckle. “It was supposed to be such a simple job. All we had to do was capture some monsters. I never imagined that we’d have to deal with something like this. And look at my men. After all the work I put into training them . . . I see that your unit is impressive in their own right, Rose.”

“What are you on about now?”

“I’m praising you. You are the most powerful opponent I’ve ever faced. And

the most troublesome, at that."

"Well thank you very much," I said sarcastically.

It doesn't look like he's trying to buy himself time. But it doesn't look like he's given up, either.

The fighting had paused as we stood there in the middle of the battlefield.

So what is he up to?

"There are no real heroes among the humans," said Nero.

"Huh?"

"That's what I thought, anyway. I thought that the world was free of people who wielded such tremendous power."

"So what? So you think that you can beat us now that we don't have a hero? Is that what you think? Because if so you have severely underestimated us."

"True. But I think differently now. In the coming war, *you* will be our greatest hindrance."

"War?!"

Is it possible that the demons are really preparing for war? Are the Growolves a part of their plans?

"The age of demons living in fear of humans is coming to an end. Our king will awaken. His existence brings with it cruelty, brutality, and murder, but for us demons it will also bring grace, blessings, and victory."

"What . . . are you even . . ." I uttered.

"That is the very reason that, to ensure victory, and for the prosperity of our entire race, we must stop you here at any and all costs. Yes . . . even if that

means our very existence.”

Nero’s words had an immediate impact on his men. It hardened them. Nero’s grip on his sword was tight enough to draw blood, and with bloodshot eyes, he glared at those around him.

This is bad.

“Everyone! Get clear!” I shouted.

“We are the Demon Lord’s blade!” yelled Nero. “Even if it means our own end, we will ensure that our enemies join us in hell!”

The demons roared, stirred into a frenzy. They once again launched themselves at my unit. The knights fought back valiantly, but the demons did not even bother to defend themselves anymore.

“What the heck?!” cried one knight.

“They’ve gone berserk!!”

As a sword sank into one demon, it gripped the blade with one hand and, grinning wildly, thrust its own blade into a knight’s arm. The demons had made their decision; they would kill us by any and all means, even if it meant sacrificing their own lives. My unit was being worn down, wounded, and battered by the demons’ frenzied attacks. But when I moved to help them, Nero blocked my path.

“Damn you!” I spat.

“I’m a real demon now, aren’t I?” he said. “I have forced my own men to their deaths, and in doing so, I drag you into the mud and grime of real war.”

“Get out of my way!”

I was overwhelmed by rage. I cocked a fist, clenched with everything I had,

and leaped forward. I was intent on decimating anything that stood in my way.

“In the chaos, you falter,” said Nero.

My fist met nothing but air, so I leaped backward. But by then it was too late. A horrendous pain shot through my right eye. I roared with pain. Nero had cut open my eye and half of my vision had gone immediately red. I put a hand to my face and looked at Nero, expressionless as he wiped my blood from his blade.

“You are all too easy to read when you’ve lost your cool,” he said.

“A cut like this means nothing to me!”

I can heal it!

I sent healing magic through my hand and into my eye, but the magic simply dissipated into the air.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“This scarlet magic blade of mine cuts through and severs magical energy. The wounds it opens remain cursed for a time. What this means is that your healing magic is useless against any cut made with this sword.”

I had known that Nero wielded a cursed or magic sword, but I had never imagined that it would negate my own advantage. For the time being, my vision would not return, no matter how I used my magic. As that fact dawned on me, I became aware of the cries of my unit.

They cannot fall here. Not like this. I can still save them. I can heal them.

“Even with your vision halved, you still intend to fight?” asked Nero. “You are essentially crippled, so let me end this here.”

Blood continued pouring from my eye. The rest of me was fine, but I’d lost my

depth perception. It made me essentially useless in battle. Nero raised his sword up high. In my confusion I was at a sudden loss. Should I dodge out of the way, or rush in and close the distance? Nero's blade screamed down, and my body responded for me. Instinctively, I rushed in to close the distance.

But I had only sealed my fate.

"It's over," Nero uttered.

"No!"

At that very instant, I heard a voice from somewhere, and felt somebody push between Nero and me, saving me from Nero's blow.

"Aul . . ." I uttered in disbelief, watching as she stood before me.

"Captain," Aul uttered, glancing at me for the briefest second.

In her eyes, I saw relief. They showed how glad she was that I was safe, and how happy she was to have made it to me in time.

But before she could do anything else, Nero's blade cut straight through her, opening a wound that ran deep, straight from her shoulder to her ribs. Aul slumped to the ground, coughing blood as she struggled even to breathe. Nero nodded in a silent show of respect, then once again readied his sword. We were the only two left standing. All of the demons aside from Nero himself were dead. My knights were too, their corpses strewn across the plains, impaled on swords and spears.

I was too late. I couldn't save them. I had the power to help them, but still they died. They died believing in me. Believing that I would heal them. They died knowing that I can heal all wounds. They died certain of the fact that with me by their side, no mission was impossible. How did this happen? My unit is dead, and I have lost an eye. Our enemy has the advantage. You should have run, Aul. If

you had fled, you might have survived. If you hadn't saved me, you might still be alive.

I was frozen by a feeling of futility. I was weak. I had relied too much on the power of my healing magic. I had believed that with it we would be okay. But I couldn't even protect my own unit when they needed it most. It was unbearable. Unforgivable. But while I hated myself for what had happened, it was nothing compared to the hatred that boiled in my heart for the demon standing in front of me. He had spent the lives of his own unit without so much as a second thought just to kill us. And all of it for some damned Demon Lord.

Everything inside me warped into an uncontrollable rage. It was a darkness that spread through me, dyeing my every thought black.

"I will not forget," Nero said. "Not the deaths of my men, nor the deaths of yours. Nor you, when you die here with them, Rose."

At the sound of the demon's voice, something broke inside of me.

"Huh?" I uttered.

My rage was a storm that threatened to engulf me entirely. Nero's sword flew down toward me, but I stopped it with my hand. Blood spurted from the wound, but the sword's momentum was halted.

"How?!" Nero exclaimed.

"You won't forget? That doesn't mean anything."

Nero attempted to pull his sword free, but I refused to let go. The rage that swirled within me, all of it directed at Nero, flatly refused to entertain any other emotions. I was unaware of my own pain, my own suffering. I gripped Nero's sword with even more strength. I ignored the world around me and punched him straight in the face.

“What do you know?” I spat. “What do you know of who they were?!”

Nero was protected by his wind armor, but it did not help. My fist went straight through it, colliding with its target. It didn’t matter how much blood went flying, or how deep his sword cut into my hand, I refused to stop punching.

At my fourth strike, Nero finally released his sword to try and launch wind magic at me. But I was quicker; I took a hold of his arm, lifted him up high, and slammed him hard into the ground. Pain shot through my arm as I did. I felt like it was going to be torn off, but I forced myself to heal and slammed Nero into the ground a second time. He let out another pained groan from the impact.

“To be remembered by the likes of you would only disgrace their names!” I shouted.

I kicked the fallen Nero hard in the ribs. The force of it easily broke through his magical defenses and slammed straight into him. He was launched into the air. I raced to meet him where he fell. Nero didn’t even have a chance to land. I punched him with everything I had. As he went flying once again, I took the sword still in my left hand and launched it at him. The blade went through his shoulder and pinned him to a distant tree.

Nero’s arms slumped to his side as though the impact had knocked him unconscious, but my rage was unabated. It flowed like a broken dam. I stormed over to him.

“I will kill you,” I said. “I will tear you limb from limb!”

I could not think of anything else. But my anger had clouded my mind. With it I had pushed myself far beyond my own abilities. The strain it put on my body had left me a bloody, broken mess. When I tried to ignore the pain and march

onward, my legs refused to listen to me. I crumpled into a heap. I was beyond even the limits of my own healing magic. Just moving brought tremendous pain, but I would not stop.

I have to kill him.

"Just a little more . . ." I muttered, trying to spur myself to action. "I have to kill him. I have to . . ."

I could not let things end like this. I was going to crawl over to him and tear his throat out with my own teeth if I had to. So I did. I dragged myself toward Nero, but as I did, I noticed someone at his side. It was a demon, who was still just a young girl by the look of it. She watched me with fear in her eyes as she tried to pull Nero away and to safety.

"M-Master," she said. "I'm here to save you."

"Amila, I ordered you to stay back," Nero muttered.

I could only watch, dumbfounded, as the girl dragged Nero away, his sword still lodged in his shoulder. I tried to keep moving, tried to get to them, but I couldn't, because in that demon girl I saw shades of Aul.

Nero had used his own soldiers as disposable pawns. And yet, like me, he was saved by one of his own. The sheer shock at the sight of it robbed me of all my hatred and all my rage. I was left there, unable to move, as the girl dragged Nero away, occasionally looking back at me with terror-filled eyes. They disappeared into the distance, leaving me with a swirl of emotions that threatened to tear apart my very sanity. I dragged myself to my knees and pounded the ground.

"Damn it! Why did this happen?!" I screamed.

Useless. I can't even kill my foe.

I couldn’t bear it. The weight of it threatened to crush my heart entirely. But then I heard the slivers of a voice calling out from behind me.

“Captain . . .”

“Aul!”

She hovered at the very edge of death, lying in a pool of her own blood. I forced myself to move and kneel by her side. I tried to heal her.

“Captain . . .” she said again.

“Don’t speak! I’m going to heal you!”

“Y-you can’t . . . I’m . . . I’m too far gone. And this wound . . . it won’t heal, right?”

Her wound had come from Nero’s blade. Healing magic wouldn’t work on it until the curse had run its course. My right eye and my left hand were no different.

But even then, I refused to give up.

“There might still be a way!” I said.

“Captain, it’s okay.”

“I said don’t speak!”

I put pressure on Aul’s wound to stop the bleeding to no avail. I watched as the light in her eyes faded. It hit me then that she would soon breathe her last breath, but I did not want to believe it.

“Fighting under you, at your side,” Aul uttered, “it made me happy.”

“Aul,” I whispered.

Why are you looking at me like that?

She looked satisfied. She looked like a girl at peace. In contrast to my panic, Aul wore only a placid smile.

“I have no regrets,” she said. “It was an honor.”

“Stop that!” I said. “Why would you say something like that?! I won’t let you die! I can’t!”

“The others . . . I know they felt the same. Please, go on. Be the woman we all look up to.”

Aul stared up into the distance. She no longer heard me as she went on. The energy in her voice waning with each word. I felt the life disappearing from her.

“You’ll always be . . . our captain,” she said.

And with that, the last hints of life in her eyes faded away completely. Her body felt like ice in my hands. She was gone. While I could heal the wounds on her body, I could not replace a soul that had left it.

I held Aul in my arms and looked down at my hand. It was wet with a mix of our blood. Fear and loss wrapped themselves around my heart and squeezed.

My unit was dead.

Aul was dead.

I alone had survived.

I felt overwhelmed by it all. That swirl of horrible emotions gave way to a pained and heartbroken scream.

* * *

I gathered up the corpses of my fallen unit and took them home. I was not going to leave them to become monster feed, and as their leader, it was my responsibility to see them to their families in the Llinger Kingdom.

The news of my return and the loss of my entire unit sent waves of worry and commotion through the kingdom. I didn't care for any of it. I reported to King Lloyd about the potential resurrection of the Demon Lord, then I resigned from my position as if I were fleeing it.

I couldn't bear it any longer. I couldn't stand myself.

I wanted nothing more than for the families of those knights to shower me with their fury and resentment. And yet, I received not a single word of criticism. Instead, they thanked me for bringing back the bodies of the fallen. They told me how happy the knights were to serve under my command.

Every word of gratitude was like a dagger in my heart.

One month passed. I spent it all by myself in the lodgings where I had lived with my unit. I sat in a corner of the room I called my own quarters thinking about them and blaming myself for what happened. I did this for days, weeks.

I put a hand to the bandage covering my right eye and I replayed Aul's death over and over in my mind. I could have healed my eye. I had healed my left hand, after all. But my eye I left scarred. It was proof of my crimes—a reminder that I had let my unit die—a way for me to ensure that I never forgot any of them.

Over the course of a month, many people visited. My fellow knights. Lieutenant Colonel Siglis. The General. Even the king himself had made an appearance. None of them had asked me to return, however. Rather, it seemed to me they came to ensure I did not follow my unit into the afterlife.

"Which I suppose," I muttered, "is one option."

Death.

I had let my own unit perish. I alone had survived. Death was, in some ways, a fitting end. I let out a husky chuckle at the thought. I knew that choosing death was the same as running away. None of the unit would have wanted me to end my own life as a form of repentance. Aul had saved my life. I could not let her actions be for nothing.

"But how should I live?"

I had nothing to live for. How was I to use my life? How could I atone for the knights I had lost? I searched for answers, but in the end, I had nothing. I did not have it in me to return and command another unit. I did not think I could

ever wield my powers for the sake of war. Not anymore.

“Revenge, then?” I asked myself.

All that I had left were the feelings of rage and murder that I pushed deep into the recesses of my heart.

Nero Argens. A demon who had escaped before I could land a killing blow. Slaying him would avenge the fallen.

So should I march into the belly of the beast to find and kill him?

I knew that if I did, I would be outnumbered. In the end, death was almost inevitable.

But I would go down fighting and would take demons with me.

“No, don’t be stupid.”

All that would make me was a murderer. Thoughts of revenge clouded my mind, and I couldn’t think straight, so I punched myself in the forehead.

“I need to cool down.”

As the pain throbbed through me, I felt myself returning to normal. I heaved a great sigh, stood up, and went to the dining hall. I washed my face, not caring about the water soaking into my bandage. It was like ice. It felt like a mist was clearing in my mind. I dried my face and took a seat at the empty table. My thoughts swirled with memories.

The dining hall was empty, but once, not so long ago, it had always been packed. My knights were idiots who had laughed loudly and were rowdy. They were honest to a fault. When I looked back, it struck me that we’d had a lot of good times together. They’d annoyed me and they’d frustrated me, but I missed their shenanigans now that they were gone.

I chuckled at myself. I was so pitiful. Was I always so weak? So fragile? I had always believed myself to be strong. But just like that, I had crumbled to pieces. I felt like a joke. I thought myself a fool.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Throw it all away and choose death? Choose the path of vengeance?

Neither struck me as a worthwhile choice.

What would my unit think if they saw me now?

I knew that they’d be angry. They might even be sad.

“Please, go on. Be the woman we all look up to.”

Aul’s last words echoed through my mind. I thought about them, over and over, and it dawned on me that I was a far cry from the captain that they had all once looked up to.

What would they say if they saw me now?

“They’d laugh at me.”

They’d laugh like idiots. They’d say it wasn’t like me to worry so much. I knew that was exactly what they’d say. But I’d forgotten because when they left it was only their deaths that I could remember. My trusted unit had always been positive. They wouldn’t have lingered on their past regrets. They would have kept their eyes ahead, on the future, and would have run for it at a full sprint.

That’s who they were, each and every one of them.

My eye clouded with tears.

This is the last time I show such weakness. So please, forgive me this once, or I won’t be able to go on.

It was like I could hear them, then, calling to me.

“Captain.”

It was nothing, but still it brought a smile to my face. I rubbed at my eyes and tore the bandage from my face.

“I’m going to be fine,” I whispered as I headed for the door.

I knew what I was going to do.

I was going to be the woman that they all looked up to.

I would live in a way that was worthy of their sacrifices. They had saved me. So I would live as they wanted me to.

“And I know just how to do it.”

I would build a team that saved lives. I knew now of the constant threat of death. I knew the sadness that came with it. My new team would not let more death come to pass. Even though the team didn’t have a name yet, I knew that it would be of huge importance.

War was coming. If Nero was telling the truth, then the Demon Lord was going to awaken. That powerful force that had tyrannized humanity until he was felled by the hero was going to return. Humanity was once more in danger.

If war came to our lands again, then our knights would have to fight, and many would die. But I would work to ensure that they didn’t. I would save the injured and the wounded. I would make sure that nobody suffered the same heartbreak that I did.

“But I’ll need help.”

I would need at least five people and at least two healers.

“And one just like me.”

I would need a healer who could do his job as he moved and fought, just like me. It didn't matter how strong a person was, if they could not move then they could not save lives. So I needed a healer built from the same stuff as me. Someone who didn't just heal but could navigate a battlefield and destroy any obstacles that stood in his way.

"But does such a person exist?"

In the past, I'd met healers who had come from other countries to become my disciples. I had tried to teach them, but they had all given up after just one day. To enter into my world required extraordinary fortitude of mind. Physical strength wasn't what mattered. What mattered was an unbreakable spirit, no matter the circumstances.

A spirit like Aul's.

"A healer just like me, huh?"

A strong body and healing powers made one almost indestructible. Such a healer could endure and survive my training. As long as they were like me, they would not perish.

I do not want to lose another person like that ever again.

"Then I just need to find a disciple."

But for the time being I let the thought slip from my mind, opened the door, and walked outside.

* * *

"That's the story of my past," I said.

Olga remained silent. His expression was hard to read. He probably wasn't sure how to respond—what to say.

"I don't need any consolation," I said. "I didn't tell you any of that to garner any sympathy."

"Oh, uh, okay," said Olga. "But wasn't it hard for you?"

"Huh? Are you stupid all of a sudden? Of course it was hard. It was excruciating."

If I'd felt nothing at all, I wouldn't have been human.

"Oh, right. Yes, of course. But, ouch?!"

"Wipe that sad look off your face. It's annoying me."

"What did you just do to me?!"

I'd flicked a little healing bullet at him. Now, however, I crossed my arms and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Go home, Olga," I said. "If you keep moping around looking like that you're only going to kill the mood around here."

"I suppose so. In which case, yes, I'll return home. Ururu will likely spend the night, so please look after her."

"I will if she behaves herself."

Olga laughed and headed for the door.

"Then I'll hope for the best," he said, turning around as if remembering something. "Oh, by the way."

"What?"

"How do you see Usato?" Olga asked. "What is he to you?"

I was at first surprised by the question but relaxed into a smile.

Olga always has a few questions up his sleeve to surprise you with.

“He’s a disciple and he’s a handful,” I said. “I’ve still got a lot left to teach him.”

“Well then, he’s got a tough road ahead,” said Olga, chuckling.

Olga looked happy as he bowed politely and left the room.

“A handful,” I muttered to myself. “Yep, that’s what he is.”

I turned my gaze from the door to the window.

At first, I’d thought of Usato as just a brat—just some kid with no special qualities who got wrapped up in the hero summoning. But when I heard that he had healing magic, I decided I would try to train him. Somewhere inside of me, I had decided that he would be my last try.

No healer had ever been able to endure my training. They had all spat their venom at me and disappeared. I’d had hopes for Olga and Ururu, but even they hadn’t made it. I had come to believe that I would never find a healer like me. That was when I met Usato.

With Usato, some part of me, long frozen, shattered and began to move again. He did not fold, and he did not give up. He fought through my training as if his very life depended on it. So many times, I saw flashes of Aul in him. I saw them in the way he talked back. I saw them in his unyielding spirit, his stubborn attitude, and his need to win. He was just like Aul. His development was startling.

Usato sped through the battlefield saving lives, even going so far as to save the very heroes he had been summoned with. At the end of the battle, he said, “I’m glad I met you, and I’m so glad I could help . . .”

I cannot describe how that felt.

“Your life too has saved my own,” I said.

Usato was out there doing his best to accomplish his mission. I knew that he would face hardships on that journey, but I also knew he would overcome them.

“He’s earned my stamp of approval.”

He would climb any wall he faced and would return home.

Your home in this world is here, Usato. The rescue team.

I did not have to speak the words aloud, and so I went on looking at the night sky.

Chapter 6: Arrival at Samariarl, the Prayerlands!

With our new companion Nea along for the ride, things had gotten . . . tougher, in a manner of speaking. For starters, she was a three-piece combo of noisy, annoying, and clumsy. To top it off, she never stopped arguing and fighting with Amako. The fact that Amako had long stopped caring about her made it seem a bit like Nea was mostly fighting with herself, but that didn't make her any less of a racket.

Thankfully, after a few days on the road, Nea calmed down a little. I should stress the word 'little'. Nea had a motor mouth on her. It never seemed to slow down. Today was no different.

"Hey, Usato! Tell me about the world you came from!"

Nea was sitting on my shoulder in her owl form, prodding me to open up. Her words brought a sigh out of me. I really didn't want to. Don't get me wrong; the talking part was fine. It was only natural that Nea wanted to talk about my home. That was the whole reason she wanted to capture me in the first place. But the girl was obsessive about her interests. I knew I had to tread cautiously. If I wasn't careful, she'd be throwing questions at me all day and all night.

"Come on, say something!" Nea said. "It's boring just walking in silence!"

Do you have to sound so condescending about it? You're not even walking. You're riding on my shoulder.

Nea started poking me in the cheek with a wing. It was starting to annoy me, but I grinned at her.

"Well then, how about I tell you about the vampires from my world?" I suggested.

“Wow! Vampires from another world!”

She took the bait, hook, line, and sinker.

Now to let her play on the line some.

“Vampires in my world can lift boulders with ease and can suck their prey’s blood just by looking at them. They swoop into people’s houses like sparrows in the night, sucking their prey dry and leaving them dead. They’re monsters in the truest sense of the word and practically the lords of the night.”

I mixed a little fact with a lot of fiction and Nea flinched in awe.

“Wh-whoa,” she uttered, “They’re uh, really something . . .”

“And that’s not all. They can fire rays of light from their eyes and breathe a blue poison gas just like a dragon. They can increase their size at will and turn into a mist so that no wall will ever stop them. If you ask me, vampires in my world are the most dangerous creature known to man.”

“Is that even a vampire though?!” exclaimed Nea. “It sounds like something entirely different!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” I asked.

I *was* a liar, of course. But Nea had to learn her place. Because I spoke with something of a toneless voice, Nea believed me and shivered at the thought of these nonexistent vampires. Clearly, she was shaken by the idea that the vampires I described entirely eclipsed the powers and abilities of the vampires she knew.

I was having *so* much fun.

“Y-you’re just playing around, right?” said Nea. “Vampires couldn’t possibly be so monstrous, right? But wait. Does that mean that in your eyes, I’m as puny

and miserable as vampires get?”

“Well, if I’d been telling you the truth, then yes,” I admitted.

“Huh?”

“And you’re not puny. More pathetic.”

Nea turned to me, frozen as she finally grasped the meaning of what I’d just told her.

“Ahhhh!” she cried, flapping her wings. “The nerve! How dare you lie to me!”

Nea spread her wings wide and made to peck at me with her beak, but right before she hit me, she froze as if bound by an invisible chain and slid off my shoulder with a pitiful moan.

I caught Nea in my hand and looked down at her; her eyes were spinning in a daze.

“*You’re* the one who made the contract, so *you’re* the one who decided you can’t do harm to your master,” I said, exasperated.

“I forgot for a second, alright?!”

“But *you* cast the spell. How did *you* forget?”

Nea was forbidden from doing me any harm. The familiar contract that bound us had many conditions, and one of those was that she couldn’t hurt me. The extent of that harm was something that I, her master, could decide at my own discretion. So if I gave the order, she could work her magic on me. This meant that I didn’t have to worry about her ever trying to hurt me. But I never would have imagined that she’d forget the conditions of her own spell.

“You dumb bird . . .” muttered Amako.

“What did you just call me?!” shouted Nea, fired up.

Amako was walking with Blurin ahead of Nea and me. She turned back to Nea with a look of disdain.

“Just spouting facts,” she said. “Now I know why you’re riding Usato’s shoulder all the time. You’ve probably forgotten how to walk already.”

“Hoo hoo! Ever since we left the village you’ve been making a fool out of me, but no longer! Hoo!”

Nea sprang from my hand and flew at Amako at tremendous speed. In response, Amako simply tilted her head and, when Nea flew straight by, caught the owl in one hand and whipped her around in circles before throwing her back to me. It all happened in a few seconds. Nea transformed in mid-air, landing on the ground in her human form.

This happens every single time. When will she learn?

“D-damn you,” Nea muttered. “I’ll get you next time, I swear.”

“You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” I said, “but Amako can see the future. How do you beat that? And in your owl form? You’re bound to lose.”

“Shut up! This all started because you lied to me! Why would you do that, you bully?!”

“Oh, come on, you don’t have to cry,” I said, and then: “Alright! Alright! I’m sorry, okay?”

Yeah, it was my fault, but Nea didn’t have to attack Amako like that, either. She could have just fired something back, but she had to take it a step farther and look where it got her.

Nea rubbed her teary eyes, transformed back into an owl, then flew back to my shoulder.

“In the end, it’s always my shoulder, isn’t it?” I said.

“Hmph. Well, I *am* your familiar, aren’t I? This is my rightful spot.”

Over the last few days, Nea had tried Aruku’s shoulder, then Blurin’s, and then the horse that carried our stuff. But in the end she’d decided that my shoulder was her preferred place to sit. It was like her throne. I didn’t mind as long as she didn’t talk my ear off, but sometimes she’d brush my ear or neck with her wings and it tickled. Then there was the matter of the heavy, reproachful gaze Amako was always shooting at me.

“Hm, makes me wonder . . .” I muttered.

I’d heard that Samariarl wasn’t particularly welcoming of beastkin people, so I wondered how they might receive someone like Nea. She was a familiar who could take a human form.

The best person to ask is Aruku, I guess.

“Hey, Aruku?” I asked.

“Yeah? What’s up?” he replied.

He was at the front of the party, leading our horse, but he slowed down to walk by my side.

“I want to ask about Nea,” I said, pointing to her. “We’re linked by our familiar contract, but are human-type monsters allowed into Samariarl?”

Aruku thought about it for a moment.

“Familiars are allowed from what I understand,” he said. “But monsters of Nea’s type are exceedingly rare, so I can’t say for certain either way. There’s a chance the citizens of Samariarl might think her a beastkin and see her unfavorably.”

I'd heard about Samariarl's feelings about beastkin, but now we were in a position where we might need to hide both Amako *and* Nea. It was a real pain.

"Human-type monsters have the intelligence to understand human languages," quipped Nea proudly. "Monsters like me are *so* intelligent we're considered on the same level as beastkin!"

"Right now, I regret letting you join us on this trip," I uttered, and then it hit me: "Wait. Does this mean people might think that Nea is my slave?!"

Aruku laughed.

"Well, it's certainly possible."

No way. What a burden to have to bear.

Nea was the one who forced the familiar contract on me, but I was the one who'd end up looking like a slave driver. Not only that, but Nea didn't have a strong control over her alternate forms. When Amako had swung her earlier, she'd turned back into her human form just like that. If things went bad, we'd be looking at more than just being driven out of Samariarl. In a worst-case scenario, they'd be on the hunt for her, and I'd end up behind bars.

"Then we just have to make sure we don't get caught," said Nea. "I'll just stay in my owl form at all times. Easy."

"Please, at least stay in your human form," I begged.

"But the owl is so much easier. I don't even have to walk."

She was a bird that didn't even want to move.

Why did Nea even choose an owl in the first place?

Her overconfidence, too, only left me more worried. She was going to stand out. All Nea knew of the world was what she read of it in books, so something

was bound to happen. I decided then and there that she'd have to wait somewhere safe while I handed over our letter to Samariarl's leaders.

"Aruku," I said, "shall we have Amako and Nea wait somewhere while we deliver the letter? I'm not keen on putting them together given how they get along, but it's better than having them with us in the castle, right?"

"Yes, I agree," replied Aruku. "We'll have them wait somewhere together with Blurin. Does that work for you, Amako? Nea?"

"Nope," said Amako and Nea together.

I should have known.

This wasn't surprising after the last few days. My shoulders slumped with defeat, and at that moment Amako tugged at my coat sleeve. I looked down at her.

"But if we have to, then . . . I will," muttered Amako.

"Amako," I said.

She's a good girl. She's too good. She understands the circumstances so well that now I'm worried about her.

"Nea? That means you too," I started.

"No way," she said, cutting me off. "Why do I have to waste my time with some disrespectful beastkin?"

She's so annoying. Aren't you supposed to be older than Amako? I guess you leave me no choice.

I walked on over to Blurin and gave him a pat on the head.

"Amako's being so responsible. You think so too, right? She's not like someone else I know, all stubborn and selfish."

“Gwah.”

“You’re right, Blurin. How about meat for dinner? All you’ve been eating recently is fruit. You need something that’s going to give you some more power. Aha! How about some kind of *bird meat*? I think I know just the thing . . .”

Nea made to fly from my shoulder in a panic, but I held her in place with my left hand. She squealed. I turned my eyes to her with a smile. The were met with the sight of a teary-eyed owl shivering in place.

Well, how about it? How about you?

“You know, I was just thinking of how happy I’d be to wait with Amako!” Nea said.

“Oh, is that so? I’m so glad,” I said.

Finally, she was willing to play along. I nodded and let her go free. Nea shook her head.

“How can you just torment and intimidate people so calmly?!” she cried. “Have I lost touch with common sense or are you completely insane?!”

“Relax,” said Amako. “He’s just completely insane.”

Aruku laughed.

“Well, he’s certainly one of a kind,” he added.

“Don’t make it sound like it’s good!” protested Nea.

In the end, the whole bird meat thing was a joke anyway. But sometimes it was a necessary measure. If Nea got too stubborn, she’d only make things harder for all of us.

“Well, you’ve said it now, so I expect you to keep your word,” I said to Nea.

“Hmph,” she replied. “Why are you so afraid that I’ll be discovered, anyway? If we’re found out, I’ll just tinker with people’s memories. Wipe them clean.”

“That is our last resort,” I said. “I only want to rely on that if we really have absolutely no other possible way out.”

Nea *could* work her magic on groups, but even then, wiping the memories of a whole crowd wasn’t an easy task, even for her. If she messed up, we could make things even worse for ourselves.

“That magic seems really handy, but it’s very situational,” I said.

“Don’t talk about my magic like that. Nobody tops me in terms of sheer variety! I can control the dead, control the living, bewitch, cast spells, and shapeshift! I spent three hundred years mastering three hexes!”

It was certainly more than me. I only had healing magic. But we didn’t need to control the living or the dead on this journey of ours. If someone saw us using Nea’s powers, the people would start to think that we’d controlled Samariarl’s leaders and made them accept our letter. As far as I was concerned, the only magic Nea had that was useful to us was her sorcery.

Which reminds me . . .

“Three hexes?” I asked. “I thought it was only the binding hex and the resistance hex. And you’re not good at either of them.”

“Why did you even say that last part?! But! You did notice something interesting!”

Nea looked supremely triumphant and proud of herself. A single hex often took a human a lifetime to master; she was making it known that three was an incredible achievement.

“The third hex is a hex that all sorcerers must master before any and all

others," she said with a giggle.

"Wow, then it really must be something special," I said.

"And it is! My third hex is," and here Nea paused for dramatic effect, her eyes alight with brimming confidence, "a release hex!"

"Oh," I said. "Oh . . ."

Suddenly I wasn't all that impressed. Nea seemed to notice my disappointment, and a little cry of rage escaped her.

"What the heck kind of a reaction is that?!" she demanded. "The release hex is a hugely important part of sorcery!"

"Well, it's just, I don't really get it," I admitted.

I was surprised that the hex even existed in the first place, if I was being honest.

"Listen up, okay? Sorcery either dissipates based on a hex's fundamental core, or its effects linger semi-permanently. It's one or the other! That's why the first thing you have to learn is how to release a hex!"

Ah, so that's why the effects of the binding hex dissipated with time.

But if the binding hex was semi-permanent, I would have been bound until Nea released me. In that sense, the release hex really was important.

"And how long did it take to master the release hex?" I asked.

"Heh heh," giggled Nea. "Of course, a *human* would ask that."

Naturally, I was curious. If the hex took a long time to master, you wouldn't have time to learn any other hexes at all. You'd die of old age.

Nea opened her wings in a wide, ostentatious gesture.

“Whoa!” I cried. “What are you doing?!”

“It took me only forty years!” Nea announced. “Which means I did it rather quickly! I’ve never used it on any complicated hexes, but I can release the effects of a simple hex in an instant!”

I guess for a monster with a long lifespan, forty years really was quick. But if a human started learning that hex from the moment they were born, they’d still be well into middle age by the time they mastered it. With that in mind, I had to wonder: Was it *really* worth mastering?

“And your release hex has its uses?” I asked.

“Of course it does! Sorcerers are everywhere, right? Those involved in sorcery wield dangerous tomes filled with curses and hexes. Mastering the release hex is essential for such threats!”

“Huh?” I uttered.

Sorcerers? Everywhere?

I tilted my head, puzzled, and looked over at Aruku, who shook his head with a wry grin. I looked back at Nea. She was proud of her hex because she believed that sorcery was used everywhere.

But actually . . .

“No way,” I whispered.

Nea doesn’t know that the practice of sorcery is essentially extinct now.

But it made sense. She’d spend her whole life in Ieva Village and her family manor. She would have thought of sorcery as rare, but nonetheless prevalent elsewhere. Revealing the truth to her was a cruel, unimaginable thing. It would be like telling her that she’d just wasted forty years of her life.

“Hey, Usato,” said Amako.

I stopped her before she could say anything more.

“Don’t say it,” I said. “Don’t you dare tell her. Look how happy she is.”

I glanced at the blissfully ignorant Nea, then turned away. I would never, ever tell her that sorcery was a lost art, and that her release hex had almost no practical use anymore. It was all the more painful for me because clearly this was the first time Nea had ever been able to brag about her achievement.

“So?” Nea said. “Pretty amazing, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Totally amazing.”

Please don’t look at me with that pride in your eyes. It just makes you pitiful.

“I know. I really do,” said Nea with a giggle. “But why won’t you look at me?”

I looked straight ahead as a huge walled city came into view. I counted my blessings and pointed at it.

“There it is!” I said.

Everyone turned to the direction I was pointing. Past the wall was a building that looked distinctly like a castle and a tower that stood just as tall.

“So that’s Samariarl,” I exclaimed.

It had been about two weeks since we’d left Luqvist. We’d run into a little trouble when we met Nea, but we were back on track, and now we had finally reached our destination.

Chapter 7: A Sudden Air of Disquiet! The King who Knows Usato!

We had arrived at Samariarl, the Prayerlands. It had been a long and arduous journey; yet, for me, this was where my duties really began. Unlike at Luqvist, I wouldn't have Welcie's support. This time *I* was responsible for passing on the Llinger Kingdom's letter.

Before entering Samariarl, we first had to speak with the guards at the outer gates. Amako of course had her hood up to hide her ears, and Nea was in her human form. We decided to introduce Blurin as my familiar.

The guards were naturally cautious at the sight of the grizzly, but once we convinced them that Blurin wasn't going to do any harm, we were allowed entry. However, I couldn't help feeling like there was something strange about the way the guards held themselves.

"You came from the Llinger Kingdom?" said one. "Ah! I see! Please, enter. Your familiar isn't allowed into the city, but you can leave him in the stables just by the gates."

That's weird. They didn't even ask us what we were here for.

We took Blurin to the stables, where Aruku and I started laying down some hay for the grizzly and our horse.

"It's like they already know who I am," I muttered.

"Well, it's possible they've already heard of you," said Aruku. "News of the Demon Lord's army has spread across the lands, so it's very likely that the work of the rescue team has too."

But that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone would just believe it. I mean,

nobody thinks very much of healing magic in the first place. If news came in that a healer was running around the battlefield saving lives, would people just believe that?

"Well, I guess there's no point worrying about it too much."

After all, we'd made it into Samariarl, which was a relief in and of itself.

"And thankfully Nea didn't get us into any trouble."

"Don't you think you might be a little too worried about her?" Aruku asked.

"Well, I'm the reason she's here. It's up to me to look out for her."

Nea had almost ended her own life, but I'd saved her from that fate. As a member of the rescue team, I had to be responsible for not just my life, but the lives of others too. So now that I'd saved Nea, naturally I wanted to watch over her.

"She looks like she's a barrel of excitable raw energy, but this is her first time away from the place she called home," I said. "It's her first trip into the outside world. I'm sure she's as anxious as she is excited."

"Yes, you raise a good point."

The scenery that surrounded us, the city we had entered, Nea had never laid eyes on any of it before. Everything would be new.

"That's why—" I started.

"Come on Usato! Pick it up!" shouted Nea.

She sounded as bright and carefree as always. I let out an exasperated sigh. Aruku laughed.

"Well, let's finish up," he said. "We don't want to keep the other two waiting."

“Okay.”

We shifted around some hay to make sure that Blurin had room to move, then led the grizzly and our horse into the stables. Blurin let out a lazy roar and slumped comfortably into his new bed of hay. He was asleep in seconds.

“Just take it nice and easy,” I said, patting him on the head.

“What now?” I asked, turning to Aruku. “Should we head straight for the castle?”

I figured we didn’t need to hurry to find lodgings. It wasn’t like we needed to prioritize seeing the sights. The castle struck me as our top priority. Aruku, however, shook his head.

“No. There’s one other thing we should do first,” he said.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“We should send word to Llinger that we’ve arrived here safely.”

Send word? But the Llinger Kingdom is so far away.

Aruku must have noticed my confusion, because he looked suddenly apologetic.

“Oh, I see. You never would have had a chance to use the service before. Welcie handled that when we were in Luqvist, so of course you don’t have any idea what I’m talking about.”

“Handled what?” I asked, even more confused.

I looked over at Amako and Nea. Amako was surprised I wasn’t following, but Nea looked just as stumped as I did.

Well, it’s no surprise that the vampire shut-in doesn’t know.

“It’ll be easier for you to just see it for yourself,” said Aruku. “Follow me.”

We gathered up the bags we needed and headed for the city. The tower really stood out. A silver bell hung mysteriously at its tip.

“That tower sure is something,” I said, looking up at it as we made our way into the city.

Unlike Llinger, where most shops sold fruits and vegetables, Samariarl was filled with shops selling a variety of different tools. The place was just as crowded as Llinger, and lively to boot. I told Amako and Nea to stay close as we made our way through the crowds.

“As you know, Samariarl is the Prayerlands,” said Aruku, “but it’s also famous for the magical items they produce here.”

“So most of the items we’re looking at are magical?” I asked.

“That’s right. Most of what you see here is for daily use and not particularly expensive.”

Having spent most of my time in this world in Llinger, I wasn’t very well versed in magical items, so it was a bit overwhelming to see so many of them. I wondered if there was a fire- lighting implement. If I ever got into another situation like the one with Inukami-senpai in the forest, that kind of tool would come in very handy.

“I’m always using the magical tools they make here,” Nea remarked. “They work for hours on the smallest amounts of magical energy.”

“But you never left Ieva, right? How did you buy anything?” I asked.

“Tetra had business in Samariarl, so I asked her to buy some stuff for me when she went.”

Like a kid begging their grandparents for gifts, probably.

Nea was looking every which way in wonder and excitement. That was when I felt Amako bump into me from behind. She stood close, clinging to my coat sleeve.

“Amako? What’s wrong?” I asked.

I couldn’t see Amako’s face, hidden under her hood, but I could sense that she was nervous. It wasn’t like her, so I looked around for the source of it, feeling suddenly cautious.

“Oh, it’s that boy,” I uttered.

The boy was dressed in neat clothes and sitting politely on a chair, but he wasn’t just an ordinary young child. That much was clear from the steel collar around his neck.

“He’s a slave.”

We had just come face to face with a reality of this world that we’d never seen in Llinger or Luqvist. I put a reassuring hand to Amako’s head. Slaves were humans bought by other humans. I’d be lying if I said that it didn’t move me. Nonetheless, it was a reality I had to come to terms with while I lived here.

Those thoughts swirled in my mind as I met eyes with the young slave. A friendly smile rose to his lips, and he waved. I smiled awkwardly and returned the gesture. As I did, I felt Amako grip my sleeve more tightly. She avoided looking at him.

It was a little different from what I had imagined of slavery. I had expected something more tragic, but the boy was surprisingly bright.

“You can keep hold if you’re feeling worried, Amako,” I said.

“Okay.”

The boy had probably already been bought. He was somebody’s property. The reason Amako was so nervous was probably because she was imagining the uproar if the people here found out she was a beastkin.

“I’m sorry, I should have been more careful,” Aruku said, noticing Amako’s expression. “They never used to keep their slaves out in the open like that.”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “It’s something I was always going to have to face at some point.”

Neither Amako nor I blamed Aruku, of course.

“Anyway, where are we going, Aruku?” I asked.

“Oh, right. It should be right around here.”

As if on cue, a series of blue shapes sped by our eyes, flying through the skies. Instinctively, I followed their trajectory and saw that they were birds. They’d stopped at a two-story house a short distance from us.

“Pigeons?” I questioned.

The blue birds looked a lot like pigeons. They were all lined up. Each of them had a little sack on its back. I watched them with great curiosity and noticed a sign hanging underneath the roof on which they all sat. There was an image of a pigeon holding a letter, and next to it the word “Hoobird.”

“Hoo . . . bird?” I uttered. “Aruku, is that the place?”

“Yes, that’s our first stop,” he replied.

Now I finally understood what Aruku meant earlier.

“It’s a courier house,” explained Aruku. “We’ll send a bird to Llinger from there to let everyone know that we’ve arrived here safely.”

Hoobird.

I looked up at the birds again and sighed in amazement. A hoobird courier house was what people called the organization that handled the delivery of letters and packages. It made use of hoobird familiars, which were monsters that looked similar to pigeons. They were like the post office back in my world, and hoobirds were their postmen. Letters were placed in the bird's rucksacks for deliveries. The birds were apparently capable of flying very long distances.

"Are they not like ordinary pigeons?" I asked.

"No. For starters, hoobirds are as fast as the wind," replied Aruku. "They're monsters, too, so they're much stronger and can carry much heavier loads."

"Wow."

"The name courier house comes from the fact that it's where the hoobirds roost."

"Oh, so it's literally a house for the couriers. I see."

While Aruku sent off our letter, Amako told me more about hoobirds. It was really fascinating. There was nothing about them in the books I'd read except for their name and basic ecological details, so I'd never imagined that they could work as familiars in a way so beneficial to human life. Just as I was marveling at them, Nea decided to butt in and say something too.

"Yeah, their whole ecological deal is pretty interesting, but what's *more* interesting is their familiar contracts," she said.

"Hm? They're different from normal?" I asked.

"They're all sorts of different," replied Nea.

I'd assumed that familiar contracts were all the same across the board, but

according to Nea, this wasn't the case at all.

"Those birds aren't contracted to just one individual," Nea explained. "These hoobirds have contracts with multiple people, so they have owners in whichever country they're in."

"So that's how they deliver and receive letters, huh? But how do you know that, Nea?"

Did she read it in one of her books? Or did she work it out by looking at them? Nea giggled at my question.

"A long time ago, I captured a courier house employee. He told me all about it. Seeing this place makes me all nostalgic."

"Nea . . ." I muttered.

That poor kidnapped guy or girl probably didn't have any other choice but to tell you. Wait, hang on a second.

That was when it hit me. If I'd known about hoobirds earlier, I could have sent word to Rose about Nack before he even arrived in Llinger.

Oh. Uh, sorry Nack.

Knowing Rose, she probably wouldn't so much as glance at the letter I wrote. She'd probably have her own unique way of welcoming Nack to boot.

Good luck, Nack.

"Alright, all done," said Aruku, joining us as I sent a silent prayer to my young disciple. "I sent a report to Llinger. I also received this."

It was a letter.

"What's in it?" I asked.

“It’s a letter from your friends.”

“Really?!”

That must mean Inukami-senpai and Kazuki!

I looked at the contents of the letter. There wasn’t much in the way of finer details, but even then, it still surprised me. It said things like, “We’ve entered the finals of a dueling tournament!” and “We’re hunting a demon bull!”

It sure sounded like an epic journey.

A dueling tournament and a demon bull, huh?

“Judging by what’s in this letter, I guess a dragon of pure evil isn’t all that big of a deal, huh?” I muttered.

“No, it very much is, Sir Usato,” said Aruku.

“One hundred percent,” added Nea at the same time.

“It’s a massive deal,” said Amako for good measure.

“You don’t *all* have to refute me at the same time!” I cried.

The most important thing, however, was that when I read the letter, I knew that my two friends were out there doing their best. It made me feel like I had to do my best too.

“What are the heroes like, anyway?” asked Nea.

Well, it’s no surprise that Nea’s going to be curious. It’s in her nature.

“Those two? Well . . .” I started.

“Are they like you?” Nea said, cutting me off. “Are they monst-ow-ow!”

“Who’s a monster? Huh?”

She comes up to me all wide-eyed like a child and then has the gall to call me a

monster? That's why I flicked you in the forehead.

"Ow!" Nea moaned, clutching her head. "What even was that?!"

"Relax. I was holding back."

"You dirty liar! I thought that was going to knock my head clear off my shoulders!"

Talk about an overexaggeration. Rose sends people flying with those kinds of flicks.

"Your version of holding back isn't even holding back," whispered Amako. "And you're totally just saying that."

"What was that, Amako?"

I looked over at Amako, who sank deeper into her hood to make sure her head was safe and out of danger.

I'll let you off the hook this time, but only because you've recovered enough to make snide remarks again.

It was something of a relief to see Amako back to her old self.

Just then, a huge ringing reverberated through the air. It was so loud that I covered my ears. I spun to the source of the sound and saw that it came from the bell in the huge tower.

“That came out of nowh . . . huh?”

The sound continued to echo through the air, but all the hustle and bustle of the city had dissolved into complete and utter silence. I looked around and saw that everybody was on their knees in prayer.

“What is going on?” I uttered.

Everyone except for the people in our party were praying.

“Now you know why it’s called the Prayerlands,” whispered Aruku.

“It’s so strange,” I said.

“Well, yes, I suppose for us as visitors, it looks unusual.”

It didn’t seem like just prayers though. It felt like part of a deeper faith or religion. Even the children had their hands clasped as they prayed fervently. The Prayerlands. I hadn’t thought very much of the name when I first heard it, but I couldn’t help but be struck by how strange it all seemed now that I was seeing it for myself.

“This, uh, it kind of freaks me out,” said Nea, looking uncomfortably at the tower.

“What’s the matter? Feel like the sound of that bell’s going to purify or cleanse you?” I teased.

“I’m not *that* evil!” spat Nea.

So you will *admit to being a little evil after all.*

The bell stopped ringing suddenly, and as soon as it stopped, the people of Samariarl returned to what they were doing. The city was bustling just like it was when we first got here. I couldn’t believe how quickly it happened.

“Well then, Usato,” said Aruku, “let’s take Amako and Nea back to Blurin, then visit the castle.”

“Sounds good. We’ve sent word to Llinger, so let’s go.”

The letter is the whole reason we’re here, after all.

I checked my luggage to make sure I still had my three letters and the spares.

“Everything’s ready,” I said.

Now all we had to do was leave our luggage with Amako, Nea, and Blurin.

“Alright then, Amako and Nea, let’s . . . huh?”

The two of them were gone. They’d suddenly disappeared, just like that.

“Oh, please tell me they haven’t pulled an Inukami-senpai and gone off wandering somewhere,” I muttered.

But neither of them seemed like the type to disappear without saying something. Especially not Amako.

But this is Samariarl, and they don’t like beastkin here.

Unsettling thoughts began to flash through my mind. I felt suddenly panicked and turned to Aruku for help.

“Aruku, the girls, they’re gone!” I said.

“Not good. Let’s put the letters on hold for now and look for them.”

I nodded. We couldn't afford to wait until it was too late. The letters were important, but we could hand them out at any time. Our companions were a higher priority right now. But just as I was about to move, Aruku grabbed my arm.

"Sir Usato. Stop," he said.

"What's wrong, Aruku," I said. "We have to hurry."

"Look behind you."

I did as he said and saw a group of knights walking toward us. It was clear from their gazes that they were heading for us. The knight leading the others had a long sword and wore armor that included a flowing robe. There were white streaks through his hair, and he spoke in a deep voice.

"A moment of your time, if I may?" he asked.

"Yes?"

Who are these guys?

Whoever they were, I wanted to get them out of my hair so I could get to searching for Amako and Nea. The knight bowed politely.

"Am I correct in assuming that you are Ken Usato, member of the rescue team at Llinger Kingdom?" he asked.

"What?!"

How does he know who I am?

We still hadn't been to the castle yet. The only thing I'd said to the guards at the entrance was that we'd come from Llinger.

Do these guys have something to do with Amako and Nea disappearing?

I felt my fists clenching. That was when Aruku put a hand on my shoulder.

“Calm down, Sir Usato,” he said.

“But Aruku . . .” I said.

“These men are Samariarl’s knights,” said Aruku. “That, and . . .”

I followed his gaze to the sword hanging from the lead knight’s belt. At the end the sword’s handle was a large sphere. It pulsed with light at regular intervals.

“Now I know why Amako disappeared,” Aruku said, softly enough that only I could hear him.

“Huh?”

“I can’t explain it in front of these knights, but they’re safe. So let’s keep calm.”

“Okay.”

I let my shoulders relax and unclenched my fists. Judging by what Aruku said, Amako must have taken Nea and left.

Are these knights the reason why?

Perhaps Amako saw the future and knew that she had to steer clear of them. That would explain why they left without warning. If that were true, it meant that I could not easily trust the knights who stood before us. I was happy to hear them out, but if they tried to strongarm us, I would meet them with an equal level of resistance.

I calmed my heart and faced the knight before us.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Fegnis, General of the Samariarl Knight Corps,” said the knight, showing the slight hint of a smile. “We are here to escort you. We know how long the journey is from the Llinger Kingdom.”

“An escort? But why?”

A general? The position sounds different from that of the same rank in Llinger, but it’s clear the man is of high rank. In any case, he knows exactly who I am. This doesn’t make sense.

“Our king, Luca Ould Samariarl, would like to see you.”

My jaw dropped.

“What?!”

First there was Amako and Nea disappearing. Then there was Fegnis, the Knight Corps General, who knew exactly who I was. On top of that, the king himself wanted to see me.

It was my first time delivering a letter from Llinger Kingdom and already there was something very ominous in the air.

Extra: Upon the Dragon's Demise

Some time had passed since the dragon had awakened. The Demon Lord and I spoke of minor matters to kill the time. Then I noticed a change in him. He had sensed something, somewhere. His expression was one of consternation and confusion. I was surprised to see that he was even capable of such emotions. But as his personal servant, I inquired into the source of his bewilderment.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"The dragon is dead."

"Excuse me?"

"'Dead' is not quite right," he said. "That which is dead cannot die again. To say as much shows a lack of intelligence. It would be more accurate to say that the dragon has returned to what it always was."

"What it always was, my Lord?"

"Like all monsters, it has dissolved into magical essence."

It seemed that the terrifying dragon was no more. The Demon Lord had said that in time the dragon would rot away, so I could not understand why he was so surprised. He sank back into his throne, put a hand to his mouth, and chuckled when I asked him about it.

"The dragon did not simply dissolve," he explained. "It was powered by enough magic to rampage for at least a month, yet it did not last even a day. There is only one explanation: someone felled the dragon."

"Are you talking of the heroes? I have heard that they wield tremendous power."

The two heroes of Llinger Kingdom had dealt a serious blow to the Demon Lord's army. Judging by the rumors, they were capable of defeating the weakened dragon. But in response to my question, the Demon Lord shook his head.

"The heroes *are* relatively close to the dragon's location, but it was not them, no. The heroes emit a very particular magical energy, you see."

I could not help but feel a certain disbelief. Since he had awakened, the Demon Lord had never once left the castle. How could he possibly have sensed the magical energy of the two heroes?

The Demon King seemed to read my thoughts, and with the hint of a grin, he answered my silent question.

"It is not a difficult thing," he said. "It can be a little exhausting, but when I concentrate, I can sense magical energy across long distances."

"Such power," I remarked. "You are able to discern the very whereabouts of the heroes."

"No. While I can sense magical energy, it is not unlike trying to find a very particular star in a star-filled sky. Whatever special traits they may have, such stars are nonetheless difficult to locate. What I am doing merely amounts to searching for them by force. This is only because I picked up the unique feel of their magical energies when we launched our attack on Llinger."

From my point of view, however, it was astounding to me that the Demon Lord had such magic abilities, difficult or otherwise.

"There are exceptions, however," continued the Demon Lord, "such as dragons—a magical energy as unique as they are frighteningly powerful."

That explained why the Demon Lord understood how many dragons there

were in existence. It made sense to me; the blood of humans had been mixed over many generations, while dragons had survived, as they were, over vast lengths of time. They had an undeniable presence, and their magic energy was pure.

“In any case, the dragon was defeated and by a human, I’d say.”

“By a human?”

The Demon Lord had thought quite highly of the dragon. Just what kind of a monster was this human who defeated it?

“I saw five magical presences in the company of the dragon,” he said. “There was a hybrid necromancer-vampire, a blue grizzly, a beastkin with precognitive vision, a human who wields fire magic, and a healer.”

“You couldn’t put together a more unorthodox group if you tried,” I exclaimed.

The only ordinary one among them was the fire caster.

A hybrid monster, a beastkin that can see the future, and a healer.

It gave me a headache just trying to think about what brought them all to the dragon.

“Did a traveling circus defeat the dragon?” I asked. “Like, did it maybe . . . die of laughter?”

“Your jokes amuse me, Ciel,” said the Demon Lord. “I feel my stomach about to burst. I eagerly await your next humorous barb.”

The compliment, if you could call it that, didn’t make me very happy. The Demon Lord’s expression didn’t change a bit. Not even a twitch. I felt my face flush with embarrassment.

“Exactly how the dragon was felled is a trivial matter,” he continued. “What is of interest is that the group that defeated it was of mixed races.”

“And why is that interesting?”

“Before I was sealed away, humans were foolish creatures who saw themselves as the ultimate race. I had thought they were as stupid now as they were then, but perhaps this is not true of all of them and some oddities exist among their race.”

The Demon Lord then stood up from his throne and looked up. There was nothing but a black ceiling above us, and yet the Demon Lord perhaps saw something different.

“The awakening of the dragon was just the beginning,” he said.

I watched him and I saw his fighting spirit carved into his features. It was almost naively childlike in its purity. But his bold smile was enough to send cold shivers down anybody’s spine.

“The roar of that dragon will echo and bring about much change,” said the Demon Lord. “Forbidden curses, the divine dragon and its descendants, and us demons too. Things are going to get very interesting, Ciel. It’s war. The ceaseless wars of the long past are coming to this world.”

I could say nothing in reply. I had no words. The Demon Lord’s voice echoed through the room as he smiled.

Side Story: The Strength to Face the Mirror

I had failed disgracefully in the war against the Llinger Kingdom. As punishment, I had been stripped of my rank. I was no longer Commander Amila Vergrett of the Demon Lord's third army. Now, I was simply a soldier.

Still, I did not feel humiliated to have been demoted. I would no longer lead or direct from the backlines. Instead, I would earn my honor as a soldier in the thick of battle, killing our enemies with each slice of my blade. I would strengthen my allies through direct action. The Demon Lord had said as much himself. His words had brought about a change in me.

I understood now what I was to do, so I trained endlessly, waiting for our next battle to arrive. The sun had long since set over the training grounds, but on I went, swinging my sword and feeling it cut through the air. I had done this tens of thousands of times, but still I was not satisfied. Even when I had climbed to the rank of commander, I had not felt sated.

A mountain stood before me. A mountain I was still not strong enough to summit.

"I must become *more*," I grunted.

One mountain was my teacher, the commander of the Demon Lord's first army, Nero Argens. He was a warrior who wielded wind magic along with outstanding swordsmanship. With his magic flowing around his body, he easily deflected attacks and moved as fast as the wind itself. In battle, he buoyed his allies as the blood of his fallen foes rained around him.

He was my goal. He was the mountain I had to summit and surpass. But he was not the only one.

“Rose!” I growled.

Rose, the woman who had caused us such suffering in our last battle. As I said her name my grip on my sword tightened. I grew tense. So I let my shoulders relax and took a deep breath.

The day I was demoted, I threw away my personal grudge against her. Because of it, I had been too caught up in my own feelings. I had forgotten my duty. My grudge had left me a fool.

“But the fact remains,” I said to myself. “I must surpass her.”

The sight of Rose bringing my own teacher to the brink of death was burned into my brain. I had only just entered the Demon Lord’s army and was still little more than a trainee. The mission that my teacher brought me on was my first ever. That was why he had ordered me to remain on the backlines; yet, when I felt a change in the air and had gone to check on everyone, I had been met by a hellscape.

The knights who had looked after me on our way into the forest were now dead, having given their lives as they took the lives of the Llinger knights. And while I had managed to get to my teacher and drag him to safety, all the while I had felt the specter of death itself on my back as we ran. It was Rose, glaring at us as she crawled, dragging herself through a field of corpses.

That was the day we met.

I had never felt anything like the murder I felt in Rose’s eyes. And even though I knew that the gaze came from nothing more than a pathetic human, there was a hatred in her that threatened to freeze me completely. I had fled in complete and utter fear. I had never once believed that anyone could take my teacher to the brink of death. I had never believed that humans could be such terrifying

creatures.

“I cannot defeat her.”

I had admitted defeat the moment I saw her. I felt humiliated.

And yet, my spirit persisted.

I felt a fighting spirit well within me, eclipsing the weakness I felt. I wanted to defeat this human who had pushed my own teacher to the limit. It was not about revenge for the fallen. They had given their lives in battle for the future of our kind; vengeance was an insult to their names.

My desire to win was what drove me. Nero was a mountain I had to conquer, just as my fellow knights had been targets for me to reach and surpass. While I could not deny that I hated Rose, my will to defeat her eclipsed my hatred.

“The fire in my heart continues to burn,” I said.

I opened my eyes and gripped my sword tight in hand.

I am the blade of the Demon Lord. I am a soldier that will carve his path.

Until now, I had been obsessed with Rose. I had polished my skills, always and forever with my eyes on our battle. But defeat had brought with it perspective.

I do not fight to regain lost honor. I fight for the future of our race.

I fought because the humans had oppressed us and driven us into the remote lands we now called our domain. It was my duty to fight for all the demons who suffered this fate.

I took a breath and held my sword in a high guard. After an instant of silence, I sliced through the air. I still had so far to go, but that was fine. I was just a soldier. I was no longer a commander and no longer had to worry about the complications of that job. I could focus purely on myself. I could focus on

confronting who I was and building from it.

The next battle was going to be harder. It was going to be bigger. I might even see Rose somewhere on the battlefield. If we did face one another, I would put aside my feelings and fight her with the pure desire to fell her in battle. I would do that for the future of the demon race and for the Demon Lord himself.

“There is no more confusion within me,” I said.

I am Amila Vergrett, soldier of the Demon Lord’s army. I will polish my skills so as to ensure our victory.

Villager

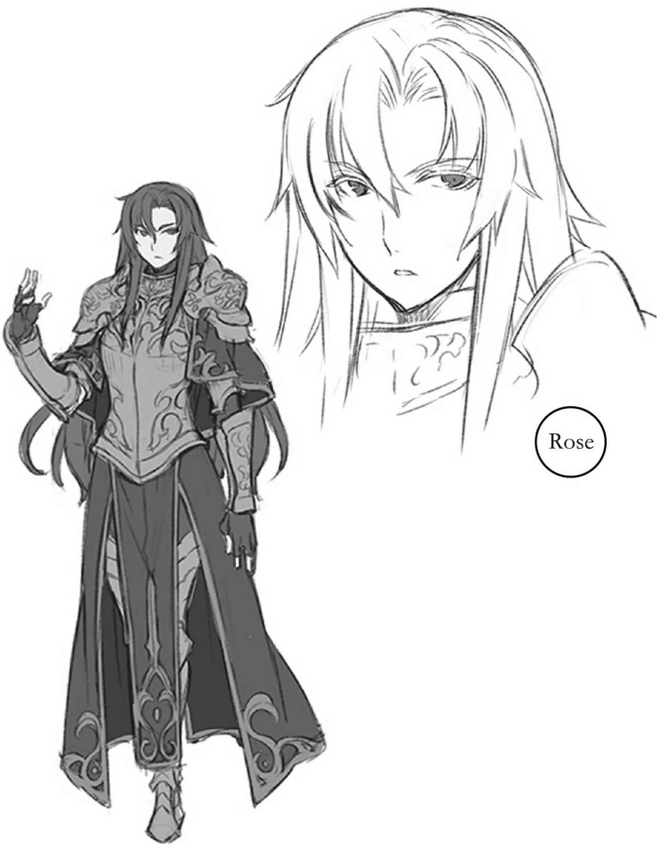
Sorcerer

Traveling Clothes

Nea

Owl

In Armor



Lieutenant Colonel Rose

The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic Volume 5

(CHIYUMAHO NO MACHIGATTA TSUKAIKATA -SENJO O KAKERU KAIHUKUYOIN-Vol.5)

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Written by KUROKATA

Art by KeG

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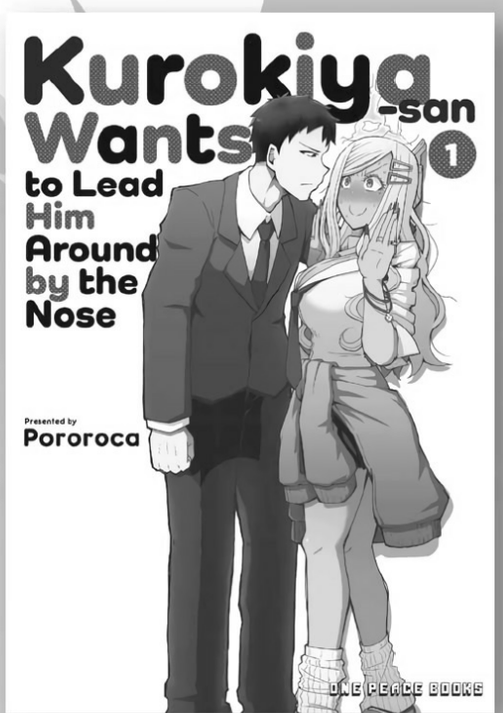

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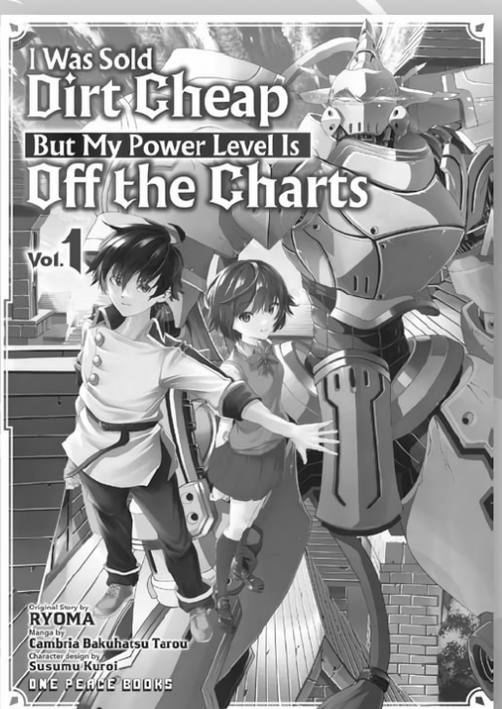

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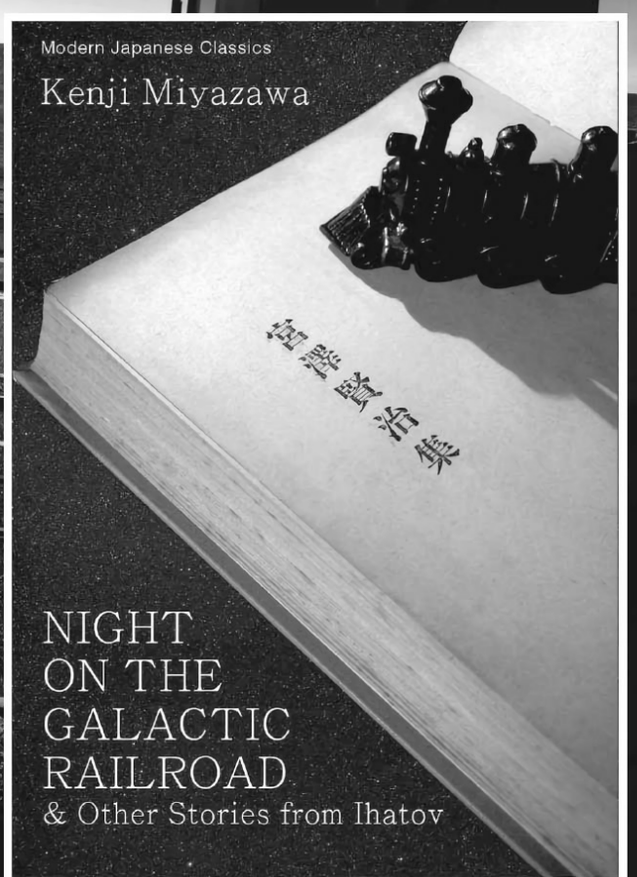

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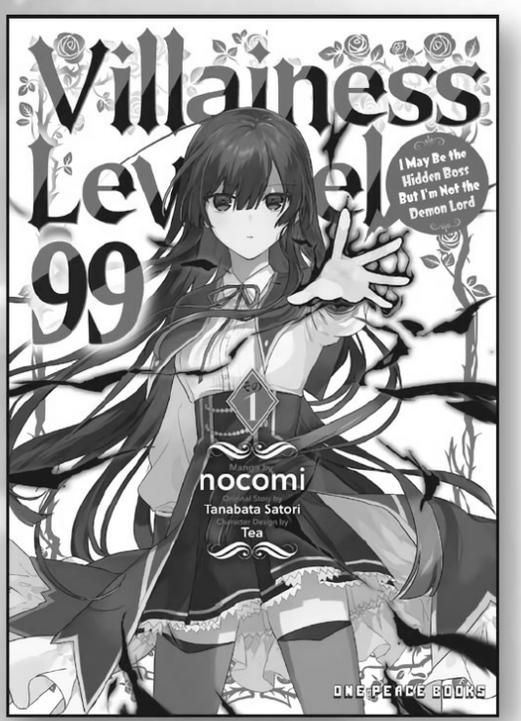

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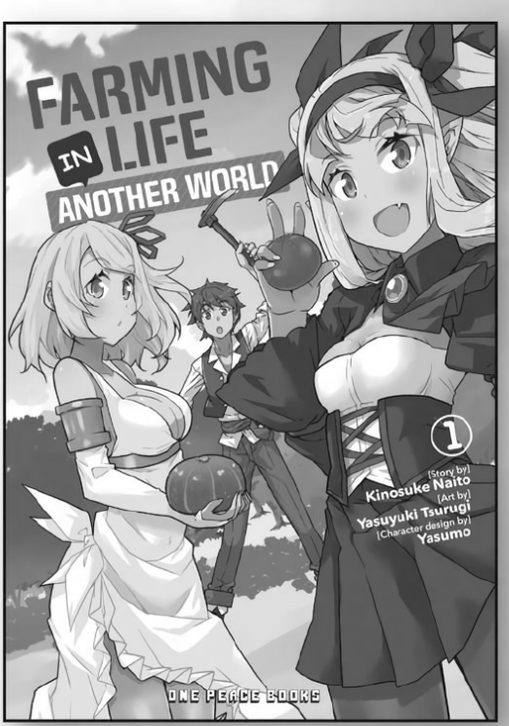

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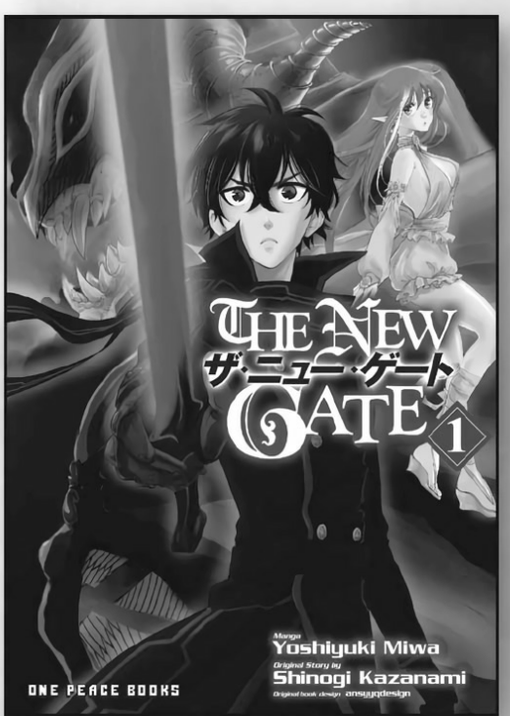

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