

Rifujin na Magonote

Illustration by
Asanagi

2

ORC EROLICA

CONJECTURE CHRONICLES

PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT



2

Orc Erolica

CONJECTURE CHRONICLES



“I wish that, just
once, one of them
would throw caution
to the wind and at
least *try* to date me!
...I'd wait on him
hand and foot for the
rest of his days!”

THUNDER SONIA
An archmage and Elf Hero
who has lived for 1,200 years.
She's looking for a husband,
but due to her high status and
some unsavory personal rumors,
she's permanently single.

Thunder
Sonia

Characters

ORC EROICA

“I'll have
you know,
there's
already
someone
I've set
my heart
upon.”



Aconitum

ACONITUM
An elf army official acting as
Thunder Sonia's personal guard.
He is also involved in international
affairs, through which he met the
woman he plans to marry.

AZALEA
During the war, her ruthless martial ability
caused her to be feared by the succubus
army. Today, she enjoys life as one of the
most decorated soldiers in the elf kingdom.
Since taking a lover, she has learned to find
pleasure in life beyond the battlefield.

Azalea

“Heh. Good
for you,
Mr. Orc.
I hope
you find
yourself
someone
nice, just
like I
found my
darling
hubby.”





"Hmm, the
beastkin
preparation
is better for
deodorizing.
But then again,
this one is
fairy-made,
and all the
advertisements
say fairy-made
is best..."



“...Bash!
I’ll help
you! This
fight belongs
to the elves,
after all! And
this way, it’ll
be two versus
two! A fair
fight!”

“I accept
your
assistance.”

“G-great!
The two
of us
together
will be
unstoppable!”

ORC EROICA

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ORC ERQICA

CONJECTURE CHRONICLES



Rifujin na Magonote

Illustration by
Asanagi


New York

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Orc Eroica 2

Rifujin na Magonote

Translation by Evie Lund

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忖度 (*sontaku*) “conjecture, surmise”; to make an assumption or guess about the feelings of another, and to then demonstrate care or consideration for the other party based on this.

(Source: Wikipedia Japan)

EROICA

Elf Country

ORC

Book Two

The Shiwanashi Forest Saga

1

THE SHIWANASHI FOREST

The Shiwanashi Forest.

It was located southwest of the city of Krassel, on the other side of orc country, which was sandwiched between them.

Save for the giant tree that had given the forest its name, there was nothing too remarkable about it.

But to Bash, the entire forest was bursting with memories.

During the war, the Shiwanashi Forest had been the site of many a pitched and bloody battle.

This land, which was the dominion of one of the finest orc clans, was the orcs' last line of defense when it came to protecting their homeland.

Should this area have fallen to enemy hands, the orcs would have lost their ability to coordinate and correspond with their fairy allies to the north.

Knowing this, the elves attacked this region relentlessly, but they were no match for the combination of the orc and fairy forces.

Bash himself had fought battles in this forest on many occasions. During the war, he had become accustomed to every tree and root—and could probably have made his way through blindfolded, even now.

Thanks largely to Bash's efforts, the orcs had been able to hold the forest to the end of the war. But this victory had not been without considerable sacrifice. The chief of the Shiwanashi Forest clan was killed, and almost every single stronghold had been burned to the ground.

But the forest remained in orc hands to the very end.

If it had been taken, the orcs and the fairies might both have been unable to hold out until the end of the war. It could have spelled annihilation for both

races.

But war is always cruel—and particularly so to the losers.

After the hostilities had finally ceased, the orcs had to stand by and watch as the forest they had shed so much blood to protect was handed over to the elves.

To add insult to injury, over 60 percent of the orcish woodland became the dominion of the elves as well. Another 20 percent was taken by the humans, leaving the orcs with only a mere 20 percent of their own land to eke out a living upon.

As an added bit of cruel irony, the remaining land actually did prove to be enough for the orcs, since many of the thirty clans' numbers had been decimated by the fighting.

"The old stomping grounds! It feels like no time has passed at all..."

"I know what you mean, Boss."

Bash took large strides forward, heading for the occupied territory of the old orcish forest.

Essentially, traveling along this route meant returning, even briefly, to the old orc country. But it couldn't be helped. Bash's destination lay beyond.

"Boss! I knew I recognized this spot! This is where you holed up when you were injured, remember?"

Zell pointed to the opening of a cave.

It was more of a hole really, the sort of place that would be perfect for a hibernating bear to curl up in for the winter. Bash had crawled inside to conceal himself from enemy view while he recovered from a grievous injury sustained in battle.

"How could I forget? If you hadn't come along, that would have been the end for me."

"D'aww, come on, Boss. A little scratch like that wouldn't have killed ya! You're made of sterner stuff!"

But it had been winter at the time. And a bear had indeed been inside the hole.

Yet despite his injuries, Bash had no trouble swiftly killing the bear. Its meat provided him vital sustenance, and its pelt kept him warm as he recovered. By smearing himself with the beast's waste, he was also able to completely mask his scent, keeping him safe from trackers. The elves passed him by, mistaking Bash's stench and slightly exposed furry back for that of a common bear. But Bash had indeed been grievously injured, and he had lost a lot of blood. Even worse, he lost track of Zell during the fighting and was completely alone. Death would have come for him eventually, if he had remained in that state.

If his loyal friend Zell hadn't searched every nook and cranny of the forest for him, eventually discovering him in the hole, then the tale of the Orc Hero Bash would have come to a premature conclusion.

"Shouldn't be too much farther now."

Bash muttered under his breath as he pushed aside several branches. He could already see the glittering river up ahead.

It was about sixty-five feet across, with fast-flowing waters.

The Unmet River marked the border between the human and elf countries. Once they reached the other side, they would be in Shiwanashi Forest proper, dominion of the elves.

The river flowed north, where it joined up with the Barg River tributary.

Everything between the Unmet River and the Barg River was residual orc territory.

"In we go."

Without hesitation, Bash stepped foot into the swirling river water.

Here, the Unmet River was filled with sandbars, and the water was shallow enough in places for travelers to walk across.

During the war, this crossing spot had been an orcish secret, but no longer. Lizardmen topographers had canvassed the land after the war, mapped out the entire river network, and published the maps for purchase by anyone who

cared to buy one.

Still, the way down to this part of the river was tricky and known to few.

Bash, of course, was one of the few.

The orc began splashing and tromping his way through the shallows, in pursuit of the opposite bank, when...

“Huh? Boss, you’re really crossing here?”

Zell’s question gave the orc pause.

“...What’s wrong with crossing here?”

“I mean... There’s nothing *wrong* with it exactly...”

In this postwar era, each country was striving to get ahead after centuries of crippling conflict.

There was no longer any animosity between countries, and none would even think to invade another.

The elf race was no exception. Sure, there had been some bruised egos and harsh feelings toward the orcs immediately after the cessation of hostilities. But once it became clear that the orcs would not put up any further retaliation, the elves abandoned the practice of strictly patrolling their borders altogether.

Well, perhaps *altogether* isn’t quite accurate. Even now, the elves kept an eye on things, just to make sure no rogue orcs were attempting to enter their land.

The Unmet River served as a natural border between the orcs and the humans.

The humans and the elves had long been friendly, and both were blessed with rich and prosperous lands. They hardly bothered monitoring the human border, focusing their guards on the orcs instead.

Bash and Zell would be able to enter Shiwanashi Forest undetected, though. Probably.

“We have to enter by the front gate! We can’t just sneak in from the side entrance! It would be the height of bad manners!”

“...Are you sure?”

“Sure I’m sure!!!”

Despite how lightly manned the elf border was, it was still a border. And even now, the elves preferred to know when orcs entered their country.

And why would someone circumnavigate such a border anyway, unless they were seeking to enter elf lands with nefarious intent?

“I see. Then, what should we do?”

During the course of his life so far, Bash had never really entered a place by its proper entrance. The custom was unfamiliar to him.

He had always taken the hidden paths, the animal trails, the sneaky backdoor routes.

His attempt to cross the river and avoid detection was pure muscle memory left over from a lifetime of war.

“If we head south a little, there’s a bridge, see? We can use that to cross.”

“Whatever you say.”

Bash nodded and changed direction, heading downriver.

If Zell said so, then it must be the right thing to do.

“...Wow, this place sure has changed, hasn’t it?”

After walking in silence for a while, Zell piped up again.

Bash lifted his head and looked around.

The thick canopy of dark-green trees. The clear, fast-running river. The sound of trickling water and rustling foliage.

It was a fine spot. The perfect place for a bit of fishing, followed by an afternoon nap on the shore.

“It’s changed, all right.”

The Unmet River Bash knew had been nothing like this.

The river had been dammed up during wartime to keep the lizardmen reinforcements at bay, and the river itself was less than half as wide then as it was now. The area around the dam had seen much fighting, and the water that

flowed from that point had been dark and brackish with mud and blood. Bodies floated along at regular intervals.

The surrounding trees had also been burned and destroyed by the ravages of war, leaving blackened husks.

The smoky, suffocating air had been filled with the roaring of orcish war cries, the chanting of elven spells, the booming of explosives, and the clanging of steel against steel.

The gentle sounds of the forest and the trickling river had been completely drowned out by the din.

“It *has* changed...but it’s simply gone back to how it was always meant to be.”

“Ah, how poetic you are all of a sudden, Boss! But you’re completely right! The forest was always meant to be peaceful and soothing like this! It is precisely as it should be! Thick trees with rustling green foliage, pristine rivers of sparkling water, beautiful flowery meadows, with the sun shining down from the heavens! Flitting and zooming around a forest like this makes me feel so at peace!”

“Hmm. You sounded almost like a typical fairy just now, Zell.”

“Ack! No, no, no, Boss! I am no ordinary fairy! I am an outlier among fairies, a pioneer of my race! The shiniest and brightest example of a fairy to ever be found in all of fairykind! I put the fair in fairy! I put the flair in flair... Uh... Well, never mind that! Although, I suppose I’m only here because I got bored of the fae life...”

“*Snuff, snuff...* Hmm?”

While Zell was babbling, Bash sniffed the air. A curious scent had entered his nostrils.

It was the smell of meat.

But not ordinary meat. No, this scent was very familiar to Bash—and quite unpleasant, at that.

It was the scent of rotting flesh.

Meat so rotten as to be completely inedible, an affront to the senses.

All orcs have strong stomachs and can digest rotten carrion from time to time when there is no alternative.

But there is one type of meat orcs never eat: the meat of sentient beings.

This includes orc flesh, of course, as orcs are not cannibals. But it also extends to the other sentient races of the world.

Even orcs have an understanding of ethics. It is true that before the war, they consumed the flesh of other races. But after fighting against them for so many years, the orcs began to think of their foes as beings worthy of respect, just as they themselves were.

“...”

Bash cast his gaze across the river's breadth, where something could be seen squirming on the far shore.

It was an amalgamation of flesh that was mostly brown, with white-and-purple marbling. It was so necrotic that it looked like it was about to start sloughing off the bone, but its shape was surprisingly well-preserved.

It was in the shape of a person.

A mass of rotten flesh, in humanoid form.

“That's a zombie.”

“A zombie, yes.”

The zombie looked to Bash, a red glow flaming in its eye sockets. Then it began to shamble into the river.

It was making its way straight toward Bash.

For some reason, zombies abhor the living. They attack anything that draws breath in an attempt to steal away their life force. None knew why. Was it because they held a grudge against the living? Or was it because the Lord of the Dead bid them do so...?

Now the zombie was homing in on Bash, compelled mindlessly by whatever forces guided it.

But the current was too strong. The zombie stumbled and fell into the water

before being swept off downstream.

“Looks like we need to watch out for zombies in this area.”

“So it would seem.”

After the war, and during the war, too, undead beings started popping up all over the place.

Wherever battles were fought, zombies and reanimated skeletons soon appeared. Many theorized that the bodies of fallen soldiers were compelled to reanimate by some mysterious force, whether because of unfinished business or out of resentment for their own slaying.

The soldiers and warriors went bravely into battle—and perished.

They marched into battle believing that death was not an option. But still, it took them.

How could they reconcile themselves to such a fate? Their souls burned with rage, and they could not accept death. Many rose again as members of the undead.

And the Shiwanashi Forest had seen much death in war.

That the forest could harbor zombies came as no great surprise.

Nor was the sight of zombies a rare one.

The orc country, too, had seen its share of zombies and roaming skeletons.

The reanimated corpses were not only those of orcs. Many belonged to the human and elf races who had perished fighting the orcs on their own soil as well.

In fairy country, there were also sightings of the walking corpses of humans and elves.

And zombie sightings were often reported in the countries of the humans and the elves themselves.

But there was never a single reported sighting of a zombie fairy.

Fairies live carefree lives in tune with nature and the natural order of things. They generally had no unfinished business after death.

“Let’s keep moving.”

“You got it, Boss.”

And so Bash and Zell paid little mind to the appearance of the zombie they had spotted on the riverbank, and they pressed on to elf country.



The bridge that served as the border checkpoint was a new one, having been constructed only two years prior.

In honor of it connecting the lands of the humans and the elves, it was christened Elman Bridge.

It would serve as a monument to celebrate the friendship between humans and elves, in the hopes of a continued alliance between the two countries.

This landmark bridge was of a sturdy stone construction, and it was wide enough for two horse-drawn carriages to pass in opposite directions.

With trade booming between the elves and humans, at least once an hour the bridge was used by traders either coming or going in their horse-drawn carts.

Once every single hour. Yes, once an hour isn’t very often in the grand scheme of things. But with the current economy still struggling after the war, business was comparatively flourishing between these two lands.

And with only one cart expected per hour, the border was very lightly manned. Only two elves were posted on guard duty.

It makes sense that import taxes should be imposed on imported goods, but the Alliance of Four Races still hadn’t worked out the particulars of bureaucratic matters like that.

The war had been such a long one, and few could remember how things used to be done in the prewar era. As a result, no one was quite sure how best to move ahead in this new, peaceful world.

Naturally, in wartime, no one was ever slapped with import taxes or tariffs when importing goods to their allies.

If such taxes had existed, the poorer races such as the beastkin would have

crumpled under the expense.

But they'd managed this far without taxes. Surely, appropriate legislation would be drafted at some point in the future, once the situation required it.

Yes, indeed, the border between the human and elf countries was very loosely controlled, what with how friendly the two nations were, and...

"Hey, you! Stop right there! You're an orc; that's what you are! What brings you here? What were you doing in human country?! Speak!!!"

Ah, but the welcome the elves extended to their closest allies, the humans, didn't apply to the other races. The members of the Coalition of Seven Races had been the enemies of the elves during the war, and the old war wounds ran deep. For their extreme brutality during the conflict, the elves held the deepest of grudges toward the orcs and the succubi in particular.

And the flames of these old prejudices were only fanned by the appearance of dangerous rogue orcs who sometimes crossed over from orc lands.

Lawless and vicious, the rogue orcs caused trouble in every land they set foot in.

Now Bash found himself on the wrong end of two pairs of sharp, primed arrows, nocked and drawn back against the bowstrings of the two guard elves.

"My name is Bash. I am on a quest, in search of...something. The human General Houston told me that I may find what I seek here. I've journeyed here for that reason."

"Bash? General Houston...?"

The two guard elves glared suspiciously at Bash.

They must have been quite young. Perhaps they hadn't been old enough to take part in the war while it was still going on. Perhaps they had only been conscripted after the war. Because if they had seen active duty, they would have known Bash's name immediately and would have already been trembling in their boots. No, if they had seen active duty, they would have known Bash on sight and would have never allowed him to get this close in the first place.

The elves who were seasoned veterans of war had a knack for disguising

themselves among the trees, blending in to be completely invisible to an enemy's detection. From the safety of their camouflaged position, they would question any intruders, with the implication being that they could skewer the potential enemy with arrows if they put so much as a toe out of line.

But these elves had not done that. That alone was proof that they were nothing but rookies.

"...Did we get any intel like that?"

"No, we've heard nothing from the humans about any orcs coming this way."

"Oh well, maybe he's just a random traveler, then? Not an official emissary?"

"So then... Should we let him through?"

"But we were warned not to let any rogue orcs in. What if he's one of them?"

"He could be. We don't know what rogue orcs look like, do we?"

The two elf guards were muttering back and forth, unsure how to proceed. Bash's gentlemanly manners had caught them off guard.

If he was a rogue orc, he surely would have attacked them the minute they stopped him from crossing.

Either that or he would have come running across the bridge bellowing war cries and attacked them without any provocation at all.

But Bash had done neither, which made it hard to believe he could be one of those dangerous rogue orcs. Still, it was always possible that the orc was lying. Putting on an act. It was impossible to tell.

"Excuse me, fellas! Let me assure you, my Boss here is no rogue orc!"

It was Zell who broke the silence, fluttering forward.

Then, swooping in gentle circles in the air in front of the two guards, Zell launched into an impassioned monologue.

"Be honored, be humbled, be awed, young elflings, for you are in the presence of the exalted Orc Hero Bash! The jewel of the orc army, a decorated war veteran, loved and respected by his own, and feared by countless others! He is a traveler on a noble mission, by express permission of the Orc King

himself, of course! Why, if you fools really think this prime specimen is what passes for a rogue orc, then you have insulted not only him but all of orckind! Now kindly step aside and clear the way for the sublime, the stupendous, the superb, the supreme...Bash!"

Finishing with a flourish, Zell snapped their tiny fairy fingers imperiously in front of the elf guards' faces.

Stupendous? Superb? Supreme? The two elves frowned. Zell's speech was long-winded, nonsensical, fanatical, and brought to mind the droning monologues of the elf elders who never missed an opportunity to blather on about days past.

"Do you know the guy?"

"Of course I don't know him! I don't know any famous orcs! This fairy's probably lying anyway."

"It *does* sound kind of suspicious."

"Right, right, totally suspicious. Plus, everyone knows you can't trust fairies."

The elves have a saying.

"A fairy's guidance is a fool's dance."

Once, there was a young elf traveler.

In the midst of his journey, he realized his canteen had a hole in the bottom.

He quickly stopped up the hole, but the water had already leaked out.

He was soon parched with thirst—and delirious from dehydration. He blundered into the forest in search of water. Then a fairy appeared and spoke to him.

"This way, this way, good man! Fresh water over here! And plenty of it! Slake your thirst! It's clean and sweet and good!"

The elf traveler believed the fairy and followed excitedly in its path.

It was just as the fairy promised. There was a clean pond in a clearing. The elf traveler plunged into the water with delight.

But immediately he began to scream. In his haste, he had failed to notice the

steam rising from the water's surface. It was not a cool, fresh pond, at all, but a bubbling hot spring.

The fairy hovered above the elf, gazed down at his scalded, incredulous red face, and laughed and laughed and laughed.

Fairies have a habit of telling lies of omission and twisting the facts to mislead people for their own amusement. This elf fable serves to warn of exactly that.

But the saying, and the telling of the fable, had only recently come into widespread use.

During the war, the elves were far too busy fighting to care for fairy quirks.

Then, during the fighting, the trickster nature of the fairies became apparent as many a soldier was led right into a fairy trap. Thus, the custom of mistrusting fairies was born.

Having heard the tales, the two elves made no effort to clear the path.

"So...you will not permit us to enter?"

"Nope! Dirty orcs like you don't get to enjoy unfettered access to our beautiful country, you know!"

"Hmm..."

Now Bash was at a loss.

If he had come to the elf border on his travels randomly, he would have simply shrugged at this point and chosen another direction. But after hearing what he had heard in human country, he couldn't bear to turn away.

After all, he had heard from noble Houston the Pig Slayer himself that this was where he ought to continue his quest.

Why, even now, Bash's future bride may have been awaiting him in the Shiwanashi Forest. A beautiful elf bride.

No, Bash had his mission. He had his purpose. He could not turn back now.

His mission was a personal one, of course. He was not here for king and country, but for his own goals.

He had no right to force his way through the checkpoint.

But Bash had the moral high ground, surely. The elves had no right to refuse him access, simply on account of his being an orc. The orcs and the elves had signed a treaty, after all. And nowhere did it stipulate that elves had the right to refuse an orc access to their land.

No, Bash was quite sure that he was in the right.

“Hey! Morons! Quit blockin’ the road!!!”

Just then, a single horse carriage came clattering and rolling this way.

It was heading to the elf border and had clearly come from human country.

The carriage creaked to a stop right behind Bash, and the man in the driver’s seat glared down at them. It was he who had just bellowed.

The man had long, silky golden hair and pointy ears. He was an elf himself. Judging by the uniform, which was similar to the border guards’, he was a member of the Elven Defense Force, or EDF.

“My bad. I asked for permission to enter the country, but I am being denied.”

“Hmm? Hey, you’re an orc!”

The driver peered down at Bash, his brow furrowed with puzzlement.

Then he lifted his head, eyes narrowing and focusing on the two guards.

It looked as though he’d come to the conclusion that it would be better to speak to his compatriots about the issue rather than converse with this unknown orc.

“What’s going on? Explain yourselves!”

“...Yessir!”

It appeared as though the driver of the carriage outranked the two guards.

They snapped quickly to attention and began explaining the situation.

An orc showed up out of nowhere and demanded access to the elf land, claiming he was in search of something.

And he had a highly suspicious fairy with him.

He was claiming to be a simple traveler, not a rogue orc. But his story reeked

of subterfuge, and so the two guards had decided to deny him access. Just to be on the safe side.

“You there, Orc. Is all this true?”

“It is true that I am no rogue orc.”

“Do you swear to it?”

“I swear on the name of the mighty Orc King, Nemesis.”

The driver gasped.

He knew what it meant for an orc to swear on the Orc King’s name.

Only the greatest of warriors, a great warlord or chieftain, could swear upon the king’s name. And if he was found to be lying, it would be considered treason...punishable by death.

In other words, the orc standing before him now must be a person of great importance in orcish society. If he was traveling outside of his own country’s borders, that must mean he was doing so under the express orders of the Orc King himself.

But that raised another question.

What was this exalted orc emissary doing *here*?

He said he was in search of something. What could it be?

Without finding that out first, there was no way they could permit the orc free passage into elf territory.

“Oh, just let him in. What’s the big deal anyway?”

But it was not the driver who spoke those words.

No, the voice came from inside the carriage itself.

It was a woman’s voice.

“The war’s over, isn’t it? And the orcs have sworn an oath, same as the rest of us. Yes, yes, there are always a few rogue orcs roaming about. But this one says he’s got the blessing of the Orc King. So he’s just like another traveler, isn’t he? There’s no need to be such bullies, interrogating him like that!”

Bash's heart skipped a beat. The stranger's assistance was unexpected.

The sweet sound of lovely feminine elf voices had always charmed the orcs, and Bash was no exception.

"But, Lady Sonia, I've never heard of an orc traveling alone..."

"It's been three years since the war ended! Even orcs have the right to sightsee when the mood strikes them! And if Nemesis himself has sanctioned it, then he can't be one of the rogue ones, can he?"

"But he has no official documents. Can we really trust his word?"

"...ExCUSE me? You think orcs are in the habit of just bandying around the name of their king? You do realize what it means for an orc to swear on the name Nemesis, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Lady Sonia; only there are many rogue, outcast orcs who spit on the name of the Orc King... He might be making the whole thing up to suit his own nefarious objectives!"

"Yes, yes, but use your brain! If an orc really wanted to enter our lands for 'nefarious' aims, he'd enter sneakily by crossing the Unmet River. That's how all the other rogue orcs have tried it, see? But this one came right up to the checkpoint and politely asked to come in. Said he's got the blessing of the Orc King himself! *And* he mentioned General Houston! You *do* know General Houston, don't you? Ol' Pig Slayer? If he was planning to sweet-talk his way in, he'd have name-dropped someone much more impressive than that!"



“Hmm, I see, I see... Well, if you insist, Lady Sonia, then... You two! Open the gates!”

The driver barked imperiously at the two elf guards, who quickly put away their bows and arrows and swept the gates open with a flourish, gesturing for them all to pass through.

The driver sniffed, before lashing the horses with the reins and urging them forward.

The carriage began to roll past Bash and Zell, clattering its way across the bridge. Bash stepped aside to give it room, looking up at the window.

“Many thanks.”

He spoke only these two words, in his usual gruff sort of voice.

But it wasn't the driver who responded.

“Heh, anytime! We're in an age of peace, after all!”

A face appeared in the open window. A beautiful elven face.

She had a high, regal nose, slanted blue eyes, a neat chin, and pointed ears. Her face was doll-like, and her bosom was modest in size, a key characteristic of elf women.

She looked to be some variety of mage. She wore a wide-brimmed hat on top of her silken golden hair. And she was clad in a dark-green robe, a very elflike look.

“Anyway, no worries! I'm someone of some significance myself, despite not looking like it, so we have that in common. Helping you out was the least I could — Ack!!!”

For some reason, as the woman laid eyes on Bash's green orcish face, she jerked in surprise.

Unfortunately, this caused the top of her head to make contact with the window frame. There was a mighty thunk, and the beautiful elf woman fell backward into the carriage, emitting a frog-like croak as she disappeared from sight.

There came another, more muted thud a second later, presumably the sound of her body hitting the carriage floor. But just at that moment, the wheels began rattling over some loose pebbles, and the clattering sound filled the air, leaving the driver oblivious to the plight of his passenger.

The woman had clearly passed out cold on the carriage floor, but no one else seemed to have noticed.

Bash probably would have noticed, if he was in his right mind.

But his head was deep in the clouds.

“How...beautiful...”

It had been so long since he last laid eyes on a female elf.

And never could he remember seeing one as beautiful as she. She was the very embodiment of elven female perfection, and Bash was smitten at first sight.

Elf women, in truth, were very beautiful indeed.

Until very recently, the elf race had been the enemy, and Bash hadn't been looking at the female warrior elves in that way. But now, with postwar clarity, Bash had to admit that elven female features were exactly his type. Their toned bodies and dainty demeanors set them apart from the humans, who trended toward curvier builds, even among the most beautiful examples of that race.

Yes, elf women were stunning, sharp, and poised, like the finest steel blades.

Bash was partial to the human softness, too, of course. But in terms of pure visual beauty, he'd go for an elf every time.

Houston had been right on the money, after all.

Bash's ideal bride was here in elf country. No doubt about it.

“Hmm? Boss, I think I've seen that elf somewhere before...”

Zell arched an eyebrow, but Bash merely blinked, his attention elsewhere.

He was, in fact, already hurrying toward the town. He wanted to get cozy with a willing elf woman as soon as he possibly could.

2

Elf Town

Shiwanashi Forest Town, in elf country.

The moment Bash set foot in town, he was surrounded by soldiers.

Once he identified himself, however, one of the soldiers nodded. “Yes, we received word from Lady Sonia. You are to be welcomed and allowed to go about as you please.” The other soldiers were all suddenly nodding and smiling, too. “Ah, Lady Sonia is so kind!” “Lady Sonia is so generous!”

And so Bash traveled freely into town, grateful for the assistance he’d received from the noble and beautiful elf lady at the border.

Elf Town architecture differed from that of the humans, who used both stone and wood. The elves built their houses exclusively with wood.

But the area closest to the town’s gates was much the same as that of a human town. Stores lined the street, selling elven wares for outsiders to purchase, and there were plenty of inns for weary travelers.

The major difference was that instead of the town being built around a castle or fortress, as was the human custom, the elf town lay at the base of a great tree. The tree was so vast, with a trunk so thick, that thirty Bashes could have stood in circumference around it, arms outstretched. In other words, it was quite big indeed.

The elf elite built their homes in the tall branches of the tree, and there they lived, higher than anyone else.

The name of the tree was Shiwanashi.

Both the town and the surrounding forest took their names from this tree.

The brilliant red and yellow houses caught Bash’s and Zell’s attention as they meandered into town.

“Elf Town sure has changed, too,” Bash muttered, looking around him.

During the war, Bash had attacked elf settlements on many occasions.

The elf houses that Bash remembered had been heavily camouflaged, covered in netting stuck with leaves and fallen branches—and strewn here and there with cloth dyed green and brown.

At a glance, it was impossible to tell the true shape or size of any of the houses, let alone where one ended and another began. In fact, it was often impossible to discern that there were any houses lodged among the branches at all. They had just looked like dense forest.

“What gorgeous colors! It’s like a flowery meadow! I guess the elves have developed some flair and a sense of style now that the war’s over!”

“I don’t think so. There simply isn’t any need for camouflage in these times. I suspect the houses were always those bright colors underneath.”

“Hmm. Anyhoo, have you noticed how many people of different races there are milling about here?!”

“It’s hard not to.”

As they walked through the town, Bash couldn’t help noticing all the non-elfen folk who were out and about on the streets.

There were humans—those were a familiar sight. But there were also heavily furred beastkin, with their distinctive snouts, and dwarves, with their short stature and long beards. All were members of the Alliance of Four. But even so, it was rare to find so many of them in a foreign land, even taking into account the possibility of scattered enclaves.

The human race was also overwhelmingly represented among them.

What was really odd, though, was that almost every single human spotted walking around had an elf mate on their arm.

Bash openly gawked at the rare spectacle.

To think that famously xenophobic elves could have opened their hearts to humans to this extent... Something strange had to be going on. Bash’s intuitions, honed from years of battle, told him so.

“Something’s odd.”

“You can say that again. I always thought elves were...pickier.”

Elves had a reputation for xenophobia and were often hostile to outsiders.

Beyond that, they were also a proud, secretive race and were said to be quick to drive out any intruders who entered their jealously guarded territory.

Up until just a few decades ago, elves wouldn’t even permit ally soldiers to rest overnight in their towns and villages.

But now this town was booming with foreigners.

It was strange, too, that Bash had been allowed to enter the town after encountering what was really only a slight amount of resistance. Come to think of it, it was highly irregular for any orc to be permitted safe passage in an elven town, even if a lone noble had spoken out on their behalf, as Sonia had for Bash.

“There’s gotta be a festival or something going on! I’ll go find out!”

Zell zoomed over to the nearest couple, in typical “strike while the iron’s hot” fashion.

Bash made no attempt to dissuade the fairy. Instead, he focused his attention on the passersby.

Bash could think of no greater pleasure than to freely feast his eyes on gorgeous elf women.

As he gazed hungrily at all the beautiful specimens, he suddenly realized something.

All the elves were female.

Or *most* of them anyway. There were a few male elves. Very, very few. But it was mostly ladies walking around.

Among the men in the crowd, elves were clearly less represented. Each male had a beautiful elf woman on his arm, and some couples were even holding hands.

And all the elf women were smiling, looking at their male partners with

expressions of joy and affection.

Talk about relationship bliss. The whole scene seemed tinged with a rosy hue.

Suddenly, Bash noticed that many of the women strolling with their sweethearts were sporting ripe, rounded bellies.

They were pregnant. Judging from the satisfied smiles of the men as well, these unions were born of mutual love. Elf women were mating with men of other races, and they were doing so of their own free will. What a discovery!

Apart from the happy couples, there were many elf women walking alone as well. They were staring at the pregnant ones, their eyes wide and blank, like dead fish.

Those eyes were filled with envy and appeared glazed over with resentment.

Bash had seen eyes like those many times before in the war.

But the war was over now, and their town was at peace. What could be the problem?

“ ... ”

Bash could make no sense of it.

Frowning, Bash continued through the town. Soon he reached a lush green park, where three female elves were all desperately trying to engage a single human male in conversation.

“I’m an excellent cook, you know. And I’ve been told I’m very good at anticipating a man’s needs.”

“Don’t listen to her. I’ll love you more than any woman ever could. Loyalty is what a man needs most from a wife, and this I can offer!”

“Forget these two. I’m the type of girl who goes the extra mile for her man, if you know what I mean. If you marry me, it’ll be the best decision you ever made.”

As the three beauties vied for his attention, the man looked like he’d died and gone to heaven. “Well, shit,” he said, “I’m totally spoiled for choice.”

Bash felt like his heart would burst from envy.

In Bash's eyes, the three women were all exquisite beauties.

Slim, tight bodies, sparkling eyes, gorgeous golden hair...

Okay, so they had a few scars on their faces. A couple missing fingers here and there. One girl may have even been without an eye. But none of those things were drawbacks in Bash's book.

Battle scars were proof they had survived the long war. That they had been warriors.

And these maidens looked sturdier than your typical dainty female elf. They had wide hips, just right for birthing fat, bouncing babies. Bash could have seen himself happily married to any one of them.

Bash had already made up his mind. He would choose one at random, have her part him forever from his virginity, and then live happily ever after, up to his neck in offspring.

Ah, but reality was not so sweet.

"...Huh?"

One of the elf ladies suddenly noticed Bash watching them.

"...The hell do *you* want?"

All of a sudden, the woman's eyes stopped sparkling with coquettish delight and became hard and steely.

As if on cue, the other two turned to face Bash as well. Their smiles vanished. All of a sudden, the atmosphere was heavy with tension.

"How dare you stand there staring at us?! Get away, you foul orc!"

"Yes, get lost, you filthy beast! ...What, you wanna throw down against us, huh? We're members of the Elf Nation's Thirty-First Independence Squad! How did you get into town? You must have sneaked in! Though you don't appear to be another one of those rogue orcs..."

"Hold on, I think I've seen this orc somewhere before..."

"Who cares?! All orcs are bad news in my book! But wait... He *does* look familiar..."

“Maybe he’s a commander or something? Though he’s missing the armor.”

Bash hesitated, rattled by the women’s sudden and extreme attitude changes.

His guess had been correct, though. These women were warriors. Also, was their treatment of him really a surprise? Elves were known for being exclusionary and hostile. What elf worth his or her salt wouldn’t attack an intruder from a foreign land on first sight?

Bash had never heard of the Elf Nation’s Thirty-First Independence Squad, but it was clear that these women had fought during the war and survived to peacetime.

“My apologies. I was just confused.”

“Huh? About what?”

“About why three elf women were fighting for the attention of one human.”

“...”

The three elf ladies exchanged incredulous glances.

A few seconds later, a deep blush bloomed on each of their cheeks. They narrowed their eyes again, glaring at Bash with haughty indignation.

“You’re really cruising for a bruising, Orc!”

“How dare you talk about us like we’re a pack of hyenas, squabbling over scraps!”

“You got a death wish, Orc?!”

Bash gasped as the three women drew close, pushing their angry faces up against his.

“I... I just...”

Bash was on the verge of fainting. They smelled so fresh, so sweet, so... feminine.

And they were fairly scantily clad, for elves. Their garments exposed most of their smooth shoulders and the upper mounds of their heaving bosoms. Bash’s eyes were drawn to their bare flesh.

Being swarmed by three exquisite elves in this way, Bash could hardly be blamed for the large bulge that had risen from his crotch.

He took an unsteady step backward and tried his best to respond without stammering.

“I just was curious, is all. If I wanted to fight you, you’d know; believe me.”

“I think we know quite well, Orc! You’re practically begging for us to mess you up!”

“I do apologize. I’ve only just arrived in this country, and I am afraid I’m not familiar with the customs. Why are there so many foreign males here, and why are they all arm in arm with elf women?”

Bash was hoping that being straightforward would lead to the best result. But the elf maidens seemed even more incredulous. They looked at each other again, eyebrows raised as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?*

Then they turned in unison to stare at Bash once again.

Bash’s heart was pounding hard as the women’s eyes raked him up and down. Even during the toughest battles of his life, his heart had never beat this fast.

“Pah! Looks like he’s actually serious! He really has no clue!”

“Unbelievable!”

One of the women shrugged, while the other heaved a huge, annoyed sigh.

The final woman, however, waved Bash away like he was an annoying gnat.

“Fine, fine, we’ll let you off the hook this time. Now, get out of our sight, before we lose our patience.”

“...All right. I’ll take my leave, then. Good day, ladies.”

Like a gentleman, Bash made a dignified exit from the unpleasant scene.

But he left with a heavy heart. He was actually enjoying conversing with those stunning ladies and wished it could have lasted longer.

How pleasant it was to listen to their sweet, lilting voices. Even if they were spitting threats, it was lovely to hear. And he was still dying to know why one human male should be in such high demand.

But they had told him to leave, so leave he must.

If he lingered any longer, things might have ended up becoming...unpleasant.

Bash was an orc. And an orc never backs down from a fight, should he be challenged.

Bash wasn't looking for a fight, though. He was looking for a bride.

If he fought a woman, she would never happily marry him. Not even if he won.

"Ah well, then, ladies, I think I'll be taking my leave now, too... I don't think I'm quite the man you're looking for, ha-ha-ha... Thanks for the offer, though! Ha-ha-ha!"

"What? Wait! Hey! You've got it wrong! That wasn't the real us just now! We swear!"

"Right! We were just, um, trying to protect you, handsome! You know what they say! Orcs are always looking to fight powerful men such as yourself!"

"I'd fight a dragon for you, honey! I really, truly would! After all, I'd do anything for my man!"

Bash kept walking away as the awkward scene unfolded behind him.

After declining a fight, it's considered proper etiquette to leave the scene without ever looking back, no matter what insults may be hurled your way.

After all, orcish custom dictates that to turn back once more and face your enemy indicates that you've changed your mind and decided to accept the challenge after all.

It's also customary for the challenger to continue hurling threats and abuse until the declining party exits the scene entirely.

"...Hahhh."

Once he'd put a safe distance between himself and the elves, Bash collapsed with his back to a tree. There was so much going on, and he understood next to none of it.

Why were elf women strolling around town on the arms of non-elf men? Why

were there so few male elves here? Why were such peerless beauties clamoring and squabbling over mediocre men?

Come to think of it, a lot of the women he'd seen fraternizing with non-elf men had visible battle scars, indicating that they had been soldiers during the war.

Their eyes were sharp, and they looked alert, as if their senses had been honed to keep them on their toes against constant enemy threat. Bash noticed that several of the women displayed the telltale signs of serious battle injuries, like missing limbs. Perhaps there was some sort of military-related festival being held in the town...?

"Boss, there you are! Boss! Boss!"

While Bash was ruminating, a tiny glowing thing came zooming right toward him.

The tiny glowing thing catapulted itself against Bash's broad forehead with a loud splat.

"Boss! It's serious! It's life-changing! It's epoch-making! It's going to change everything! Nothing will ever be the same! You won't even believe it! It's unbelievable!!!"

Ah, of course. Zell.

Well, how many other fairies were there out there who'd come zooming in at top speed like that and glue themselves to Bash's face?

"What's up?"

"I've got killer info! I've got explosive intel! I've got dynamite details!"

Bash plucked the fairy off his face.

Zell was all purple and puffy. The tiny fairy looked about ready to explode in a cloud of fairy dust at any moment.

Clearly, something had the tiny creature all shaken up. Bash had never seen his companion so excited.

And it was rare for anything to ever ruffle Zell's fairy wings.

No, Zell was always chilled out, mellow, cool with the fairies, you might say. Bash had only seen the fairy stressed out to the point of dive-bombing the orc's face a few times, out on the battlefield. Why, wasn't it the battle of the Shiwanashi Forest when... Ah, but then again, it happened once before that. The battle of Sandorian Knoll. Ah, and there was also the battle of the Honey Forest. Can't forget about that. Hmm, come to think of it, it had been more than just a few times...

At any rate, Zell only ever got this flustered when something major was going down.

Like when the orc clan chief, General Baraben, died. Or when Demon Lord Geddigs was attacked. Or when the Killer Queen Bee was overthrown and eaten by her own daughter... Stuff like that.

Those were all shocking events. Devastating events.

What could have happened?

"Calm down."

Bash grabbed Zell out of midair, interrupting even as the fairy was engaged in the act of performing frantic loop the loops. He was eager to hear what the fairy had to say.

Indeed, what intel had Zell uncovered?

Not that it would ever shake Bash. He was an Orc Hero. Prepared for any battle. If the situation called for action, then Bash would join the fight. As long as the problem, whatever it was, could be solved by fighting, then Bash himself would be fine.

But what if it was something else? What if something had happened to Nemesis, the Orc King...?

What if there was trouble, back in the orc country?

Bash swallowed hard, suddenly afraid.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's—it's... It's— Just a second...catch my breath... Okay. In the elf country..."

Gasping with excitement, Zell shivered in Bash's fist.

Was the fairy about to reveal the truth about what was going on here?

Would the fairy provide answers to the questions that had been plaguing Bash ever since he came to town?

"...In the elf country right now, elf women are fighting each other, tooth and nail, to get their hands on a husband...and foreign men are the hottest commodity on the market!!!"

...Bash could have kissed the manic little fairy.

3

VITAL INTEL

Elves.

On average, an elf had a life expectancy of around five hundred years.

Elves could mostly be found living in the forest regions of Vastonia, but they had also spread as far as the southeast and northwest. They prided themselves on ethnocentrism and exclusionism and were a very prideful people. They had always been quick to drive out any outsiders who strayed into their territory.

They had one of the smallest populations of all the races, and the typical elf boasted a very modest stature. They mostly fought using swords, bows, and arrows, as well as ice and wind magic. They were also extremely skilled at stealth, often hiding in plain sight. Furthermore, as a result of years of accumulated experience stemming from their extraordinarily long life spans, their ranks comprised many seasoned, legendary warriors, making them formidable opponents indeed.

Or at least that's the impression their enemies formed about them during the long war.

At least on the surface, those surmises were basically correct.

But there was one key difference. A change had come over the elf race as of late. Their ethnocentrism, their disdain of other races. That was now a thing of the past.

After the long war ended, the elves wanted a new start, the same as everyone else.

They began interacting more with members of other races, particularly the humans and dwarves, who had been their allies during the conflict.

These newly cordial relations extended far beyond simple trade or tourism.

The war had gone on so long that even the oldest of the elf race had still been born during the conflict. Even the venerable elders knew little of the world outside of wartime.

The general elf attitude could be succinctly summarized as: *We live far longer than you; therefore, we're smart, and you're dumb.* But when the war came, the elves began to lose confidence in their own superiority. They had to reevaluate their entire belief system.

Furthermore, the elves had lost all their old knowledge and culture during the war. Even their logs and records, representing their accumulated wisdom, had been destroyed by the ravages of war.

With little left to back up their claims of racial superiority, the most prideful and haughty elves had begun to quietly disappear.

And so now we come to the modern-day elf. He or she has abandoned the old elven legends and customs and is now entirely focused on fostering international relations with foreigners—and building a multicultural society out of their previously homogenous one.

It would have only taken about a thousand years for the elves to forge a new and unique culture and write new books on elf customs and history. Only another thousand years, and perhaps they could have rebuilt their reputation as a great race and regained their sense of pride. But the elves didn't care to wait. They were eager to rebuild their war-ravaged country as soon as possible.

Now, what's the one thing you need to rebuild a depleted country?

Most countries lacked that key ingredient at this moment in time, postwar. The elf race was no exception.

The key ingredient, of course, is *population*.

Thus came the baby boom. And as a prerequisite of that, a boom in the number of marriages.

It was the High Elves, the privileged class, who were the trendsetters here. The elf commoners, however, soon followed suit.

Get married. Have children young. Proliferate.

But the elf population, already modest in number, had suffered especially heavily from the war.

The repeated clashes with the succubus army were largely to blame for this. The male soldiers were almost completely annihilated, leaving mostly women to emerge from the long war as survivors. Now eligible young women were being squeezed out of the marriage market as a result of overwhelming demand for male partners.

If the elves were nonmonogamous like the dwarves, then perhaps this wouldn't have been such a big issue. But elves tended to mate for life, forsaking all others in favor of their spouse. It was a vital aspect of the elf morality code.

So the Elf King, Leucanthemum, began heavily promoting a certain policy.

The Emergency Half-Elf Population Promotional Measure, as it was called, offered citizenship and subsidies to foreign men of other races if they came to marry elf women.

The combination of citizenship, financial support, and their pick of willing elf women proved a highly tempting package to foreign men. They came in droves.

The policy was an overwhelming success.

The humans, who had been particularly struck by the beauty of elf women in the war, were big adopters of the policy. Many a horny human male made his way to elf country, drool practically dripping down his chin at the prospect of marital joy with an elf maiden.

But some opposed the policy. What if the country ended up overrun by half-elf babies?

But the elf race was long-lived and patient. At some point down the line, the policy could be discontinued, and the half-elf offspring bred back with the pure, high elf racial line. If this was continued for a few generations, then all the non-elf blood could be bred out of the bloodline, and the elf race would be almost completely pure once more.

So now the elf country was awash with foreign men eager to find the best possible elf bride for themselves. It was a total buyer's market, and many elf women were left on the sidelines or forced to compete against each other for

the attention of a single man. There were wedding ceremonies being conducted left and right.

Who could have predicted that Bash would stumble into town right when foreign males were currently the hottest commodity around, with every elf woman desperate to lock one down in marriage?

Talk about serendipity.



“So you see, the elf country is in an interracial marriage frenzy right now! They’ve got more gorgeous, supple, willing elf women than you could shake a club at! Boss, if we can’t find you a suitable bride here, then I’ll eat my wings!”

“Great!”

Bash and Zell were engaged in an intense strategy meeting at their inn.

Bash had come to the elf country on Houston’s recommendation, more out of a lack of better options than anything else. But now he was really beginning to realize what a huge favor the human general had done for him.

Something had definitely felt strange the moment he walked into town.

As he made his way through the streets, he had felt like he was being watched.

Well, it was to be expected, wasn’t it? Orcs rarely made an appearance in the elf land. Some may have even jumped to the conclusion that he was a rogue orc.

So it was no surprise that Bash was immediately surrounded by soldiers and questioned. But they had backed down astonishingly quickly, saying things like: *“Ah yes, he may be an orc, but he’s the same as any other traveler,”* and *“If Lady Sonia is willing to vouch for him, that’s good enough for us!”*

That kind of thing would have been unthinkable were it not for the current, favorable situation.

Three years had already passed since the official end of the war, but the elves were notorious for being finicky and hard to deal with. Now they were being downright friendly.

Indeed, if this new school of thought had taken a foothold among the elves across the whole of elf territory, and not just in this town, then Bash would face no real impediments to his journey.

“But you know, elves and orcs have never gotten along. They’re like cats and dogs; they just don’t mesh. And I hate to say it, Boss, but even if there IS currently a trend for marrying foreign males, you won’t get anywhere if you go a-wooing just as you are.”

“I see what you mean. What should I do, then?”

“Oh, there’s plenty we can try. Generally speaking, though, you should behave as you did around the humans. Although elves are actually a lot more like us fairies. We both share a deep love for the forest, which loves us in return... We’re like the guardians of nature! So attuned to the world! So you’ve gotta show an appreciation for the elf ways, customs, and philosophy! And when it comes to splashing on the cologne, floral scents are an absolute must! Your clothing, too, should be on the modest side, without too much exposure! Elves only show skin in front of very, very special companions!”

Bash looked down at himself.

His attire was typical for an orc. So elves hated exposed skin, did they?

Zell was no doubt correct. Bash had to do what he could to minimize exposing his bare skin.

But then all of a sudden, his brain replayed a mental highlight reel of the exposed body parts and the sexy, revealing clothing of the three delectable elf maidens he’d encountered earlier.

So those elf women considered that nondescript human male to be a “very, very special companion,” did they?

Bash’s chest swelled with excitement. He felt ready to explode from the anticipation.

“Good stuff!”

“All right, let’s start by smartening you up a bit! Off to the tailor we go! Just leave it all to me! I’ve already used my research skills to find the best one!”

And so Bash allowed Zell to direct him straight to the tailor shop that was located not too far from their lodgings.

It really wasn't too far at all. Actually, it was right next door.

Bash had to stoop down and twist a little to fit his bulk through the doorframe. As he straightened up again, he was impressed by the rows and racks of clothing on display. Such variety could not be found back in the old orc country.

The wares on offer were made up of mostly elven clothing in muted nature hues like dark green, light brown, and mustard yellow. There was also a range of human-style clothing on offer.

"Where do we even begin, huh, Boss?"

"I don't know what's considered fashionable when it comes to elven clothing. If you asked me to appraise elven armor for durability, that would be one thing, but this...?"

"Ah, but this shop is said to be frequented by many guests from other races! They have raiment and apparel for all! I'm certain they'll have something that will bring out all your best features, Boss!"

It was just as Zell said. The shop had elven clothing in a wide range of sizes, to fit a variety of races from humans to dwarves.

Only there didn't appear to be any orc-size clothes in stock.

The biggest size they had would only fit someone six foot five, at best.

"Pah! An orc!"

As Zell and Bash were absorbed in looking over the clothing, the shopkeeper emerged from the back.

He was a male elf of indeterminable age, wearing a wreath on his head that was made of flowers and leaves.

He took one look at Bash and immediately stiffened, on high alert.

"When I heard an orc had been given free access to the town by her ladyship herself, I was curious. But you're just another one of those common green orcs.

Well, Sonny, just you try causing any trouble in my store. I'll have you know that during the war, I slayed a dozen orcs in these parts. A total bloodbath it was..."

Then the tailor trailed off, his eyes suddenly widening.

At the same time, he made a strangled sound in his throat.

"No...it couldn't be!!! The reason her ladyship let you in to the town... Goodness!"

"I'm not sure what you're referring to. But I was indeed vouched for by a noble woman on the bridge into town."

"Egad! To think that her ladyship should be so...undiscerning! So...*accepting!*"

The tailor shuddered for a moment, then was still. Finally, he sighed in a resigned sort of way.

"So what's your business in my shop?"

"I'm here to purchase a new outfit. I heard that the elf race abhors revealing clothing."

"We abhor what now? ...Eh, whatever. We've nothing here that would fit a man of your stature. But wait... There may actually be *one* piece..."

The tailor looked Bash up and down, from the top of his swarthy green head to where his big feet stood slightly splayed upon the floor. Rubbing his chin, the tailor turned and disappeared into the back of the shop for a moment.

"This should just about fit you, I'd wager."

The tailor returned, carrying a dark-green elven outfit with black piping detail.

It was clearly much, much larger than anything else on sale in the shop.

The tailor held up the outfit so Bash could see, stretching both arms out wide in order to do so. Now all that was visible of him were the tips of his fingers. The vast swath of cloth concealed almost all of the tailor from view.

"Beastkin man came through a while back, ordered this custom-made. But the ungrateful brute said he didn't like the finished piece and left, taking his money with him. You're a bit small for an orc, so it should fit you. Ah, sorry. Please, don't get mad. I meant no offense. It's just, you know, there's an awful lot of

orcs out there bigger than you, aren't there? Facts are facts."

"No offense taken."

"R-right. Good man. Anyway, this is the suit for you. Why don't you try it on?"

Bash obediently accepted the huge suit from the tailor.

Then, right there on the spot, he tugged off his orcish clothing and cast it aside, donning instead the fancy elf outfit.

He wasn't used to such clothing, but he knew enough to figure out how to put this kind of outfit on.

Still, the suit had been tailored to a beastkin's body. He was able to button it, but it was too tight around the shoulders and thighs. And far too short on the hems and cuffs.

"Ah..."

The tailor's face fell. Guilt flooded his eyes.

This particular tailor came from a proud lineage of tailors stretching back several elven generations.

Seeing an outfit he himself had recommended fail to satisfy a customer's needs... This caused a critical hit to the tailor's sense of craftsmanship and pride in his work.

"I'll adjust it..."

"Looking sharp, Boss! But then, you'd look good in anything! They say the clothes make the man, but I say they've got it the wrong way around! What a dapper fella you are! How suave, how sophisticated! You look like a seasoned and skilled man of the forest! Nay, a man of the bedchamber! Look alive, sweet elf maidens! The man of your dreams has finally arrived!"

The tailor's words died on his lips as the hyperactive fairy accompanying the orc began giving his boss's ego a good polishing.

After an outpouring of bootlicking and flattery like that, the tailor felt he could say no more about the suit.

"...You could be right, my flighty fairy friend. Your companion and my suit

might actually be the perfect match.”

The tailor’s brows lowered, meeting in the middle. He was actually beginning to reevaluate the look, as well.

It was true that it was far too tight—and stretched out across the chest. But it made the orc appear much more put together than when he first entered the shop in that boorish, orcish attire.

And actually (although he’d never admit it), the tailor always thought there was something a bit weird about seeing a human or dwarf dressed in elf clothing.

This orc was no exception. You only ever saw orcs wearing their distinctive orcish gear, so of course he was going to look a bit strange in nice elf clothing. But that aside, he didn’t look *bad*, exactly. In fact, he looked rather cool.

Short sleeves and pant legs only exposed more of the orc’s rippling physique, and this effect was enhanced by the tightness of the shoulders and thighs. Rather than looking comical, the outfit served to highlight the admirable aspects of the orcish physique.

“Well, if you like it, then I’m glad.”

“Mm. I think I’ll take it.”

“Ah yes, well, as to payment. Now, how much to charge... Huh?”

Bash pulled a bundle from his belongings and held it out to the tailor.

Taking it and turning it over in his hands, the tailor curiously undid the ropes that bound it and opened it up.

It was a pelt. A pelt as big as the orc himself. No, even bigger.

The owner of this pelt must have been humongous in life. A fine specimen indeed.

“What’s this?”

“Bugbear pelt.”

“It’s simply splendid. Did you slay the beast yourself?”

“Yeah. Kept the pelt to remember a fallen comrade.”

“Are you sure you want to trade something so precious?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

Bash frowned at the tailor, who stiffened.

The tailor couldn't even begin to comprehend orcish values. Nor did he care to learn.

One was duty bound to associate with foreigners in this new and often confusing era. But that didn't mean the tailor needed to go out of his way to learn the ins and outs of every race that came through town.

After all, he wasn't the one who had to get married and shack up with these foreign brutes, now, was he?

“The pelt is splendid quality, to be sure. But there's a huge rip in it, right here. It'll be a simple barter, the outfit for this pelt. No cash back, got it?”

“Fine.”

Bash scooped up his orc clothes off the floor and exited the shop.

Now that he had the outfit he needed, there was no further business to be had with the fussy elf tailor.

No, his business was with the eligible elf maidens of Shiwanashi Forest Town.

“...”

The tailor watched as Bash stooped through the doorway and left the shop, a new swagger in his step. Somehow, the shop seemed quieter, more still, after he left.

With no other customers present, the orc's visit had had a dreamlike quality to it. The only proof that his strange guest had even been there at all was the giant pelt spread across the counter.

“Darling, who was that just now?”

The tailor's wife emerged from the back.

She was a young, nubile elf, too young to know the true horrors of war.

“Just a customer. Bit of a character, actually.”

“That’s not what I meant. He was an orc, wasn’t he? Did you know him?”

“Of course not. Not personally. But I do recall seeing him on the battlefield before. I think I’ll just let Aconitum know about it. I’ll be back soon.”

“What? Darling, wait!”

But the tailor was gone, exiting the shop with a spring in his step, in a state of high excitement.



Back at the inn, Bash began getting ready, per Zell’s instructions.

He took a bath. He put on the cologne provided by Zell. He changed into his new, smart outfit. He slicked back his hair with scented oil.

Bash had noticed that most of the elf men wore their long hair tied back, so he decided to attempt to copy their look.

But Bash’s hair was not all long. Most orcs kept their hair shorn short in wartime, and Bash, too, had always maintained a short cut, at least on the top. So there wasn’t much to slick back. Still, this was as close as Bash could get to copying the look.

Preparations complete, Bash headed to a meadow just outside town, where he gathered a bouquet of flowers that elf women were said to adore.

There. Now he was ready. The only thing left was to take the plunge.

Bash headed back into town, Zell following.

“Boss, it’s already in the bag! You’re as good as in! All you’ve gotta do is take your pick! Now, the elves prefer the direct approach, so you’ve got to engage ’em one-on-one, see? But don’t go bellowing, now. If you raise your deep, orcish voice, you’ll only make ’em skittish. Pick a suitable target when she’s by herself and go strike up a friendly conversation!”

“All right.”

It was already sundown.

All the day laborers were heading home right around this time.

There seemed to be a lot of soldiers among those trickling back into town,

even though the war had ended. Many of the elves passing through the town were clad in armor and walking in formation.

Bash didn't really care about his future bride's profession, though.

Yes, the orc people would be more excited if their wartime hero, Bash, took an elven warrior maiden as his wife. But personally, this wasn't actually a big deal in Bash's eyes.

Really, any profession would do.

His future bride could be unemployed, for all he cared.

As long as she was willing to become his wife, he didn't mind at all. If he could mate with her and relieve himself of the burden of his virginity, that would be more than splendid enough. Anyone would do. He just didn't want to turn into a mage. Anything but that.

Besides, almost all elf women were beauties. There was no need for Bash to be picky. He'd be happy choosing one at random off the street.

At any rate, with so many of them around, surely he'd find success with at least one?

"All right. That one."

Bash quickly homed in on one of the women who was walking alone.

His pick was tall, with golden shoulder-length hair worn in a ponytail. She was dressed in the distinctive red-leather armor of the elves and carried a bow in her hand. A quiver of arrows was slung across her back. There was a fairly large burn scar on one side of her face, but Bash hardly noticed it.

Her expression was weary as she made her way through town, but she had a kind face.

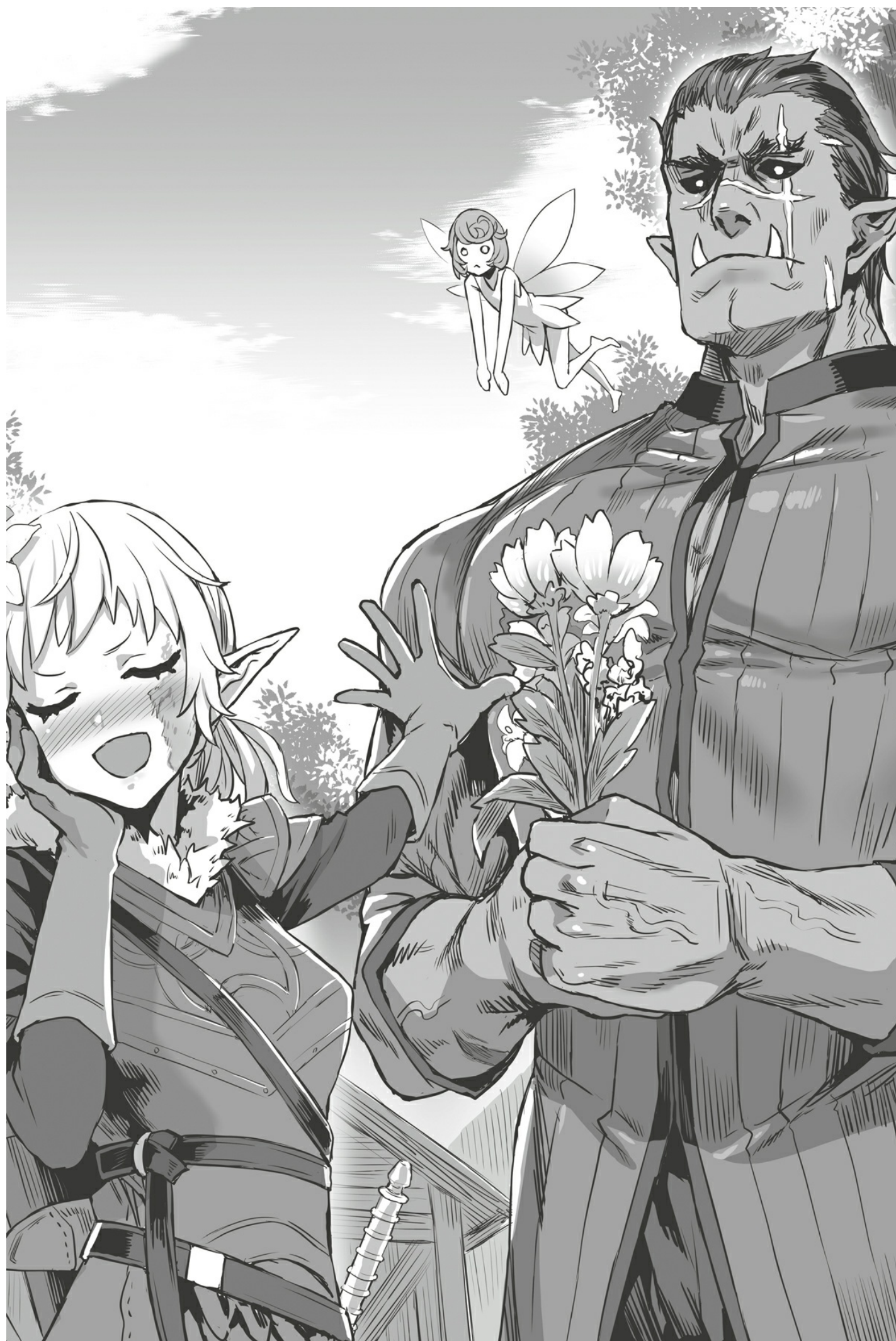
Bash felt his heart leap. Yes, she might be a good candidate.

"Excuse me, you there."

"...Wh-what? Huh? An orc?"

The elf woman stiffened as she turned and saw Bash. Her grip tightened on the bow, and her brows drew together in a frown.

Then, as she took in Bash's strained smile, dapper outfit, slicked-back hair, and the trembling bouquet of flowers he clutched in one meaty fist, her eyebrows shot right up again.



She realized, at once, what he wanted.

“Ah, um... So I’m here to...”

“Oh, sorry, Mr. Orc! I’m afraid I’ll have to stop you right there! I appreciate the offer, but I can’t accept!”

The elf maiden shook her head and held up her hand, palm forward, cutting Bash off midsentence.

Her expression was what you might call smug. Bash was charmed, of course. But any female elves in the vicinity who caught a glimpse of that smirk would be incensed and immediately fantasize about punching her. Her little half smile and slightly raised eyebrow had big *Poor me! It’s so hard being this beautiful!* energy.

“Hmm.”

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong! You’re very nice, Mr. Orc! But take a look at this!”

The elf gestured toward her own head as Bash looked down at her mutely.

She wore a white flower in her hair. Bash recalled seeing that same type of flower blooming in the meadow where he’d gathered his bouquet.

“I guess you don’t know, Mr. Orc, but engaged elves all wear white lilies in their hair! And married elves wear white flowers, too. Not lilies, though. It’s sort of like how humans have that custom of wearing rings on the third finger of their left hand so everybody knows, you know?”

Bash looked around. Sure enough, around half the female elves in the vicinity appeared to be wearing white flowers in their hair.

Either as a single bloom, a flower crown, or woven into braids.

Casting his mind back to his altercation with the three sultry elf maidens from earlier, Bash suddenly recalled that none of them had been wearing a white flower.

“I don’t know what kinda ladies you orcs are usually into, but I’m real flattered you approached me, Mr. Orc! Thanks for taking notice of little old me,

heh!”

“...”

“You know, up until a few days ago, I’d still have been a free woman. I might even have been open to getting hitched to an orc. But just the other day, I finally, finally got my wish! I got engaged! So you see, Mr. Orc, I can’t possibly accept your proposal. I hope you understand.”

“...I do.”

Bash nodded politely and turned to leave. The elf’s jaw dropped in surprise to see him give up so easily.

“Wow, Mr. Orc, you’re super reasonable! I heard that once an orc sets his sights on a woman, nothing can be done to dissuade him!”

“The Orc King has forbidden nonconsensual mating.”

“Oh, I see. So refusing to give up on pursuing a woman, that’s also outlawed for you orcs now?”

“That’s the same thing...isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. You’re right. Wow, Mr. Orc. You’re pretty smart, aren’t you?”

The elf woman bobbed her head in approval.

Before her own desperate marriage search had been successfully concluded, she would have been a lot more hostile toward Bash upon hearing this claim. *Who can trust the word of an orc?* she might have cried. *Think you can fool me?! I’ll kill you!* she might have yelled.

But no longer. Now she was a new woman. And much, much nicer.

After all, she was already engaged. She was one of the lucky ones. So she could afford to be a bit magnanimous.

As a winner in life, she was filled with good will toward all.

And she was a pretty kind person in general as well. Kind enough to go the extra mile to help a complete stranger, even if he was an orc, for no personal gain at all.

“Know what, Mr. Orc? Let me give you a tip.”

“A tip?”

“If you want to find a partner, just follow this street until you reach a tavern. It’s called the Great Eagle’s Perch. That’s where all the unmarried folk gather to mingle and try to find a partner. The clientele is...I mean...by this point, it’s mostly just women who’ve failed to find a decent man. Lot of emotional baggage, you know? But anyway, if you go there, you might just find someone desperate enough! Just like I was!”

“Okay. Thank you for the helpful tip.”

“Don’t mention it! Anyway, I’ve gotta run! Hubby awaits!”

Then the elf hurried off, ponytail bobbing jauntily behind her.

As Bash watched, she suddenly skipped, knocking the heels of her boots together in midair, clearly in the highest of high spirits.

“Did you catch that?”

“Sure did, Boss! Loud and clear!”

Bash turned to face his fairy companion as the elf woman disappeared down a side street.

Bash’s first pickup attempt had been a swing and a miss, but he’d managed to get two extremely vital pieces of information.

First, he’d learned that if an elf woman wore white flowers in her hair, he shouldn’t waste his time trying to pursue her. This would vastly increase his chances of success—or at least save time that would have otherwise been spent approaching taken women.

The second thing he learned was where he ought to go to find a large concentration of women looking for marriage partners.

If he hit up this tavern the elf woman had spoken of, then it would only be a matter of time before he himself was engaged to a lovely elven maiden.

It was basic supply and demand, wasn’t it? Bash wanted an elf wife. And the elves who frequented this tavern wanted husbands, elf or not. Bash fit the bill,

didn't he?

Being an orc was a point against Bash to be sure. But the elf race was crazy for interracial marriage right now.

They were getting together with humans, with beastkin, and even with dwarves, which the elf race had always somewhat abhorred, allies though they were.

Bash didn't mind his chances.

"Let's move."

Their destination? The Great Eagle's Perch.

Bash steeled himself. He was going into battle.



The elf turned around.

She was watching Bash as he strode off in the direction of the tavern.

So he was taking her advice, and he wasn't wasting any time about it. He was heading to the Great Eagle's Perch.

"Weird. Everything I've heard about orcs suggests that they drag off any woman who catches their eye, to debase and defile. I guess some of them have started to embrace the values of other cultures."

She had fought against the succubus army until the very end of the war, so she hadn't encountered any orcs on the battlefield at all, really.

Maybe she'd caught a glimpse of one or two, once or twice, during major battles. But never up close. Everything she knew about the orc race came from secondhand sources.

They were rough, savage beasts who treated women like livestock.

But this orc she'd just spoken to seemed completely different from what she'd always imagined.

"Huh. I guess anyone can change if they make a genuine effort. I mean, look how I turned out..."

Her name was Azalea.

Bash and Zell had no idea, of course, but she was actually quite notorious for being a bloodthirsty maniac on the battlefield. She had a reputation known throughout the elf land.

Her penchant for ripping off the tails of succubi while laughing hysterically had earned her the title of Azalea the Hyena.

Her brutal nature and relentless pursuit of her enemy resulted in her name striking fear into the hearts of the succubus army. By the end of the war, she had racked up thousands of kills.

Up until a few days ago, she had been a battle-scarred ex-fighter, desperately searching for a husband with her bloodshot eyes and a sense of heavy desperation.

She was like a starving beast, deprived of prey.

Her signature move was to grab a prospective male partner by the throat, lift him into the air, and menace him with the suggestion of marriage. She called it the Husband Choker.

Her success rate, as you may have guessed, was zero.

Her old war buddies, a group of female elves with whom she went way back, often made jokes about her lack of appeal. "Azalea, married? Ha-ha-ha! No way! She'll be the last of any of us to wear a white flower, mark my words!" But still, Azalea applied herself relentlessly to the pursuit of a husband.

Then, when news of Azalea's impending nuptials reached them, they were so shocked that they devolved into screams of jealousy and indignation.

"Heh. Good for you, Mr. Orc. I hope you find yourself someone nice, just like I found my darling hubby."

Yes, Azalea had really changed since getting herself a man.

She had regained the modicum of sophistication that had been stolen away by the long years of war. She found that she could smile and laugh again.

She'd stopped sitting cross-legged, stopped scratching at her crotch, and stopped making obnoxious smacking noises while she ate.

She had even stopped purposefully picking fights with random people. And even when she was challenged by someone else and had no choice but to use her fists, she refrained from knocking out every single one of her opponent's teeth, as she used to so love doing.

She had gone from being a savage beast of the battlefield to an ordinary elf again.

And it was all thanks to the love of a good man.

Quietly, the elf people offered up silent thanks toward this hapless individual who had performed the ultimate sacrifice.

"All right, enough dawdling! It's time to head back and enjoy some more of hubby's home cooking!"

Grinning, Azalea continued on her way, already salivating at the prospect.

4

THE GREAT EAGLE'S PERCH

"The Great Eagle's Perch."

The moment Bash stepped into the tavern, he felt as though he'd entered a gambling den or some other kind of questionable establishment.

For a pub, a place of drunken merriment, the atmosphere was heavy and tense, almost stifling. The patrons all seemed to be sizing each other up.

It wasn't threatening, exactly. It was more like that feeling you get in the early stages of a battle, when both sides are trying to measure the strength of their enemy before striking.

"Is that an orc? I heard that a lone orc was seen entering town... Welcome, Orc."

The barkeep nodded to Bash, gesturing that he should take any available seat.

There was a bar but no barstools. The only seating available was at the tables.

Bash hesitated for a moment, unsure where to sit. Then he figured it out. Men were seated along the exterior wall of the tavern, with women on the opposite side.

Bash took a seat on the men's side.

The female elf warrior at the opposite side of the table had a mean stare.

She had short hair cut into a bob, with the ends curled under.

She was wearing a look of such malice that it could strike down a small human, perhaps a child, without her ever laying a hand on them. And she had a distinctive diagonal-shaped scar running across her face.

Her dress was fairly revealing, but Bash could tell from just one look that she had been a prominent soldier during the war.

Perhaps she had been the elven equivalent of an orc chief or held an even higher rank.

As soon as Bash sat down, the woman's eyes went wide. Then she caught sight of Bash's new clothes. Quickly, she made eye contact with a woman sitting to her side, before nodding firmly.

"Well, hello there! You're a fine figure of a man, aren't you? Nice to meet you; my name's Henbit!"

Her voice brought to mind a ferocious tiger doing a desperate impression of an adorable kitten.

Bash wasn't sure how comfortable he was making small talk with women this way. He felt like he was exposed in the field, with the enemy sniffing out his scent. He always preferred to strike first. But in front of a woman, he wasn't sure how to act.

It was a feeling he'd never experienced before... Or was it?

Feeling very out of his element, Bash nonetheless decided to plunge ahead and try to make conversation.

"So then, what's your name, Mr. Orc?"

"Bash."

"Ooh, Bash! What a splendid name! You orcs all have such wonderful names, poor Henbit is all in a tizzy!"

"Um... Okay."

Her shrieked voice was so high-pitched that Bash felt the beginnings of a headache. And he was starting to feel quite dizzy as well.

Was he under some sort of spell?

"Hmm, I see scars. So you were in the war, were you? Where did you fight?"

"All over. Near the end of the war, I spent most of my time in this region. I fought to protect our land."

"I see, I see! Well, what a silly question that was! You must think I'm a total airhead!"

“Where did you fight?”

“Oh, I was part of the team that went and invaded the succubus country! The Thirty-Second Division! So that’s why I don’t know much about the orcs, you see— *Gack!*”

Henbit suddenly started coughing.

After quickly sipping her glass of water, she said “Ahem!” loudly a few times, to test her voice. Then she gazed at Bash with a sickeningly sweet smile.

“And this is the first time I’ve heard of an orc traveling to the elf country. I’m dying to know *all* about you! What brings you to our forest?”

“Um... I’m looking for something. Although, to be more accurate...”

But before he could finish his sentence, Henbit heaved herself across the table and pressed a finger to Bash’s lips.

Silencing him.

“You don’t even have to say it. I already know. You’re thinking about marriage, aren’t you? That’s why you’re here.”

“...Yeah.”

Bash clamped his lips shut, embarrassed to have been so easily read.

Although when he thought about it, his mere presence in this tavern was an obvious sign that he was in the marriage market.

And it’s not like he was trying to hide it, exactly. His status as a virgin, though—he’d die before he let that little detail slip out.

“But you know...”

Henbit tipped her head to one side in an approximation of feminine thoughtfulness, but she did it so vigorously that it looked like her neck was about to snap.

“...the thing about widdle ol’ Henbit is that she doesn’t want to become someone’s breeding slave. I mean, she’s not *opposed* to having children. It’s just that I wanna have a true elven union, marrying one man and staying in love with him for all my days!”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got status, back in my country. If you become my wife, you won’t be treated as a breeding slave. I give you my word.”

Status.

The use of this term made Henbit’s eyes sparkle.

“Ohhh, is that right? So, Mr. Bash, you have some renown back in the land of the orcs, is that what you’re saying? What was your rank? Great chief? War chief?”

“I was just a warrior. Only...”

“Just a warrior? Pah!”

Henbit spat with disgust at the mention of Bash’s rank.

Also, her voice dropped several octaves in an instant and became gravelly and rough, like that of an uncouth soldier.

It wasn’t exactly a pleasant voice, but it came as something of a relief to Bash.

A rough, uncouth soldier he could deal with. It was the artifice...her whole “tiger posing as a playful kitten” gimmick that he couldn’t stomach.

So she was a true tiger, after all. Bash could make small talk with a tiger.

“During the war, my rank was that of a warrior, yes, but I achieved many...”

“I don’t wanna hear it, you orcish braggart! You rich?”

“What?”

“Did I stutter? How much are you worth?”

“Money? I don’t... I don’t have any money.”

In truth, Bash was one of the richest men in the orc kingdom.

Back in his homeland, Bash wanted for nothing.

But the orcs mostly dealt with trade and barter. They didn’t handle currency.

Except for when they were trading with other countries, the orcs lived their daily lives without ever handling coins or even thinking about physical money at all.

But Henbit seemed unable to comprehend the existence of a society without money.

“No *money*? I’m switching seats!”

Heaving a disgusted sigh, Henbit scoffed at Bash before getting out of her seat and stomping off across the tavern.

“...?”

Bash had no idea what had just happened.

He waited for Henbit to return, but she took a seat at another table and started talking to a different man.

“Zell... What now?”

Bash turned to look at Zell.

But Zell was currently glugging down a large glass of mead and was already three sheets to the wind.

“So I says to ‘im, I says... Ya need *red* flowers for flower divination! And then guess what ‘e says? ‘e says *which* red flowers?! There’s tons of red flowers! Can you *believe* it? *Hic!* I mean, when I says red flowers, it’s obvious what I mean! Don’t you think so, Boss?”

Zell was gesticulating wildly while addressing a saltshaker.

The fairy would be no help to him in this state.

What do I do?

Should he follow Henbit? Or...

“Hi! ‘Sup! Evening, Mr. Orc! I’m Lilac! We don’t often see orcs around these parts, so I just had to come over and introduce myself!”

Another elf. This one looked like she could take on a gryphon without breaking a sweat.

But her voice was much higher and squeakier than a gryphon’s.

“Bash.”

“Can we just cut to the chase, Mr. Bash? Do you own any land?”

Bash would forget about the last woman. This one was his new target.

Bash shook his head slightly, refocusing on the woman in front of him.

“I don’t own any land. Orcish territory is—”

“Ah, in that case, I’m good. See ya!”

With a sudden look of disinterest in her eyes, Lilac waved her hand at Bash dismissively and disappeared.

It was so quick.

So quick that Bash could almost still see a faint Lilac-shaped afterimage sitting across the table, superimposed on his retinas.

What was her deal?

But before Bash could give the interaction any real thought, the next woman sat down.

“Good evening! My name’s Peace Lily! I hope you don’t mind me joining you, Mr. Orc!”

“Um, no, not at all...”

Bash didn’t have any time for confusion. All he could do was sit tight as Peace Lily now interrogated him—and try to answer her questions as best he could...



After that, Bash chatted with a string of ladies, one after the other.

Sounds like heaven, right? Well, not quite.

The elf ladies grilled Bash on all aspects of his private and personal life before inevitably making a hasty exit.

After Bash had met with ten ladies, he finally realized what the setup was here.

Men would sit. Women would question the men. And if a man’s answers didn’t fit her requirements, she would move on to the next man.

That was the system in place at the Great Eagle’s Perch.

The women all asked the same sort of questions. After posing a few of them,

they all moved on from Bash.

It looked like Bash wasn't going to be one of the chosen ones.

As for Bash, well, he would have been happy with any of the women he'd spoken to. So the problem wasn't with him being too picky.

But this string of failed interviews had made one thing painfully clear, even to a naive man like Bash. The reason why he wasn't getting anywhere.

It was because of wealth. Or to be more accurate, his lack of it.

The elf women all had their own way of posing questions, but it was obvious that they were all after money. He was asked about titles and lands as well, but mostly what they wanted to know was how thick Bash's wallet was.

It didn't do any good, Bash explaining the high status he held back in orc country. When they found out he didn't have any gold in the bank, so to speak, the elf women would spit in disgust and vanish in a flash. Elf women seemed to be masters of spitting.

After having ten elven beauties vanish on him, Bash soon found himself sitting alone.

It seemed that word had spread among the elf women, and they had warned each other against approaching Bash's table.

But I thought that the elves weren't interested in money. Not like the dwarves are. So then, why is it like this?

Bash couldn't understand it.

Not only did the women stop approaching Bash, but they all started avoiding his eye and began giving off a *Don't talk to me, Orc!* vibe that was quite hostile.

At a loss, Bash decided to at least fill his belly with a meal, since he was here.

Bash remembered elven cuisine being bland and consisting mostly of berries and nuts. But since they had started welcoming other cultures, the elves had taken an interest in importing beast flesh and grain and incorporated these ingredients into their cooking.

The seasoning was subtle, as was the elven custom, but an orc would eat

pretty much anything without complaint.

As Bash tucked into his meal, fully appreciating the hearty fare, he found his thoughts returning to the question of money once more.

“Why do they want money?”

“What’s that? Why do they want money, you say?”

A man turned to face Bash just then, apparently having overheard the orc muttering to himself.

He was a human man, with an entirely unremarkable appearance.

But Bash immediately noticed his ruddy cheeks and glazed-over expression.

The man tottered drunkenly toward Bash, falling into a clumsy heap in the chair next to the orc’s. Then he threw his arm around Bash’s shoulders as if they were old buddies.

Bash didn’t really mind, but such maltreatment of his person, if witnessed back in the orc country, would have Bash’s admirers up in arms, baying for the human man’s blood.

The man, however, was clearly drunk out of his mind.

“I’ll tell ya, if ya want.”

Without waiting for Bash to respond, the man hiccupped and launched into an explanation.

“Listen here, my orcish friend. All the women you see in this tavern belong to the unit that fought against the succubus army during the war. Well, what’s left of the unit anyway.”

According to the man, the situation was as follows.

After the war, there was a big marriage boom in the elf country.

The rich ones married each other first, aristocrat families setting up their sons and daughters.

But with a surplus of women and hardly any men, it became a buyer’s market for a man looking to wed. The prettiest elf women got snapped up in an instant.

Around this time, a lot of the women from the commoner class got to see how the other half lived for the first time, and it became the dream of every commoner woman to marry up in society.

Then the marriages between commoners started happening.

However, most of these marriages were among people who were already close.

Close, in this context, meant that they were survivors from the same unit or that they were childhood friends who had grown up in the towns together, left behind by parents who had gone to join the war.

The war's over, the government's offering cash incentives to those who get married, and everyone else we know is getting hitched! So why don't we just tie the knot, too? It was like that.

Eventually, the only single ladies left were the ones who had fought against the succubus army.

That unit had been made up almost exclusively of women.

It sounds obvious, right? After all, the succubus race is known for bewitching the hearts of men and driving them into a frenzy of lust, making them easy prey for the feast.

Undeterred by the overwhelming presence of enemy women, the succubus army sought out the units that did have men in them. Then they attacked the men and dragged them away.

Succubi found the flesh of elven men to be the tastiest of all delicacies.

As a result, the elf country was soon facing a serious shortage of men.

Initially, there were six elf women to every four elf men recorded in the census. But that ratio soon changed until there were seven elf women to every three elf men—a severe imbalance.

Then, after the war, the female units who had shouldered the burden of fighting against the succubus army found themselves left on the sidelines. Having come from an almost all-female environment, they didn't have any male acquaintances to court.

So these women made their way to the Shiwanashi Forest, where many men from other races were said to gather. They began husband hunting in earnest, and one by one, the women with the most agreeable personalities were able to find willing men.

But not all women enjoyed the same success.

The ones who remained had personality problems—or badly disfigured faces.

Those flaws aside, the elf race was still known for its beautiful women.

Men far and wide would kill for an elf bride. Human men more than most.

So these unmarried women still had one final chance. And with the marriage boom going on, it was now or never.

Still, the women couldn't help feeling angry and resentful.

As a result of the marriage boom, they had been overtaken in the marriage race by the younger, prettier, less psychologically and physically scarred whippersnappers they had to babysit during the war. You might even say their entire predicament could be blamed on these younger, already married women.

Well, the remaining women had had enough of being passed over. They weren't going to settle. They were going to get what they were worth.

"...But why is it money they want?"

"Duh, it's obvious! The younger ones all got themselves hitched to rich humans, and now they're livin' in the lap of luxury, livin' the kinda lives that elves of their caliber could have never even dreamed of!"

"Oh, I see."

"These women won't be satisfied with any man who's worth less than the ones their old war buddies have already married. They want an aristocrat or a royal. They want a man who's got status, money, stability. A man who can allow them to live in comfort for the rest of their days. Not that a man like that would come to a place like *this*, though. No, those sorts of men could do better than the broads on offer here."

Bash's new human friend was apparently penniless as well.

After the war, he found himself with nowhere to live and no hometown to return to. And despite doing quite well on the battlefield, he found himself *forcefully retired* from the army once the conflict ended and soldiers weren't needed as much anymore. With little social status to speak of, he now lived in a small, run-down shack and scratched out a living working as a day laborer.

Getting married seemed an impossible dream for a man like him.

He often found himself questioning what exactly it was that he had fought for. And why he had survived to the end of the war, only to be met with a fate like this.

In the depths of despair, he heard a rumor that the elven women were open to marrying men of other races.

He had encountered many a stunning elf woman during the war.

If only he could get one of those women to agree to be his bride. It would change his life. Maybe he would have a warm home to return to, at long last.

And so he had taken the plunge and traveled here, hoping to find a beautiful elf bride of his very own.

"Egh..."

But the reality had been cruel and disappointing.

The elf women who had yet to marry were all gold diggers.

He tried to regale them with tales of his prowess on the battlefield. He assured them that, once married, he would take care of their needs for the rest of his days. But to no avail. They all snorted at him with disgust. Boasting about his wartime deeds was really the final nail in the coffin. Every one of these elven ex-warriors had slain ten times the enemies he had, after all.

"Guh! What a pathetic, insignificant speck of dirt I am..."

Recalling the harsh treatment he'd received from the elf women, the man began to cry.

Bash blinked in alarm, unsure how to handle this grown man who had suddenly begun blubbering like a baby in public.

The man just kept on crying. Between sobs, he took large swigs of his ale.

Then finally, he looked up, bleary-eyed.

He was looking at the elven women who had all been blatantly ignoring Bash.

“Look at them, eh? Just look at those beauties. What I wouldn’t give...”

“...Yeah.”

Bash could understand the man’s sentiments.

Even from across a gloomy bar like this, the elven women’s beauty was radiant.

Shining golden hair, slender limbs. The sharp way they carried themselves. Their well-defined muscles communicated competence and strength.

All right, so their personalities may have suffered from some severe flaws. But if only Bash could claim one for himself, and lie with her every night, he wouldn’t have a single complaint.

“If only I had some money...”

“Yeah, it’s all about money...”

Money.

Money was nothing to Bash. He had been raised in orcish society, where it wasn’t even a consideration.

He had no idea how one went about getting money and no clue how to accumulate enough of it to satisfy an elven woman.

Zell might know. But the fairy was currently splashing around in a large tankard of ale. There was a saltshaker floating in there, too, for some reason. Zell seemed to be trying to wash its back. It was actually kind of cute.

“*How much* money, though?”

“How much? Um... No idea, to be honest. All I know is that, way back when, rich elf men proposed to their sweethearts with emerald necklaces. Emerald necklaces set in *gold*. Real works of art! So I guess it takes about that much? Yeah, you gotta have deep pockets for a nice piece of jewelry like that!”

Bash was unaware, but this was an old elven tradition, sparked by a tale.

The tale says that a human man fell in love with a beautiful elf maiden at first sight.

He proposed to her immediately, but the elf woman was prideful and turned him down as a matter of course.

The human man was undeterred. He pursued her doggedly.

Annoyed, the elf woman decided to offer up an impossible condition for winning her hand, to hopefully get rid of the man.

If he could bring her the legendary Greenleaf Emerald, she said, the mythical jewel that was said to exist somewhere unknown in the land, then she would marry him.

The man agreed readily, setting out on a journey around the world in search of the emerald.

Along his travels, he discovered not only the Greenleaf Emerald but many precious gems and jewels besides, with which he had an elaborate necklace made. Then he returned and presented it to his beloved.

Throwing up her hands, secretly delighted, the elf woman acquiesced, and the two were wed. So went the tale.

Most elven women these days dream about being proposed to with an emerald necklace.

There's no more romantic way to propose in the minds of the elves.

In fact, emerald necklaces were in such high demand that every jeweler in the elf country made sure to keep plenty of them in stock.

"An emerald necklace..."

"Eh, no point stressing about it, though. It's beyond our reach, penniless as we are."

"So...what are you planning to do?"

"Me? Hmm. I guess, at the very least, I'll try my hand at hunting zombies, starting tomorrow."

“Hunting zombies?”

“Oh, don’t you know? There’s been an outbreak of zombies near town. Nobody knows what’s causing it. But the town council will pay ya for every zombie you slay. You can make decent money that way, if you’re any good at it.”

“You can get money for slaying zombies?”

“Yeah.”

This was useful information indeed.

Bash guessed this man’s plan was to slay enough zombies to accrue enough wealth to buy one of those shiny necklaces.

In actuality, all the man was hoping to do was earn enough money to get through another week. After all, he was flat broke.

“At any rate, I guess you and I are both losers tonight, eh? So let’s drink. I’ve never drunk with an orc before.”

“All right. I’ve never drunk with a human before, either.”

“Oh, shoot. Forgot to introduce myself. The name’s Breeze.”

“Bash.”



As they took stock of each other's name, both paused for a second, struck by a sudden feeling of déjà vu.

Both recalled hearing the other's name somewhere before. But after a beat, they each shrugged, deciding to drop it.

They had fought for years during the long war—and survived all the way to the end. Soldiers who distinguished themselves on the battlefield often had their names mentioned far and wide. It was fairly common. Hearing each other's name before wasn't so strange.

They were also too drunk to really care about it just then.

"Here's to the loser men!"

"Here's to the stunning women of the elf country."

"Cheers!"

That night, for the first time in a long while, Bash got well and truly sloshed.



"Guh... Egh... Drank way too much..."

A few hours later, Zell awoke with a pounding headache.

Looking around, Zell realized through still-spinning vision that they were in a tavern. Of course. The tavern. That memory was still intact.

Usually when Zell woke up after getting blackout drunk, they would find themselves corked inside a bottle. That happened a lot. But today the fairy seemed to have remained safe and unharmed as they slept off the booze.

Well, of course. Bash was there with them, after all.

Why, they had been taking a bath together right before Zell passed out, had they not?

"Hnng!"

Zell pinched the bridge of their fairy nose and grunted, tensing up.

The fairy's personal glow intensified for a second, and something cloudy rose from their head, floated up into the air, and dissipated in the gloom.

Fairies could cure their own hangovers with a little magic.

In fact, fairies were skilled at removing poisons and toxins from their own bodies using this trick.

“Now then, where’d the Boss go?”

Zell began looking around for the Orc Hero.

There was a booze-soaked saltshaker lying nearby on the table, goodness knows why.

But the fairy was busy looking for Bash right then and spared the saltshaker no further mind.

“Aha!”

There he was.

Seated at a table in the middle of the tavern, just where Zell recalled seeing him before passing out. He hadn’t moved at all. Bash, too, was deep in his cups, although he didn’t even appear drunk.

“Boss! Did you find a willing lady?”

Zell bobbed questioningly in the air in front of Bash, but the orc merely shook his head.

“No. But I did find out some interesting information.”

“Ha! You, gathering intel, Boss? I wouldn’t be surprised if I saw a pig go flying past the tavern window!”

“I’m perfectly capable of gathering a little intelligence, you know. Of course, I can’t hold a candle to you and your skills.”

“Of course you can, Boss! You’re the boss! Why, look what you’ve managed to achieve while I was lying around in a drunken stupor! But please don’t make a habit of it, Boss... Otherwise, you might find that you don’t need me anymore. And then what will become of me?! I’ll cease to exist! I’ll expire in a puff of fairy dust! I’ve just gotta be needed, Boss! Still, good stuff, eh?”

Zell whistled, clapping Bash’s meaty shoulder with one tiny hand.

The fairy always made sure to bolster Bash’s self-esteem at every

opportunity.

Their nickname wasn't Support Master Zell for nothing.

"So tell me about this info? You got a secret little black book of single, eligible lady elves?"

"No, it's not a book. But I have discovered what it is these single elf ladies seek. Now, I'm going to obtain this key item for myself and use it to woo one."

"Aha! So in other words, your attempt to infiltrate the single ladies and discover what makes them tick has borne fruit, eh? Amazing, Boss! So what is it these women desire?"

"Riches."

"Riches!!!"

This made sense to Zell immediately.

Zell was a fairy. And fairies weren't particularly interested in things like money.

But some fairies are very interested in riches. There are fairies who obsess over precious metals and gems, entranced by their shine and sparkle.

Zell knew one such treasure-happy fairy, actually.

A gold-hungry fairy, who filled their home wall-to-wall with gold coins and spent all day staring at the pile.

Probably, the elves were a lot like that one friend of Zell's.

"Well, there's all kinds of riches, you know. There's gemstones and precious metals like gold and silver..."

But Bash had a response to this, too.

He had already found out everything he needed to know from the human man, who even now was slumped over one of the tables in a drunken coma.

"As to that... I heard that the first human male who married an elf proposed to her with a shiny gold necklace, one with a huge emerald on it. This showed his worth to the woman."

“I’ve got it, I’ve got it! So all we need to do is buy a shiny gold necklace, and...”

“...And I can get myself an elf bride!”

Yeah, right.

It was true that most elf women would go weak at the knees if presented with an emerald necklace as a proposal token. After all, what could be more romantic?

But the kind of women who were husband hunting in earnest at spots like the Great Eagle’s Perch were after much greater riches than that represented by a single emerald necklace.

They wanted fine dining, exquisite gowns, a big mansion, social status. They wanted to live like the elite, the stinking rich ones, in comfort and luxury.

Zell clearly didn’t know much about money—or how it worked.

But Zell was just operating on the info Bash had offered up. In the fairy’s tiny brain, a single emerald necklace equaled instant success, the key to their whole quest.

“So then, how are you gonna get the money to buy the necklace, Boss?”

“Mm. About that. Apparently, there’s some kind of outbreak going on, and they need all the help they can get.”

“An outbreak? Of what?”

“Zombies. There’s waves of zombies popping up, and they need people to help wipe them out.”

“Yeah! We saw that zombie on the way here, remember?”

“Apparently you get some money for every zombie you kill.”

“Aha, now it all becomes clear!”

And so the Orc Hero decided to take on a part-time job as a freelance zombie hunter.

Too bad for the zombies. Their lives now came with an imminent expiration date.

Well, to be more accurate, their lives had already expired some time ago.

“All right, let’s get out there and kick some zombie butt! Now, zombies tend to be most active at night, so we should head straight out there, and... No, wait! We must return to the inn first! You’ve got to change out of that nice outfit! No sense getting it covered in mud and zombie goo when you’ve only just bought it, eh?”

“Right! First, we’ll return to the inn!”

Bash and Zell nodded excitedly at each other and then left the tavern just as the owner was closing up shop for the night.



Upon exiting the tavern, the two found that the sun had completely set, and the town was in full darkness.

Still, it was plenty bright enough to see, thanks to the light of the moon high overhead and the magical lamps that were strung up along the streets.

In the past, the town was never so brightly lit.

Elves had perfect night vision, thanks to their magical proficiency. And since they spent much of their time in the deep forest, where it’s as dark as night even during the day, the elves tended to prefer the gloom, even inside the comfort of their own homes. They used no torches, lamps, or even candles.

Elves were creatures of the dark. That’s how the orcs always saw them.

But now Bash was starting to see differently.

The elves actually loved bright lights. Perhaps even more so than the humans did.

They only lived their lives shrouded in darkness as a survival tactic during the war.

Yes, it was the war that had driven many of the shifty behaviors the elves were known for. Now that the war was over, however, the elves were... different. Take the welcome Bash had been given when he came into town, for example. The bloodthirsty elves of wartime would never have been so agreeable.

No, the elves Bash encountered during the war were almost like a different breed.

They were fiercer then. Attacking on all sides, eyes bloodshot, magical spells and swords slicing through the air.

And they had hurled such foul insults and threats at Bash as they attacked.

How the elf race had changed, simply as a result of the cessation of hostilities!

As he thought about the elf race and how different things were now, Bash felt somehow warm inside.

“That’s why I *told* them...”

“Yes, but...”

“Excuse me?! So you’re saying I’m wrong?!”

His ears suddenly perked up. He could hear people arguing.

As he listened closer, however, he soon realized that rather than arguing, it was more like one of them was whining and complaining about something, and the other was trying to soothe them.

Bash strained his eyes in the direction of the voices.

Then he spotted them—a man and woman walking together.

“What I’m saying is: Why can’t they use their brains and decide for themselves? Right? You agree, don’t you?”

“But, Lady Sonia, you stipulated that all decisions should be run by you first...”

“...Yes... But... I mean, it’s the small, petty things; they should know better than to bother me with those! Especially this late in the evening! They’re like children! Waah, waah, waah! Grow up!!!”

“But, Lady Sonia, you’re the one who said that all order will fall if a unit fails to follow the proper chain of command.”

“Ugh!!!”

The man was wearing an elf military uniform.

The woman was dressed in a dark-green robe and a pointy hat, pulled down

low and almost covering her eyes.

Bash wasn't interested in the woman's outfit, however.

"Hmm."

Just then, the woman looked up and noticed Bash.

"...It's him!"

She stiffened, her hand going straight to the staff she wore tucked in her waistband.

Seeing this, Bash crossed his arms deliberately. In orcish custom, this signaled his clear desire for peace and assured his opponent that he would not fight.

"..."

It was the beautiful elf from earlier.

Bash could never have forgotten her regal nose, her sparkling blue eyes, her dainty chin, and her cute, pointy ears. She was on the smaller side, not short, just proportionately small, and had the tiny bosom characteristic of elven females. Her hair was silky and golden and glimmered in the moonlight.

Yes, this was the beautiful elf noblewoman who had helped Bash get admitted at the border.

The man was the same one who had been her companion then, too.

Illuminated by the moonlight and the mellow glow of the magical lamps, her beauty seemed otherworldly.

Bash was captivated by her face. But that didn't mean he'd failed to notice something else important, as well.

(Boss! *Boss!*)

Zell began whispering excitedly into Bash's ear.

(Check it out, Boss! Look at her head! No flower! She's single!) (I noticed!)

Bash was staring at the elf woman's head.

She wore no white flower in her hair, no white flower to signify that she was taken or engaged.

She was single. This exquisite elf was still on the market.

(What do I do?)

(Just stay cool. Don't blow it. Be gallant. Thank her for her assistance at the border!) (Roger that.)

Bash nodded, then bowed deeply in front of the woman, who was watching him with sharp, wary eyes.

"Thank you again for your kind assistance at the border."

Bash kept his eyes trained on the elf woman even while Zell was whispering rapidly into his ear.

The elf woman had caught that, too. The orc had his arms crossed in a peaceful gesture, but the way he was staring at her told her he was ready to attack at a moment's notice. Well, she was ready to throw down, too. But at the same time, she felt frozen to the spot.

She couldn't possibly attack first, after all.

"D-don't even mention it! We elves have no reason to deny entry to orcs. The war's over, after all, isn't it?"

"As the lady says, Mr. Orc."

Her companion bowed to Bash.

Still, he kept his eyes on Bash the entire time. His gaze was fixed on the orc, in fact.

His whole demeanor told Bash, *If you make one wrong move, I'll kill you where you stand*. Bash was used to such looks. He got them all the time.

"Still... There's one thing I'm curious about!"

Bash's heart began thumping fast.

"You're curious? About me?"

"Y-yeah!"

Bash's heart started thumping even faster.

Bash had never known it to beat so fast, even during the height of the most

pitched battles. Bash swallowed hard, the blood rushing audibly in his ears.

Then he briefly made eye contact with Zell.

(I might have a chance here!)

Zell flashed Bash a thumbs-up.

“What is it you’re curious about?”

“Well, I wanna know... What’s your business here?”

“My...business?”

...?!?!?

“Y-yeah... I already know who you are, see. You’re the great Orc Hero Bash. What brings you to elf lands? Why have you left your home? What’s your plan here? Speak!”

Her tone had grown interrogative, even hostile.

But Bash was an orc warrior, used to rough speech. He took no offense.

Besides, he was thrilled. She was curious. About him.

“Mm. Well...”

He had a chance. She was curious. She wanted to know about him.

Then, he should hesitate no longer.

He wanted to propose to her at once and then immediately drag her off to bed.

Of course, Bash knew it was still too soon for that. He had just spent the past few hours being rejected by a string of elf women over his lack of riches, after all. Proposing on the spot like this wouldn’t go down well, not with the way things stood. So then, how to answer her question in the meantime?

(Psst, Boss?)

As Bash hesitated, he heard Zell in his ear again.

(What?)

(I was just thinking... How about focusing all your efforts on this one? Make

her your target, y’know?) (What do you mean, target?)

(Elves mate for life, and they’re totally monogamous. So one of the things they like best in a man is loyalty!) (What are you getting at?)

(What I’m saying is: Instead of casting your net wide and trying your luck with a ton of ladies, why don’t you focus all your wooing efforts on this one woman? I’d say your odds of success would go up dramatically!) (...Ah, I get it!)

Here was a stunning elven bridal prospect, still unwed, with whom he was already acquainted. He had never had such good odds. So why not do everything he could to maximize success with this most likely candidate?

(But you definitely shouldn’t propose just yet, Boss. After all, you don’t have a shiny gold necklace yet. What you should do for now is let her know you’re interested in her, while sidestepping the whole topic of your bride-hunting objective! Then you can save up some funds, buy that necklace, and *then* propose! That’s how you should go about it all, Boss!) (Roger that!)

Bash was impressed.

Good old Zell. Back on the battlefield, he had been saved countless times by the fairy’s quick thinking.

It was true that he had also been endangered by the fairy’s foolishness about the same number of times, but Bash was a grown man and could take care of himself. He wasn’t one to judge his buddy based on a few careless mistakes.

“My objective...”

“Yes? Yes? What’s your objective? Why are you here? Tell me!”

“...I shall say only this.”

He had to let her know he was interested.

The question was, how?

Bash’s brain was working at full capacity here. He chose his words carefully, drawing on the experience he’d gathered in the human country.

“I’ll be back to see you again.”

“What? You’re coming back? To see *me*?!”

The elf's eyes widened in shock.

"What does that mean?! Explain yourself!"

"Heh. You'll find out, soon enough..."

And with that, Bash turned and made his exit.

Keep an air of mystery at all times. That was what Bash had learned in the humans' Fortified City of Krassel.

Make sure his target knew he was interested. But conceal his true objective. For now.

(Nicely done, Boss! Very smooth!)

Bash had been perfect.

Or so he thought.

Zell thought so as well, of course.

Both feeling pleased with how the encounter had gone down, they hurried off in the direction of the inn, eager to get out there and start slaying zombies for coin.



The elf woman watched Bash disappear into the distance, her face a mask of shock and horror.

"What the hell is going on...?"

None of this made any sense.

The elf woman was in a state of total confusion. But you could hardly blame her.

She clenched her hands into fists and stamped her foot in frustration.

"Curses! What is he doing here?! What is he planning?! I mean, suspicious much? He's really here just traveling? Then don't just walk off smirking after dropping such creepy, cryptic remarks! It's like he's *trying* to make himself conspicuous! I mean, don't you agree? Huh?"

"Yes, I agree with you... But as an Orc Hero of his caliber...he may be here

undercover. It wouldn't make any sense for him to be openly indiscreet. And with you interrogating him like that, he could hardly explain himself without giving away his country's secrets. He had no choice but to be cagey. Anyway, you know orcs aren't known for their lying ability."

"What? You're taking that orc's side over mine?!"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

The elf woman glared at the man until he shrugged.

"Well anyway! Now that we know he's up to something, make sure he's got eyes on him at all times!"

"Certainly. However, if he does return, it sounds like he plans to...kill you, Lady Sonia. Since you've already sniffed out his plans. I guess he'll kill me, too, while he's at it..."

All color drained from the elf woman's face.

The look she was wearing right now—a mixture of awe and terror—was a look common on the faces of those who had encountered the Orc Hero Bash on the battlefield...

But no. She shook her head hard, fists still clenched.

"Even so, I refuse to flee. After all, I am Thunder Sonia, the Elf Hero herself!"

The woman, Thunder Sonia, shook her clenched fist at the moon, her voice tremulous but as prideful as ever.

THE INSECURITIES OF THUNDER SONIA

Seven days had passed since Bash arrived at the Shiwanashi Forest.

Shiwanashi. The great tree.

High up on its penthouse floor, in a lavish suite, a sole elf looked down on the town.

Her long golden hair fell to her waist. She wore a dark-green robe and had a broad-brimmed hat on her head.

She sat on the window seat, gazing out with unseeing, troubled eyes.

The whole of Shiwanashi Forest Town was laid out glittering beneath her. The magical lamps of the town were just strong enough to illuminate the town for its residents but not so strong as to carry into the deep forest. To the elf, the mellow glow of the lights themselves was a symbol of peace.

During the war, it was always either far too bright or pitch-dark instead.

But the elf woman was not feeling peaceful as she gazed out the window.

Nor was she admiring her own beautiful reflection in the glass.

During the war, the elf race had always made it through by focusing only on what would happen tomorrow. But what troubled her now was what would happen the day *after* tomorrow. Or in other words, she was pondering the course of the rest of her entire life.

“Hah...”

Her name was Thunder Sonia.

But everyone called her Lady Sonia out of affection and respect.

She was one of the great Heroes who had slain the Demon Lord, and she was one of the most powerful sorceresses of the entire elf race.

And she was the greatest Hero the elf country had ever known.

She had status, prestige, lands, a peerage...everything a person could want. But she also had a massive, crippling insecurity.

“I can’t believe I got rejected *again...*”

Yes. She was single.

“You expected too much, Granny. To thrust yourself at a human aristocrat who only came to foster ties between our countries... What were you thinking?”

So spoke the male elf standing in the doorway of her room.

His name was Aconitum.

Named after the poisonous genus of flowers, he was a captain in the elf army, as well as being Sonia’s grandnephew. In other words, he was the grandson of one of her siblings.

Officially a captain in the army, he had duties that mostly involved serving as a bodyguard for Sonia, the greatest warrior the elf country had ever known.

Technically, he was her “personal guard,” but what this civil servant actually did all day involved mostly being Sonia’s errand boy and squire.

“Well, what do you suggest?! None of the elven men will give me the time of day! I’m out of options! And how many times have I told you not to call me Granny?!”

Thunder Sonia.

This year, she would be turning 1,200 years old.

She was the oldest of all elves.

Elves usually lived to around five hundred.

Well, there was a reason why Thunder Sonia seemed to have such an unusually long life span.

It happened around nine hundred years ago.

The elf country was in a terrible bind, the worst spot in all of elven history.

The forest was ablaze, their land had been seized, and the soldiers had been almost entirely wiped out. The sound of children's laughter had left their dwellings.

At the time, Sonia, the daughter of the village chief, felt sure that she was witnessing the end of the elf race.

But Sonia was a prodigy, a genius.

Blessed by the god of thunder, the elves all knew she was special. They looked to her to save them.

Indeed, no one had ever faced Thunder Sonia on the battlefield and lived to tell the tale.

Her thunder and lightning magical attacks crisped her enemies instantly, leaving only ashes behind. With her strength, she could hold entire armies at bay.

It was Sonia who held the front line of the battlefield.

But she was already three hundred years old.

An elf is said to be at his or her peak between the ages of one to two hundred years.

Then their skills decrease rapidly until they reach their fourth century of life. Anything past four hundred years was considered very old for elves.

Sonia's prime was already behind her.

She could feel age beginning to take its toll on her. Before too long, the front line protecting the elf country would fall.

Then all that awaited the elves would be their own annihilation.

And so Sonia turned to the dark arts.

She used an ancient curse, passed down in elven folklore.

She performed this curse on...herself.

The result? Sonia's physical age reverted to her late one hundreds and remained fixed there forevermore.

With rejuvenated magical abilities, Sonia became the leader of the failing elf army and within two hundred years had managed to reverse the fates of the elf race by rebuilding the army and repelling their enemies.

After that, she made many appearances on the front line and fought in countless battles until finally she and several other Heroes from foreign lands successfully assassinated the Demon Lord.

She was a true Hero.

But she was still a woman, with a woman's needs. After the war ended, and everyone was getting married left and right, she couldn't help thinking...

"Well, we've got peace at last. Maybe I should find myself a partner, too!"

But she was already 1,200 years old.

And she was a Hero, the pride of the elf race. Everyone knew her name.

No elf man would even think of dating her. It would be too much pressure. She was far too great and important. And far too old.

And so Sonia missed the boat on the marriage boom.

Now there wasn't a single man remaining in the elf country whom Thunder Sonia might have had a chance to snag.

And that wasn't all, either.

To be perfectly honest, there was another major reason why Thunder Sonia couldn't get a man.

"Dammit! It's all *his* fault..."

"Are you referring to whom I think you're referring? The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest...?"

"Yes! Who else?! It's all because of that wretched orc!!!"

The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest.

It was an incident no elf would ever forget, for as long as living memory remained.

After the slaying of the Demon Lord, Geddigs, the elf army and the human

army had teamed up to deal with the dissenting orcs, coming at them in a coordinated pincer movement.

But the elf army had been thwarted by a single warrior.

The Orc Hero Bash.

Just as Sonia had done, Bash preserved the front line of the orc territory and crushed the attacking elf and human soldiers.

But the elves knew that Shiwanashi Forest would never be theirs unless they could take down this orc.

Bash was just too strong, though. Ninety percent of the army that went up against him perished. The other 10 percent managed to flee, but they remained deeply traumatized.

It seemed like no one would be able to defeat him.

That's when Thunder Sonia, the Great Sorceress of the elves, stepped up and challenged Bash to a duel. Who better to fight a Hero than another Hero, after all?

Their battle raged for three days and three nights.

Sonia's lightning magic set the forest ablaze, and thunderbolts cracked the heavens above.

Bash's mighty sword ate its way through the trunks of thick, sturdy trees, sending them crashing to the ground, and his roars caused the very earth to shake.

Their battle had the kind of ferocity only ever seen during a natural disaster.

One elf officer saw it all. He was posted to observe the battle, you see.

Finally, what he saw filled his heart with terror.

At the apex of the battle...

After the thunder and roaring had ceased...

...Only Bash remained standing.

Sonia was crumpled at Bash's feet, knocked out.

Now, what happens when a female elf falls at an orc's feet in defeat?

What always happens, of course. She is dragged away, defiled, and forced to birth babies until her body gives out.

The great Thunder Sonia would be captured.

The Hero of the elves. Their figurehead, their champion. Reduced to an orc's breeding tool.

This could not be allowed to happen.

If the elf troops ever saw their Hero, Sonia, as an orc slave...eyes glazed, belly bulging with an orc child...it would destroy their morale.

The elf army might lose the will to go on, and the chain of command might collapse.

Seeing this tragic fate ahead, the officer was about to leap in to attempt to rescue the Elf Hero, when he saw something extremely shocking.

It was the orc. He was...walking away.

Without even glancing in the direction of Thunder Sonia.

And it wasn't just the officer who saw it. All the soldiers on the scene were watching, too.

They were at a loss as to how to explain what had happened. Nonetheless, they retrieved the fallen Thunder Sonia and reported what they had seen to their commanders.

The commanders, in turn, attempted to cover up the fact that Thunder Sonia had been defeated.

But it was to no avail. Too many soldiers had witnessed it. Before long, the truth got out.

Soon, Thunder Sonia's defeat was known throughout the entire elf army.

The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest. The defeat of the Great Sorceress, Thunder Sonia.

This tale filled the other soldiers with despair.

How could Thunder Sonia have been defeated?

Their heroine, dragged away to become an orc's sex slave...

Such an ending, after all her great deeds... What a nightmare!

But just as the elf soldiers were about to give up, they heard another key piece of info.

Somehow, Thunder Sonia had not been dragged off by the orc at all.

The soldiers couldn't make sense of it.

What? She wasn't taken? Why not? Did her bodyguards leap in and snatch her back from the orc's clutches at the last moment?

No, they had not.

So then...how? An orc always drags off his prey. Either that or he befouls her right where she fell. Why, I was almost victim to one myself the other day. Luckily, backup came just in the nick of time.

I don't know, but it appears he just walked off and left her alone.

Hmm, perhaps she smells older than she looks? You know...maybe she gives off...old-person smell?

Ha-ha! What an amusing thought.

Such gossip was going on all throughout the elf army. And eventually, the discourse regarding Thunder Sonia took on a mocking tone.

"Thunder Sonia may look young, but her old-person scent is so strong, it could even repel a horny orc!"

That was how Thunder Sonia gained her reputation as *the Woman Whose Stink Would Make Even an Orc Rethink...*

She was seen as damaged goods, a woman so unappealing that not even a foul orc would deign to lie with her.

Marry a woman like *her*? No, no, no.

So that was another big reason why Thunder Sonia couldn't find a man to marry.

To circumvent these issues, Sonia had been going on trips outside of elf country lately, looking for a human partner.

Humans live for around eighty years on average.

She figured they wouldn't really see the difference between a two-hundred-to-three-hundred-year-old elf and a twelve-hundred-to-thirteen-hundred-year-old one.

But all her attempts had been ending in failure.

The humans had heard about the Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest, too.

Whenever Sonia, with her bumbling inexperience around men, tried to turn the topic toward potential marriage, the human men always found a way to quickly deflect her.

Sonia blamed her lack of success with human men on the rumors that swirled around her, but there was actually another big reason why she kept striking out...

At any rate, Sonia hated the rumors and gossip with the fire of a thousand suns.

Still, she knew one thing.

The marriage boom among the elves...the rumors about what happened with the Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest...those things were transient, fleeting.

In her 1,200 years of life, she had gone through many eras, seen many changes occur.

She had been around through more generations than any short-lived human's mind could even begin to fathom.

And as the times changed, so did memory.

Even during the long war, things had still gone in and out of vogue.

In another twenty years, the rumors around her would be forgotten. A new generation of humans would be born. Surely Sonia could find a suitable marriage candidate among their number.

And in another hundred years, a new generation of elves would be born and

inherit the land. Maybe one of those would even be willing to marry her.

Due to the curse, Sonia would continue living indefinitely, unless someone killed her, that is. The time would pass in the blink of an eye.

Still, Sonia hated simply biding her time.

It felt like defeat. Like *she* was the loser. Like she was accepting the fact that she was entirely undesirable.

Like she was admitting that she stank. That she was, in the end, truly *the Woman Whose Stink Would Make Even an Orc Rethink*.

But it's not true! It's not! Come here! Take a sniff!

I haven't even been wearing perfume lately, because of that stupid rumor! I don't smell of anything!

Still, the facts didn't matter. Whether she really smelled or not, the rumors were persistent and pervasive.

They wouldn't just die out on their own.

This was all his fault. It was all the fault of that man. The Orc Hero Bash.

If he had only dragged her away like an orc should, then Thunder Sonia would not have to live under this stigma.

Of course, if he actually did drag her off and make her his sex slave, things would have been a whole lot worse for her...

Anyway, despite ruining her life, the orc hadn't even done her the courtesy of acknowledging it!

The other day, the orc hadn't even said hello or long time no see to her when they were reunited after all this time.

Hmm, under the circumstances, given what had transpired between them, perhaps a greeting of that sort would have been in poor taste, though.

Still, his manners were shocking. He looked her right in the face and didn't even react.

According to Aconitum, Bash had simply watched their carriage roll past with a blank look on his orcish face.

Now, any typical orc, upon laying eyes on a beauty like Sonia, would immediately pitch a tent in his pants and lick his lips with desire.

Ah, but it had been a long time since that had happened.

The last time an orc had reacted to Sonia that way, it had been before the elf nation had turned it around in the war, when they were being battered on all sides by the orc forces. Back when Sonia was still young.

At some point, their interest in her ceased. Then, whenever an orc caught sight of Sonia, he would simply shudder—or else run at her, prepared to fight to the death.

No orc had lusted after Sonia in several hundred years.

That said, the war was over now.

And the orcs were known to have become almost civilized these days.

So then why hadn't Bash pitched a tent in his pants or given her a lustful look at all?

Could it be that her age really *had* caught up with her...?!

Bash's indifference toward her had sent Sonia into a self-conscious spiral.

Not that she would ever let it show outwardly, of course. After all, she was the Great Elf Sorceress, the Elf Hero herself. A woman so exalted that she could never afford to show weakness or doubt in front of her subordinates.

"Anyway, what I want to know is what that orc is doing in our land! You're having him monitored, right? Well? What's he doing?"

"His first day here, he seemed to be gathering info. Ever since, he's been seen zombie hunting in the forest."

"Zombie hunting? What for?"

"I don't know. Probably gathering funds to move on to the next town."

"Nonsense! I've never heard of anything so ridiculous! He said he came here to see me, didn't he?!"

"Well, whatever he said, he's done nothing but hunt zombies."

Seven days had passed since Bash came to town.

His first day there, he was reported to be sniffing around town for some reason. But these days, all he did was go back and forth between his inn and the forest.

He was being suspiciously unsuspicious.

Causing no trouble. Keeping his nose clean.

Almost as if he wasn't really an orc at all.

"But you know, he's been the talk of the town. Everyone's talking about the orc who showed up out of nowhere and started slaying zombies all over the place, saying how the orcs are surprisingly pretty amazing. Actually, thanks to him, the number of zombie sightings has plummeted over the past seven days. We're thinking about sending the army in to mop up what's left and put this thing to bed once and for all. Wouldn't have been possible without the orc's efforts."

"All right, all right, you don't have to suck up to him, you know."

"It's what his fans have been saying, not me."

"Fools! All this glorification of murder! Remember what that little twerp Leucanthemum always says? We must remember the dead but forget the ones who slayed them. No keeping score."

The current Elf King, Leucanthemum, had issued a decree to all elves, in the name of peace.

To bear no grudge against those who had been their enemies during the war.

Ill feelings only led to future wars. And so Leucanthemum's words would often be quoted whenever there was any talk of who had killed whom.

Blood had been shed on both sides. All was fair in love and war, after all.

Of course, it was difficult not to hold grudges. But they had to break this age-old tradition.

The marriage boom between elves and other races, that played a part in it, too. But Leucanthemum's decree was key in changing the minds of the

xenophobic elves and in helping them to open up and accept other races in general.

And it was the decree that meant Bash had such an easy time entering the elf town, compared to the hostile reception he was met with at the gates of Krassel.

Still, maybe that was more due to the fact that most of the soldiers in this town had been busy fighting other races than the orcs during the war. So their prejudices weren't so strong.

"Lady Thunder Sonia. You're contradicting yourself. Are you saying it's a bad thing that the orc has been assisting with the zombie-culling effort?"

"Oh, hush. I know I'm just being...churlish."

Sonia heaved an exaggerated sigh.

Well, there was no sense in dwelling on things that couldn't be changed.

"Hmm, well anyway. The orc can stay. When I really think about it, if he was actually planning something nefarious, he probably wouldn't have approached me and acted so outwardly suspicious."

Sonia had been panicked when Bash first came to town and felt the icy grip of fear around her heart when he told her he would "be back to see her again," whatever that meant. But nothing had happened. She was going to be okay... probably. She still felt a small knot of nerves deep in her stomach, but as long as the orc made no sudden moves, there was no reason to suspect him.

Sonia hated the rumors about her, but she didn't wish Bash any ill will in particular.

It was all her fault for losing their battle, really.

Rather than blaming him, Sonia wanted to find a way to squash the rumors for good.

That was what Sonia desired most in the whole world, at least right now.

But how to do that? Challenging Bash to a grudge match and emerging victorious this time around...wouldn't be enough to get rid of the rumors.

And she could hardly beg the orc to capture and ravish her in front of loose-tongued witnesses, just to prove she was desirable. No, that was crazy talk.

“Damn those humans!”

And so Sonia turned her ire irrationally on the human race.

“They’re irresponsible, flighty cads, but for some reason, they handle us elves with kid gloves! I wish that, just once, one of them would throw caution to the wind and at least *try* to date me! That would get rid of the rumors of my...old-person smell...in an instant! And I’d make sure the guy was set up for life in exchange! I’d wait on him hand and foot for the rest of his days! Why, I’ve already devoted twelve hundred years of my life to the elf kingdom! I could spend fifty or sixty years pleasing a man! I mean, human men love having a woman by their side, doting on them, don’t they? And I’m a beauty, aren’t I? What more do these people want?!?!”

“It’s immodest to call yourself a beauty.”

“Are you saying I’m not?! All right, I may be twelve hundred years old, but physically, I don’t look a day over one hundred! I can use pretty much any magical spell, and I’m smart! I’m practically a genius! I have significant knowledge of politics, and I even know my way around business consulting! All that on top of a pretty face! All right, so I’ve never actually done *the deed*, but human men love that, don’t they?! Why, six hundred years ago, a human general stopped at our elf encampment once, since we were allies and all, and he bedded all the elven virgins, one right after another! I’ll never forget that!”

Unable to do anything about the Bash situation, Sonia had decided to rant about the human men who had rejected her advances instead.

Aconitum could do nothing but listen to her carrying on, a small smile playing about his lips.

He was sure that at least one human man would be willing to date his great-aunt if only she put as much fervor into asking one as she did into complaining about them in private.

But during a face-to-face interaction with a human male, Sonia would never carry on this way.

Not only was she shy and a late bloomer, but she always tried to comport herself with the dignity and poise befitting her status as the Great Elf Sorceress, Thunder Sonia.

In other words...she always acted far too cool.

And no human man would be foolish enough to come on to a woman who was clearly someone of great importance, someone who behaved as a dignified hero of her race.

If they said the wrong thing and upset her, it could lead to a major diplomatic incident between the elf and human countries.

When she visited the human country, she came as an honored guest and was treated like royalty. Even a one-night stand with a random man would be completely unfeasible.

Thunder Sonia was convinced that rumors of her alleged old-person smell had reached human ears, but this was not so at all.

“Hmm, come to think of it, Tum-Tum...how about *you* do the honors? Keep the bloodline pure, y’know?”

Aconitum’s cheeks stiffened. His great-aunt’s suggestion made his blood run cold.

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

Aconitum’s earliest memories were of Thunder Sonia changing his diapers.

And while she was changing them, Sonia would be smugly telling his mother: *“Just leave this to me. I changed your diapers—and your mom’s diapers, too, you know. I’m like...the family wet nurse! Ha-ha!”*

Yes, Thunder Sonia had been almost like a nanny to Aconitum growing up, as she was to all the kids in the family.

Naturally, he had never once even *thought* about his great-aunt that way. Nor would he ever. Lady Sonia was just that desperate.

“I’ll have you know, there’s already someone I’ve set my heart upon.”

“What?! You’ve got yourself a sweetheart?! You could have told me! So who

is it? What family does she belong to? Are there any impediments between you two? Are you *star-crossed lovers*?! If so, I'll swoop in and have a word! Wait, she's not a succubus, is she? That's one thing I won't allow! I'll use my influence to have you disinherited, mark my words! No, I'll have you driven out of elf country and banished altogether! But don't worry, you can tell me. I'm a reasonable woman! Go on, then!"

"It's Princess Innuella, the beastkin king's third daughter. We're still at the negotiation stage at the moment, so it's being kept under wraps for now."

"What?! That's your type, is it? And what do you mean, 'negotiations'? What, are they checking to see if you're good enough for her, is that it?! Arranging to get you promoted so you're suitable? Quibbling over the best date for the announcement? Why haven't I heard about any of this?!"

"I asked Father to keep it from you, since you're such a blabbermouth..."

"Then why just blurt it out now?! Foolish boy! Have you learned nothing thus far?! Don't you understand the importance of withholding sensitive information?! Well?!"

Aconitum sighed and rolled his eyes with annoyance. Just then, an owl landed on the windowsill, hooted once, and began to peck the glass with its beak.

It had a scroll tied to its leg.

"Hmm? What's this? A message?"

Sonia opened the window and held out her arm for the bird to perch on. Then she gently removed the scroll from its leg.

The scroll was a letter.

"Aw, it's from Calendula. Cally."

"...*General* Calendula, you mean?"

"Mm-hmm. Seems they've spotted a lich among the zombies..."

"A lich...really? So then, the cause of the zombie outbreak over the past few years has been...?"



“Yep. So *that’s* why they keep springing back up, and we can never quite manage to stamp ’em out.”

The appearance of undead has always been a largely natural phenomenon.

When a person dies, but their soul still harbors deep grudges or regrets, the body is reanimated and seeks to steal the souls of the living.

However, once a zombie was defeated in battle, that would be the end of it.

Also, it was said that the souls of those who become zombies were irredeemably cursed, such that they could never be revived again.

But if a lich was among them...then none of that applied.

The liches were a superior class of undead who could use their macabre powers to gather together the shattered souls and reanimate the fallen zombies.

In other words, as long as a lich was lurking about, it would be next to impossible to stop the zombies from regenerating ad infinitum.

“They’re launching a major-scale cleanup operation five days from now, and they want my help. I’m to go and attend the strategy meeting at once.”

“But it’s the middle of the night.”

“Yes, yes, we’ll be burning the midnight oil, that’s for sure. But if there really is a lich out there, then there’s no time to waste.”

The elf army soldiers were highly skilled.

Three years had passed since the end of the war.

The knowledge that they had amassed over thousands of years of war was still with them. They were as sharp as ever.

When they went on the attack, they did so with their full force, in a highly coordinated effort.

The elf army had decided to mobilize the Shiwanashi Forest Division’s Second Battalion against the zombies. They were going all out and taking this very seriously, even though their enemy was nothing more than a horde of shambling corpses.

The Second Battalion's unit had more magic soldiers than the rest of the army put together.

Fire magic proved particularly effective against zombies.

Now would be the best opportunity for them to eradicate the zombie threat once and for all.

"Hmm, although...with such a major-scale operation going on, I'm concerned about what that orc will get up to in the meantime. I mean, what if he acts while we're all distracted?"

"Er... But he hasn't done anything particularly suspicious. Let's just leave him be. As I said, if he really did come here to do something sneaky, there's no way he would have made himself conspicuous by accosting me on a dark street and making vague threats, now, is there?"

"Are you sure, Gran—Lady Sonia? You don't want to, y'know...*mess* with the orc, just for the fun of it?"

"Hey! Who do you take me for? I'm not that petty! I wouldn't mess with someone just because we were enemies in the past! Give me some credit! No, the orc shall go unharmed!"

The owl was watching both of them with round, staring eyes as they bickered back and forth like fools.

"Anyway, I'm off to see Cally-poo! So go and get ready!"

"Certainly."

"Hmph! I need some time to prepare myself, as well. Come and collect me in...say...an hour's time. Got that?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Aconitum bowed sharply before leaving the room as quickly as possible.

Interlude

THUNDER SONIA PREPARES HERSELF

Women always take forever to get ready.

After the war, with peacetime in effect, it seemed everyone had more time to prepare themselves to leave the home. Women, more so than men, began to enjoy the rituals of bathing, dressing, and styling their hair. All time-intensive tasks. Thus, the above saying was born.

Naturally, such a thing was not true during the war itself.

Preparations were always to be done before sleeping, so that in an emergency, the soldiers could muster up speed. Such was the habit of a good soldier.

This rang true for everyone.

After all, death was the great equalizer.

Faced with certain annihilation, there was no time to say, *Oh, my apologies, I wasn't ready. Let me start over.*

As a wise and seasoned soldier, Thunder Sonia had always handled preparations faster than anyone else.

As soon as they were alerted to the enemy's approach, she would spring up, already dressed in armor, chomping on the field rations she drew from her pocket as she ran heedlessly through sludge and soot to join the battle. After the fighting was done, she would scarf down an evening meal, pack the next day's breakfast rations in her pocket, and lie down to sleep still clad in filthy armor, so as to save time the next day as well.

She made sure to prioritize getting enough rest but always made sure she kept her wand and field rations on her person as she slept.

Sure, sometimes there was an official ceremony or something she had to

attend, and she'd scrub up for that. But generally, Sonia was a warrior and hated to have to spend any extra time getting ready for anything.

At least, that was how it had always been. Over time, though, Sonia had learned there were some battles you couldn't hope to win unless you spent a great deal of time preparing first.

Yes, Thunder Sonia had really changed.

Even though the war was over, she now always took well over an hour to prepare herself whenever leaving home.

This change could all be traced back to one root cause. Yes... The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest.

"Time to wash up, eh?"

Thunder Sonia stood before a large bathtub. She'd had to order it special from a human blacksmith.

It was shiny and copper-colored, and its interior was covered with magic sigil engravings. It was clearly a magical artifact.

Thunder Sonia touched one of the sigils, activating it with her magical power. In the blink of an eye, the bathtub was full of steamy water.

She tested the water temperature with one hand and nodded to herself.

"That'll do."

Thunder Sonia slipped out of her clothes and tossed them into the laundry basket.

Her slim, supple body wasn't really what anyone would call voluptuous, even for an elf, but if a certain virginal orc had been present to witness her disrobing, there's no doubt that his passions would have been inflamed by the sight.

Before sinking into the steaming water, she crouched beside the bathtub and gazed at the array of bottles arranged there.

Yellow, green, pink... The bottles were filled with a variety of liquids, of all colors of the rainbow. They sparkled in the light, like precious jewels.

Thunder Sonia selected two bottles from her collection and held them up for

scrutiny, her brow furrowed with concentration.

“Which one...? Hmm, the beastkin preparation is better for deodorizing. But then again, this one is fairy-made, and all the advertisements say fairy-made is best...”

A chilly draft sent goose bumps rising across Thunder Sonia’s exposed skin.

“Achoo!”

After letting forth an explosive, undignified, old-person sneeze, Thunder Sonia realized she could deliberate between concoctions all day and still not be able to come up with the best solution. Putting one of the bottles down, she opened the lid of the other one and dumped its contents into the hot bathwater.

Then she stirred the swirling water with a stick that was leaning against the wall, frothing up the water and causing thick bubbles to form.

Then, finally, she sank into the hot and steamy water.

“...Ah.”

Gasping with delight, Thunder Sonia became ensconced in the warm water.

But her brow remained furrowed.

Thunder Sonia began to massage the bubbles into her skin, splashing a little here and there, but a frown remained fixed to her face the entire time.

And she took special care when massaging the fragrant liquid under her arms and behind her ears.

It was the beastkin concoction that Thunder Sonia had chosen for her bath today.

The beastkin have sharp noses. So sharp, in fact, that they are able to hunt their enemies in the blackest of nights, using only their olfactory senses to guide them.

Since sniffing out their enemy was considered so essential to the beastkin, they also expended a lot of time thinking about their own smell—and how good their enemies might have been at smelling *them*.

The beastkin, particularly the night-wolves, who spent a long time waiting in

place for their chance to perform an assassination or ambush, were well-known for bathing thoroughly before a battle. They would scrub their skin with deodorizing soap to completely neutralize their own body scent.

It was this special beastkin soap that Thunder Sonia was now using in her bath.

After a thorough bath with this stuff, not even a beastkin would be able to smell you. Not unless you got up real close.

That's how potent this stuff was.

"That'll do the trick, surely?"

After soaking herself in the scented water for a good half an hour, Thunder Sonia reached out and touched the magic sigil on the bottom of the bathtub.

As she channeled her magical energy into it, the water in the bathtub shimmered for a second before vanishing completely.

Then Sonia stepped out of the now-dry tub, steam rising from her body.

Touching the magic sigil again, she refilled the tub with fresh, hot water.

Now she picked up a different bottle.

Another half hour later, Sonia was squeaky clean.

After fully deodorizing, she had scrubbed every inch of her skin with high-grade, human soap.

Even if she really did have old-person smell, it would be a few hours before her body began producing smells of any kind. It was a kind of insurance policy for Sonia, albeit one that would expire before too long.

"Hmm..."

Now wearing underwear, with steam still rising from her body, Sonia rubbed her chin and hesitated.

Before her sat an array of colored bottles.

There had to be at least twenty in all.

They resembled her bath potions, but these ones contained what was called

perfume.

“Should I put some on...?”

Thunder Sonia worried about her smell night and day.

Up until last year, she slathered herself in perfume after her bath, just to make sure.

But then one day, she overheard the gossip.

“Lady Sonia’s perfume sure stinks.”

“She’s probably trying to cover up her old-person smell.”

“I knew it! She really is a stinky old lady!”

Sonia had been attempting to hide any natural scent with perfume. But her plan had backfired. Because now she really did stink.

And everyone had noticed.

Thunder Sonia was thunderstruck by the gossip.

But at the same time, she could understand.

If she walked around reeking of perfume, no one would be able to tell if she really did have old-person smell or not.

Actually, during the war, with so much heavy fighting and camping out, and with no chance for a bath, she really did smell at times. Even she had to admit it. She’d actually used perfume quite often then, as a way to disguise the stink of sweat and battle.

But ever since overhearing the catty gossip about her perfume use, she had sworn off it. She would use only deodorizing soaks and soaps from now on.

But it took bravery on Sonia’s part to forgo the safety net of perfume. Now if her old-person smell really did waft out, there would be no safety net in place to prevent everyone else from taking notice.

She planned to skip the perfume again today as well.

But there was Bash to consider. If the orc was around, then maybe she should think twice.

Of course, her choice to wear perfume or not shouldn't logically have been affected by Bash being in town. But she would feel safer hiding her scent entirely with the orc around. Just for insurance. Just in case.

It goes without saying, but Thunder Sonia did not smell bad. She smelled of nothing more than clean soap. Adding perfume on top was merely a placebo, something to ease her troubled mind.

"Maybe just a dab, then? Yeah."

Thunder Sonia nodded, as if convincing herself, before selecting one of the bottles. It was her personal favorite, the scent she had often chosen during wartime. She dabbed a tiny bit onto her neck.



And with this, Thunder Sonia's preparations were complete.

Just a quick bath, that's all it was. No doubt those human aristocrats took twice as long as she did to get ready.

But those who knew Sonia before her paranoia began, who knew how lightning-quick she was to prepare for battle...they would be quite concerned with how long she took to get ready this time. Perhaps she had slipped in the bath and hit her head, they might wonder.

Well, there was one who was used to Sonia's increasingly long "getting-ready" sessions.

Aconitum.

He heaved a huge sigh as he saw Thunder Sonia finally emerge from her room.

"Sorry for the holdup, Aconitum. Let's go."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Aconitum bowed briskly, before falling into step alongside Thunder Sonia as she marched off.

He got a whiff of a clean, pleasant scent coming from her hair.

The scent brought him back to his childhood.

Every elf had to have caught that scent at least once. It was...reassuring.

“...Um, Lady Sonia?”

“Wh-what? What’s wrong with using a little perfume when the mood strikes?”

“This strategy meeting will be mostly attended by married people. It would be very bad manners to flirt with them...”

“I’m not going to flirt! You...idiot!”

Thunder Sonia tossed her hair indignantly, putting on an extra burst of speed to get ahead of her annoying grandnephew.

Aconitum hurried after her.

Oh dear, he thought as he jogged along in Sonia’s wake. Granny’s really going for it again today...

6

THE ZOMBIE ORC

After the war, each country underwent a reduction of its armed forces.

Both the winning and losing armies alike greatly pared down their forces to an agreed level, so as to reduce the chances of a further war occurring in the future. Still, the agreed level was set at very different parameters for the victors as opposed to the losers.

The Shiwanashi Forest army was more of a self-defense force, set up to protect against a random orc uprising or an invasion by the humans.

The army was split into two battalions, one meant to combat the orcs, the other, the humans.

The army was around 1,200 heads strong.

The First Battalion was made up of mostly archers and came in at around seven hundred soldiers.

The Second Battalion was made up of mainly magic wielders and numbered roughly five hundred.

Those who stayed in the army after the war were mostly the ones born into military families, who couldn't do anything else but fight. This was true for all races, though, not just the elf army. However, about half the armed forces were made up of members of the military elite who were headhunted for their combat skills after the war and drafted into the new self-defense force almost as a matter of course.

Essentially, this meant that the surviving armies of each nation were made up of the best possible soldiers who had survived to peacetime.

With their extra-long life spans, the elves didn't concern themselves as much with fostering "the next generation" as humans did. There were almost no new

recruits to the elf army, only veterans who had made it to the end of the war using their superior skills.

The Second Battalion, of course, contained five hundred of only the very best magical soldiers the elf kingdom had to offer.

Surely five hundred seasoned magic wielders was overkill, considering their opponents were merely a bunch of rotting zombies.

Whether or not a lich was really lurking in the woods, a hundred soldiers ought to have been more than enough for such an operation as this one.

But the elf army was nothing if not hypervigilant, even now. They knew how foolish it was to underestimate their enemies. They had learned from bitter experience. All felt that caution was warranted.

Now arriving at the site of the zombie outbreak, Second Battalion General Calendula immediately mobilized the scouting parties to sweep the area.

The sweep involved ten scouting platoons working in tandem.

The platoons spread out in a wide radius with the main platoon in the center. Every three hundred feet or so, they would pause to scratch magic sigils into the dirt.

These magic sigils could detect the movement of an enemy within 150 feet of their range. The effects would only last for a few minutes.

The army used the magic sigils to make sure the way ahead was clear. If all remained still, they would proceed another 150 feet and recall the sweep platoons.

The sweep platoons would reconvene with the main army before splitting up again and moving out to cast further detection sigils.

This process would be repeated until they had discovered an enemy.

“Report, Arrow Three. Enemy sighted. Five zombies, three skeletons.”

“Take them down.”

As soon as an enemy was detected, the sweep platoon became a strike force, working in tandem with the main force to surround the enemy target and crush

each one.

This maneuver was called the Elf Arrow and was a traditional elven battle tactic continued for generations.

“Report, Arrow Six. Enemy general sighted. It’s a lich. Plus, over a hundred zombies and skeletons!”

“All right. Eliminate the lich, then take out the rest of the undead.”

The Elf Arrow had its drawbacks, though.

And the enemy had exploited its weaknesses on too many occasions to count, even using the fingers of both hands.

Still, it was considered the best course of action for a zombie eradication mission.

“Lady Thunder Sonia! We are grateful for your assistance.”

“Yep, yep, you can count on me. I’ve taken out many a lich in my day! No sweat!”

Thunder Sonia’s confident tone rang out clearly through the forest.

The rousing words of the Elf Hero raised the spirits of the entire army.

The past three years had been largely devoid of this sort of large-scale battalion operation.

But they felt confident—and calm. After all, they were fighting nothing more threatening than a bunch of jelly-brained zombies. And they were the army’s elite, the ones who had survived the long war all the way to the end.

Plus, they had Thunder Sonia in their corner. Even if things did go south, the Elf Hero would be there to cover their butts.

Victory was assured.

There was no fear in their hearts. The pounding...was from excitement.

Yes, a zombie cleanup operation... It was more like a parade.

“All troops! Commence the attack!”

“Yaaargh!!!”

Letting forth an almighty war cry, the elf army launched their attack.

The odds were stacked in their favor.

They had the forces and the skill. Their commanding officer was excellent at leadership and would make no careless mistakes. Morale was high, and everyone was keeping a cool and steady head. They were familiar with the undead's many weaknesses, as well. And they had honed their strategy to exploit those weaknesses.

There was practically no chance that they would lose.

Sadly, they had made one fatal miscalculation...

You see, they had forgotten whose corpses littered the floor of the Shiwanashi Forest, just before the end of the war...



At the same time...

In a dark corner of the Shiwanashi Forest...

While the elf army continued their quiet sweep...there was a change under the silent canopy of the trees.

The soil was beginning to rise, chunks flying into the air.

Something was emerging from the ground beneath.

The *something* dragged itself out of the dirt, soggy mud splattering all around as it straightened up.

It stood ten feet tall.

Tall enough to dwarf even an ogre.

It was humanoid in shape, and where its eyes should have been, there was a blazing red glow.

It was a zombie.

Having risen, the zombie stood in its dirt hole and gazed around, pausing as it noticed something off in the distance.

“Rawrgh! See that, soldiers?”

The creature's voice echoed around Shiwanashi Forest.

It was a low, raspy, guttural voice that sounded as though it was emanating from the depths of hell.

"I see them clearly! The foul army of the elves! Those skulking rats, whose approach took us by surprise on that fateful day!"

In life, the undead creature must have been an imposing, colossal figure.

At nearly ten feet tall, it was as tall as any giant, and its sinewy muscles, although sloughing off the bone now, still looked as strong as steel. Its arms and legs were as thick around as tree trunks.

It was missing its left arm from the elbow down, but its right arm was whole, and in its right hand, it gripped a giant steel war hammer. The weapon was roughly hewn and looked like nothing so much as a huge chunk of raw iron ore.

Clad in rusted armor, the zombie threw back its head and roared with laughter.

"Rargh! Behold! Behold! What a glorious sight! Don't you agree, comrades?"

All of a sudden, there was a movement in the shadows, and the woods behind the great zombie were at once thick with a veritable horde of other zombies.

And not just a few dozen zombies, either. There were hundreds. An entire army of the undead, standing in formation behind their leader.

Many of them had no eyes.

And yet a red glow burned in the empty sockets, providing them with sight.

They were all facing the same direction. With their acute night vision, they were able to see the elf army as clear as day.

"Is this not cause for laughter? For celebration! The fates have afforded us this one chance at vindication, this sole opportunity to settle the old score!"

The great zombie raised its war hammer high in the air.

Slowly, the zombie horde raised their own weapons high as well.

Bent, rusted, and twisted swords and axes. These were specialized weapons of war, weapons that had been left buried underground for years. And yet

every blade emitted a fiery-red glow.

“...And let us offer up our gratitude! Gratitude to the wise and venerable Gandaguza, who has given us this second chance!”

The surrounding horde of zombies did not speak.

Zombies are, essentially, incapable of speech. The most they can manage are groaning, guttural noises.

In fact, the only zombies capable of coherent speech were those who were either higher beings or those who had been specially trained...

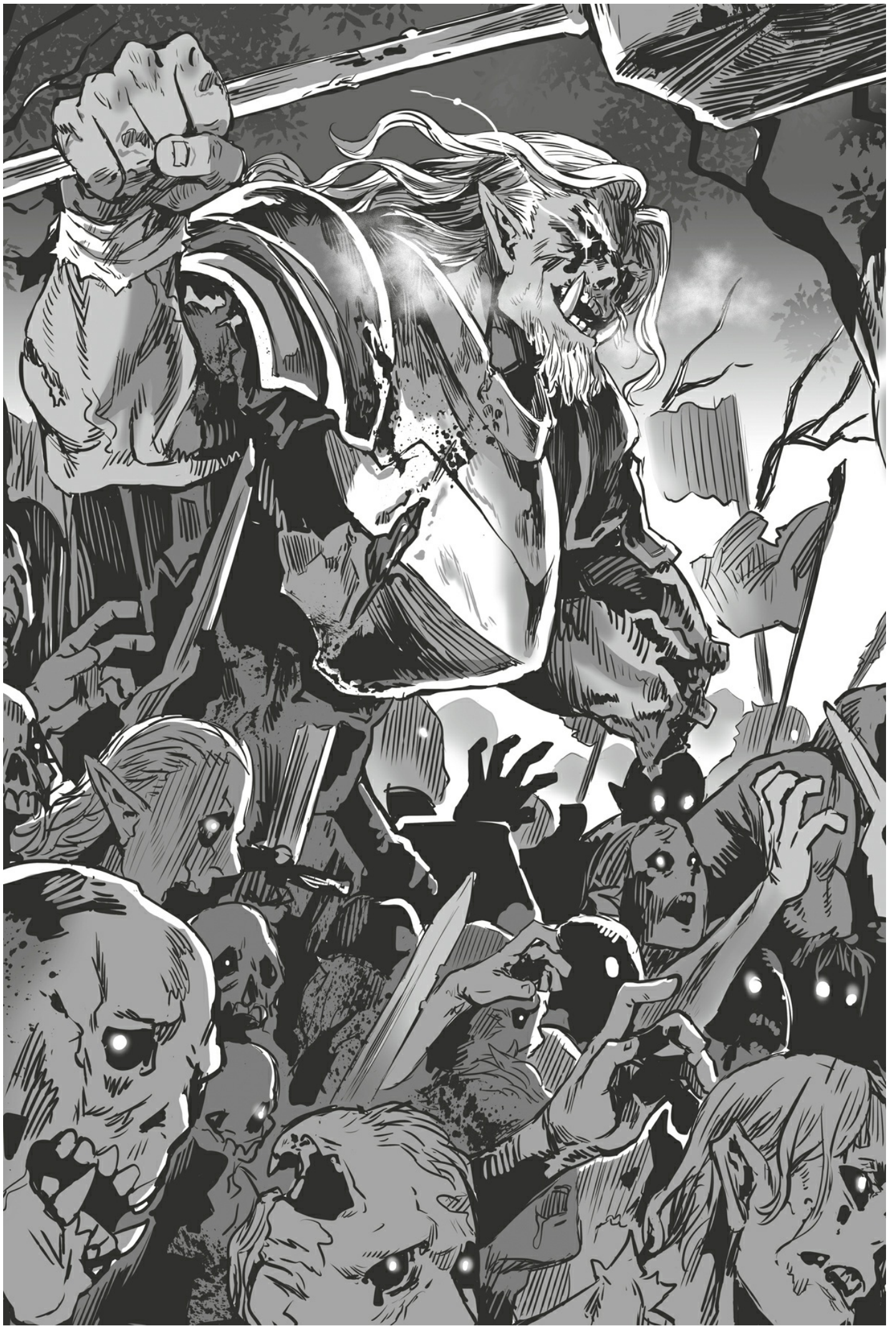
“And let us repent! Repent our inhospitality toward Gandaguza, our arrogance in ignoring his words!”

The zombie horde understood well.

They knew they should proceed covertly.

They knew they should begin moving through the forest slowly and steadily, silently closing in on their enemy.

Just like how the elf army had sneaked up on them, on that fateful day in the past...



The zombies' minds had already rotted away to mush, and they had no brain activity to speak of. However, their bodies thirsted for revenge over the indignities they had been dealt.

With their broken necks, their pierced hearts, their perforated lungs, somehow...they knew.

They knew their time had come.

“Advance, soldiers! Together, let us crush these foul elves!”

The horde of shambling undead began to shuffle forward, following the orders of the zombie giant.

They advanced slowly. And above all...quietly.



The first one to notice something odd was a scout who had retreated to the back of the group to recharge his magical powers.

The scout's long ears picked up the sound of footsteps behind him.

But...he was the last of the company. None of his fellow soldiers remained behind him. He was supposed to be the last one.

Could it be reinforcements, coming from Shiwanashi Forest Town?

Or perhaps a messenger, bringing vital news?

Thinking that it must be either one or the other, the elf turned around. That's when he saw it. A zombie orc, its rotten body moving at unnatural speed as it advanced upon him.

The scout was a veteran, with fifty years of battle experience under his belt.

The zombie orc was one of the rare assassin types, and its rotten skin was a mottled color somewhat close to yellow. The scout quickly noted this.

He also realized, in the space of a split second, that the zombie orc intended to stab him through the throat with the shortsword it was brandishing. There was no time to dodge the attack, either.

“Rear atta—”

The scout wanted to at least warn the others, perform one last noble act of duty before he was slain, but the words died in his throat.

The sharp sword severed his vocal cords, and in place of a shout, only blood burbled out.

Fatally wounded, the elf still tried to get ahold of the situation, to somehow understand how this had happened.

Where had the zombie orc come from? Where had it been hiding?

“...!”

Unable to fight death, the elf rolled its eyes wildly, trying to grasp some kind of clue.

Then he saw it.

Behind the zombie orc.

A veritable horde of undead.

One of their number held aloft a single standard. The material was tattered and torn, the flag itself almost unrecognizable.

But he had seen that flag somewhere before. He was sure of it.

It was the standard of the orc general, the one who had fallen in the Shiwanashi Forest...

“Guh...”

But that was as much as he remembered. The next moment, the assassin’s shortsword cleaved through his brain stem, and the elf’s thoughts were silenced forever.



“Enemy forces to the rear?! How many?!”

“...There have to be at least a thousand, sir!”

“Any casualties?!”

“Half the scouts are dead, sir... We’ve incurred heavy losses already.”

General Calendula was incredulous. He could barely believe the report.

A horde of zombies at their rear. It was like they came out of nowhere.

By the time anyone realized anything was wrong, half of the scouting parties had already been exterminated while they were hanging back and waiting for their magical powers to recharge. Now they would never be returning.

So far, they had ascertained that the lich-led zombie horde they were hunting up ahead numbered at least three hundred. Calendula had already been debating with himself whether to single out the lich or try to annihilate the entire horde without losing too many soldiers, when the messenger had stopped them with this terrifying report.

They had been taken completely by surprise, and now all advantage was lost.

General Calendula had been convinced that their scouting parties would pick up on any threats ahead. It hadn't occurred to him to cover the rear.

"But where? Where did they spring from?!"

"We don't know; that's the thing... They just appeared!"

"Dammit!"

General Calendula was completely rattled.

The enemy forces were too great in number. Their point of origin was unknown. They had launched a successful surprise attack and caused huge losses among the elf soldiers.

The only thing to do in a situation like this was retreat. Without hesitation. They needed to abandon their dignity and flee.

"..."

Retreat...

Yes, that was the decision General Calendula came to. And yet his sixth sense was screaming at him to reconsider. As if further danger lay in that direction...

As if attempting to retreat would lead to the annihilation of the entire company.

"...It's like it's happening all over again..."

Calendula was lost in a memory. A memory from around one hundred years

ago.

It happened while Calendula was just a commander, not a general as he was now.

His father, General Catalpa, had been caught in a similar sort of trap.

General Catalpa was said to have a mind that moved at lightning speed, enabling him to make decisions faster than any other leader.

So when ensnared by the enemy, he issued an immediate order to retreat.

As a result, his troops were surrounded, and all perished.

Calendula had seen the whole thing go down from his vantage point on a nearby hill.

So he knew. He knew that his father, Catalpa, had been correct when he gave the order to withdraw.

He had made the correct decision, based on all available information at the time.

But it was almost like the enemy had known what Catalpa was about to do, and they sprang into action accordingly. As Calendula watched from above, he screamed down to his father's army. *"No! Don't run that way!"*

Boxed in by the enemy, Catalpa's troops were left with nowhere to flee. They were all wiped out, down to the very last soldier.

This situation, the one Calendula found himself in...felt just like it did that day, one hundred years ago.

They had to retreat.

But if they ran in the wrong direction, it could spell annihilation for them all.

Where, then? Which way should he retreat?

Standard battle protocol would dictate focusing the attack on the lich up ahead as planned, leaving a smaller company of soldiers to fight the horde that had sneaked up behind them. Once the lich had been taken out, they could then cut a path directly through the weakened zombie army to freedom.

Identify and slay the lich as a matter of priority. This was the standard method

used to exterminate a horde of undead.

But they had been attacked from the rear. Did this mean the lich that had been spotted up ahead was only a decoy?

Was the lich in front of them? Or was it behind?

They needed to flee in the direction of the true lich.

If they got it wrong, their defeat would be a certainty.

The presence of a lich meant that the undead horde was essentially immortal, able to be revived over and over again. Attempting to break through them would be an exercise in futility. They would be caught up in an endless battle and incur serious damage to their army, if they even managed to escape at all.

Just like what had happened to General Catalpa.

“...”

Calendula thought hard.

Who was commanding this horde of undead?

The undead army was being commanded by a lich, obviously. But wasn't the lich meant to be ahead of them...?

Calendula needed to give the order to retreat, without any further hesitation. But he still didn't have enough information. He could not give an order blindly.

“General! We need your orders!”

Calendula could not act.

Time was so precious. If he didn't make a move now, they would miss their window of opportunity and lose the chance to flee at all.

He had to give some sort of order, even if there was a chance it was the wrong one.

Calendula knew that. But for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to speak.

“Hey! Cally!”

General Calendula heard someone calling out to him.

There was only one who would refer to a general like him by such a childish

nickname.

He turned to see the mage standing there. Long golden hair blowing in the wind, clad in a dark-green robe. A female elf.

“Lady Sonia...”

“I’m guessing the zombies were hiding in shallow graves when we passed by! Then once they were sure we’d gone ahead, they sprang up! It’s just like what happened with your dad! Pretty crafty bunch of stiff, aren’t they?!”

The sight of Thunder Sonia made Calendula heave an internal sigh of relief.

The Elf Hero was here.

Beside her stood her bodyguard and grandnephew, Aconitum.

He never said much as a rule, and he was silent now, seemingly deep in thought. There was a look of apprehension on his face.

He was a civil official and had no experience on the battlefield. No doubt, he had never found himself in a pinch like this one before.

“I know! Believe me, I know! But there’s nowhere to flee...”

“Stop overthinking it! Tsk, you wanna play right into the enemy’s hands, sonny boy?!”

“But...I cannot risk a repeat of what happened to my father!”

“Foolish child! Have you forgotten whose presence you stand in?!”

Thunder Sonia puffed up her modest chest. Calendula blinked at her, suddenly remembering.

Yes, of course. Thunder Sonia was here.

The Great Elf Sorceress, Thunder Sonia, to be precise.

The witch of a thousand spells. The archmage who had brought about the end of the war.

The Elf Hero. The most powerful magic caster in all of elf history.

“I’ll open up a path for us! *And* act as rear guard! Fear not! I’ll make sure you make it safely back home!”

“...”

“Hey! Didn’t you just get married to a cute girl? You’ve gotta get back to her, right? And you can’t possibly go dying on the battlefield in peacetime, now, can you? You’ve gotta make it back! You’ve gotta take all your troops back! Their lives are in your hands, understand?!”

Calendula felt his chest swell with emotion in response to Sonia’s rousing speech.

Yes, she was right. She had always been right, ever since he was a child.

She thought of all the elves as her family and knew the names of each one. When the situation looked bleak, Sonia would take it upon herself to step forward and protect them all, even at great risk to herself.

That’s why she was the Elf Hero. That’s why everyone always listened to what she had to say.

“You got that, General Cally? I’m waiting!”

“Yes! Yes, Lady Sonia! I, Calendula, shall lead the troops and withdraw!”

“Good! Well said! Then stand back! I shall cut us a path to freedom!”

This still didn’t solve the issue of exactly which direction they ought to break in, but Calendula had made up his mind about one thing.

If the Elf Hero was willing to stick her neck out and fight for them all, then Calendula would fight, too, no matter which direction they ended up taking.

And thus, he finally came to a conclusion. They would break in the direction of home.

“Everyone, about-face! We break through the zombie horde to the rear!”

“Yessir!”

The soldiers began running.

Calendula had given his order. Now there would be no further hesitation. If there was a lich to be found among the horde who had sneaked up behind them, then they would slay it. If it transpired that the lich was actually located farther ahead in the forest, then they would simply return another day with

more people and hunt it anew.

Many of the company would die. Calendula would be held responsible for the losses and demoted for sure.

He might even be forced to retire from military service altogether.

But even so, at least this way they would be able to avoid complete annihilation. If they could get most of their soldiers back to the town and warn everybody else, then Calendula would consider that a victory.

A victory for the elves.

He adamantly refused to lose to a bunch of rotting zombies.

“Begin the retreat!”

The sound of elven war cries echoed around the forest in response.



As soon as the withdrawal operation began, General Calendula noticed what set these zombies apart.

Yes, they were all undead.

Skeletons, zombies, wraiths...

No major-level evil creatures like vampires or headless horsemen, but that wasn't so unusual for an army commanded by a lich.

The lich, itself, was a major-level evil undead, but its regenerative powers only worked on creatures below its own level...zombies, skeletons, and the like.

But that wasn't the issue here.

The skeletons, the zombies...were all corpses, but in life, they had one thing in common.

Their race.

“...They're all orcs...”

Calendula muttered under his breath as he stood on the front line, tossing fireball attacks at the oncoming zombie army.

Zombie orcs. Walking orc skeletons.

The zombie army was made up almost completely of raised orc corpses.

Even the wraiths that came fluttering through the night air resembled orcs.

But none of this was really so strange, after all.

This was the Shiwanashi Forest. The site of the final bloody confrontation between the orcs and the elves. The ground was littered with orc corpses. If zombies were being summoned to action here, it stood to reason that those zombies would have been orcs in life.

But Calendula was filled with dread.

The Shiwanashi Forest...

An enemy attack force that came out of nowhere and ambushed them to the rear. It was all just too sophisticated for a zombie horde...

And when Calendula looked really closely, he noticed that all the orc zombies were clad in the same type of armor.

The armor was rusted and filthy, and hard to identify, but it was unmistakably the same type. Their weapons, as well...all seemed to belong to the same grade...

Calendula had seen this raiment, those weapons, before.

It happened over three years ago, but he hadn't forgotten a single second.

"Hey! Cally! Looks like we can break through right here!"

Fighting by his side was Thunder Sonia. But she didn't seem to have noticed what Calendula had.

She was unleashing powerful magical attacks, far more devastating than any other's. In no time at all, she cut a channel through the enemy ranks and was leading their army through.

With each wave of her staff, she unleashed powerful bolts of lightning, her namesake thunder magic in full effect. The bolts hit the zombies, turning them to instant charcoal, powdering the bones of the skeletons, and evaporating the wraiths into puffs of black smoke.

Yes, Thunder Sonia was living up to her title of Elf Hero, all right. But

Calendula knew that this ancient woman was missing something important.

“Uh...Grannywitch... I’ve got a bad feeling about...”

“Did you just call me *Grannywitch*?! You impudent runt! Want me to tell all your soldiers about how long it took you to stop wetting the bed when you were a boy? Huh?! ’Cause I will! Watch yourself!”

“S-sorry... But, Lady Sonia... I really do have a bad feeling about this! We need to proceed with caution!”

“Hmph! It’s just a zombie horde! For me, this is nothing! Add another ten thousand to the number, and I *still* wouldn’t even break a sweat! Right, Aconitum?”

“Um... I think things are bad enough as they are...”

The grandnephew seemed to be having trouble catching his breath.

Usually, Calendula would have scoffed at this pathetic display and wondered aloud how he’d managed to survive to the end of the war despite being such a weakling.

But to be honest, Calendula was quite out of breath as well.

Still, that was to be expected. They were up against an army made up of orc zombies and orc skeletons.

Sure, they were technically just a horde of shambling undead. But in life, these guys had been *orcs*. And they still retained some of their orcish power and vigor.

In a one-on-one battle, it would be easy enough to dispatch any of them using the traditional elven hit-and-dash tactic, but there were just too many of them.

They would have to use all their strength to push through the never-ending onslaught of undead.

In the past, a fight against the orcs would lead to the orcish numbers dwindling the longer the battle went on, whether or not the orcs were winning or losing.

This was truer than ever in battles containing many beautiful female elf

soldiers. The orcs would begin to disappear from the battle, starting with the victorious ones.

They would fight one-on-one, win, and then drag their female opponents back to their hideouts to be enjoyed as war spoils.

So the best battle strategy against the orcs was said to involve drawing out the battle for as long as possible.

Of course, the taken elf women would naturally go on to bear orc children if left to the mercy of their orc captors, so a rescue mission would need to be launched to recover them, preferably before they were violated. But in essence, a longer, more drawn out battle would prove advantageous to the opposing party, in terms of sheer numbers of soldiers on the field.

But against zombie soldiers, thinning the herd, reducing the number of enemies... That was looking like an impossibility.

Yes, they were fighting orcs. Orcs using orcish tactics. But the standard anti-orc strategies would be of no use this time.

Because the fallen zombies would only rise to fight again, returning to the fray.

All because of the influence of the evil lich.

Calendula had never fought such an exhausting battle before.

The orcs had lost the great war, true. But it wasn't because they were weak.

No, it was because they were so strong. The strongest orc soldiers would withdraw from the front line of battle in order to drag away women for their purposes. But they would fight to the last soldier.

Now they were zombies. Their strength as soldiers had decreased.

Despite this, they were still fighting on. And they had the number advantage.

At this rate, if it took too much time for the elves to break through, then...

"Hah! Cally! Forget about your deadly premonitions and bad hunches! You were actually right! Look over there!"

Thunder Sonia was suddenly shouting, her face lit up with glee.

Calendula turned to look. Thunder Sonia was pointing to the center of the orc zombie horde.

It was immediately obvious what she was pointing at. A single, distinctive undead.

It was wrapped in a tattered black cloak and hobbling along while leaning on a long staff. A hunchbacked figure of a zombie.

Its eyes blazed with a red glow, and unspeakable green slime dripped from its hanging mouth.

The rasping sound emitting from the ragged hole in its throat... Was it just the wind blowing through? Or was it the zombie itself, uttering curses toward someone?

Its face was hideous, terrible, revolting.

And...familiar.

“...It’s the Great Chief Warlord! Gandaguza!”

Yes...it was the Great Chief Warlord of the orcs, Gandaguza himself.

The powerful orc mage, adjutant to the protector of the orcs’ interests in the Shiwanashi Forest, Orc General Baraben himself.

Gandaguza had met his end...right here, in the forest.

Yes, in the final battle for the Shiwanashi Forest, fought between the elves and the orcs.

“So it’s him... Well, I guess if any orc was ever going to turn into a lich after death, it would be Gandaguza. Well anyway, all we have to do is cut him down, and then we can put this whole thing to bed. Leave it to me!”

Liches were a variety of undead that came about when someone very old, and very magical, died with hatred in their hearts.

Calendula, and Thunder Sonia, too, had both fought against Gandaguza. They knew he was more than powerful enough to have transformed into a vengeful lich.

His magical skill and acuity more than qualified him to be an orc general, to

hold a position of utmost respect.

However, while Calendula and Sonia were unaware of this fact, an orc mage actually carried low status in orcish society. To become a mage, after all, one had to go through thirty years of sexlessness and remain a virgin.

The orc mages gave up their youth in service of the country, which was a sacrifice respected by all orcs. That said, however, there was still a horrible stigma attached to being a thirty-year-old virgin. No orc mage could shake it.

“...”

Thunder Sonia was just gearing up to approach Gandaguza when, all of sudden, he stopped uttering his foul curses and lifted his head, gazing this way.

He saw Sonia. And spoke her name.

“The elf witch... Thunder Sonia...”

“Hmm?”

He was...grinning.

The orc zombie was gazing right at Thunder Sonia with his glowing eyes, and...grinning.

“Gu-gu-gu-gu! S-s-so you saw through our sorcery...and sniffed out our trap...”

The foul voice that burbled from his rotten throat sounded thick and soupy with decay.

It was like a voice from a bottomless swamp. It struck a visceral fear into the hearts of all who heard it.

“Hmph, yeah, well, like we’d ever actually fall for a silly trick like that thought up by a rotten old corpse like you!”

Thunder Sonia whirled around.

Aconitum and Calendula were both nodding and smiling at her, as if to say, *Yes! That’s the spirit!*

Okay, so they hadn’t noticed anything until it was too late, and there was really no denying that the zombie mage had trapped them with a quite ingenious trick. But if their leader Sonia wanted to bluff, then they were going

to back her up.

Anything to prevent the morale of the troops from plummeting to despair.

It was peacetime, after all. Only *their* butts were on the line.

“It’s time to pay the land taxes you owe on that grave of yours, Gandaguza. We can send the bill to you in the underworld.”

“Gu-gu-gu-gu! Foolish wench, Thunder Sonia!”

“Hey! Who are you calling foolish?! Watch your foul tongue!”

Then Thunder Sonia paused and whipped her head around. “Right, men?” she trilled.

She had been counting on her two lackeys to back her up again, but not this time. They were busy dealing with the horde of zombies that was closing in. This left Sonia to turn back around and deal with the undead Gandaguza all by herself.

“Gu-gu-gu! You really thought you could fight your way out of my trap?”

“Oh yeah, with ease! Remember who you’re talking to, you shambling zombie! I am Thunder Sonia, archmage of the elves!”

“Fool!”

Gandaguza struck the earth with his staff.

“What the...?”

Thunder Sonia trembled for a moment, believing that the lich had cast some sort of magic. But there was no sign of any spell.

The next moment, however, she began to feel a strange aura.

It was like the air had grown heavy all of a sudden. Almost as if some sort of immense, powerful presence was coming this way. Goose bumps sprang up along Sonia’s arms. Her hand tightened around her staff.

“Youuuu...”

A voice boomed out across the forest, drowning out the groaning of the zombies.

The zombie horde fell eerily silent. Now there was only the sound of squelching footsteps.

The owner of the booming voice was coming this way, toward Thunder Sonia, tree trunks snapping beneath its feet like twigs.

“Thunderrr Soniaaa!”

The bloodcurdling voice burst forth from its rotten larynx with a rasping gurgle.

Then, as the trees just in front of it were uprooted and shoved aside, it appeared in sight. A single orc zombie.

Yes, it was clearly an orc. But the size of it...was humongous.

It had to be at least ten feet tall. Horribly rotten but still clearly filled with power. It advanced with quick, jerky, energetic movements.

Its metal armor was decorated with distinctive spikes. It carried a colossal, heavy-looking steel war hammer like the kind wielded by the ogres.

Everything about this horrible orc’s appearance was at once immediately familiar to Thunder Sonia.

“Clan Chief General Baraben...!”

Yes, this was the general who had united all the clans of the Shiwanashi Forest.

He had been in charge of the final line of defense and had been the last of the orcs to be defeated by the elves.

All orcs knew, loved, and respected him for his bravery and prowess in battle.

The level of respect he was afforded by the people ranked him second only to the Orc King.

“Raaagh! I’ll cut you down and make amends for my humiliating defeat!”

The giant howled.

His voice was so loud that it shook the earth and sent shock waves rippling through the leaves of the trees.

The red glow in the eye sockets of the zombie horde suddenly began to glow five times as brightly.

“Gu-gu-gu! This is the end, Thunder Sonia!”

“Oh, who cares?! So what, an orc general came to join the party? The more the merrier, you gargantuan oaf!”

Thunder Sonia stuck out her tongue and waved her staff.

Thunder Strike!!!

As she swung the staff in a wide arc, she unleashed her patented, silently cast magical technique.

Twelve bolts of pure, concentrated lightning appeared in a flash, hurtling toward General Baraben.

As they struck their target, there was a colossal bang, and everything went white.

Then the shock wave spread out, mowing down everything in the vicinity.

The air crackled with electricity, and Thunder Sonia’s hair stood on end.

“How do you like that? Did it in one strike, didn’t I?”

Zombies were vulnerable to fire.

But lightning did the trick as well. Thunder Sonia’s magic attacks were powerful enough to turn a sixty-five-foot-long zombified dragon into charcoal in the blink of an eye.

Her thunder and lightning magic powers were known throughout the entire world.

“Graaagh!”

“...Whoa!”

The war hammer came out of nowhere, aiming for her head, but Thunder Sonia dodged it just in the nick of time.

The war hammer came down hard on the patch of ground where Thunder Sonia had been, sending mud splattering upward.

“What the...?”

Thunder Sonia gazed at the mud crater in disbelief. Then, as the dust from her attack settled, she could make out the figure of General Baraben, looking completely unscathed.

Gandaguza, too, was unharmed by her attack.

“Gu-gu-gu! Magic doesn’t work on liches!”

Indeed, liches are highly magical beings themselves.

And on top of that, Gandaguza had also mastered high-level magical barrier spells to be used specially against the elves in warfare.

So it went without saying that Sonia’s Thunder Strike had zero effect on them.

General Baraben had been surrounded by the protective influence of a barrier spell as well. And he was also clad in heavy-duty armor. Yes...the armor. The armor that was seemingly painted with yellow and red paint...

“Resistant paint, eh?”

“Gu-gu-gu!”

Gandaguza gurgled with glee.

It was dwarven-made, attack-resistant paint that had been slapped with a thick coating on the armor.

Each color of this special paint had different properties. The red paint had flame-resistant properties. The yellow paint repelled Thunder Strikes, the blue was for extreme cold, like ice magic attacks, and the green was for earth magic attacks.

The exact composition of the paint was kept a closely guarded secret, known only to the dwarves themselves.

The dwarves distributed the paint to their allies in the war. As far as Thunder Sonia recalled, the Alliance of Four had been doing pretty well during the war, after they first started to use the paint.

The human prince, Nazar, wore shining armor daubed with beautiful bright-blue, red, and yellow paint when he cut down scores of demon knights. It was

all anyone could talk about for ages after.

But still... It was paint.

Anyone could slap some paint on.

Soon, the formula for the paint was stolen by the enemy, and before long the orcs and the demons were all using it.

After that, the resistant paint became a common sight during battle, slapped on to the armor of the soldiers on both sides.

“Guh...”

Thunder Sonia groaned.

Zombies were, obviously, impervious to cold and the effects of the dirt and soil. Ice magic and earth magic would be of no use. She already knew that.

But now fire magic and thunder magic were rendered useless as well...

“This...this isn’t good.”

Beads of cold sweat slid down Thunder Sonia’s brow.

7

ELVES IN PERIL

That day in the forest, Bash and Zell were having a grand time hunting zombies.

“So many zombies out and about for us to slay today, eh, Boss?”

It was odd, though. There really were an *awful* lot of zombies around that day in particular.

Usually they managed around two to three zombie kills per hour, but today, it was more like one every second...

It was almost like there was a horde of them. Yes, that wouldn't be an overstatement.

“With this many zombies, we'll have that shiny gold necklace in no time, eh, Boss?”

“Yeah!”

Bash nodded in agreement, neatly cleaving a zombie's head from its neck.

With his greatsword, Bash smashed the shoulders and chest of the zombie to mush, leaving the head and belly parts intact.

Then he deftly removed the jaw part from the head and tossed it into the bag he was carrying.

To receive payment for zombie hunting, one needed to turn in the heads—or even just the jawbones—as proof.

Whether skeleton or zombie, no undead could cause further trouble without a head.

“How are we even gonna be able to carry this many back, eh, Boss?”

“We'll have to make several trips.”

Bash's spirits were soaring.

He didn't even know how long they'd been fighting. Before he was even aware of it, the two found themselves surrounded by a pile of zombie remains.

With this many zombie kills, he may even already have earned enough to buy a shiny gold necklace.

In other words, there was no longer anything holding him back from marriage with a lady elf.

With that extremely beautiful little witch elf in particular. Bash closed his eyes. He could already hear the wedding bells.

Bash and Zell had utterly failed to notice that, beyond their range of vision, the mangled remnants of their kills were rising again, and fresh zombies were crawling from their graves to swell the ranks.

They were too distracted by thoughts of payment.

Even if they did notice, they probably would have been delighted. More zombie jaws to add to the bag.

"Ah, Boss! Look! A wraith! I bet a wraith will go for a lot of money, too! They've gotta pay for wraiths, if they pay for zombies and skeletons, right?"

"Go for it, Zell!"

"Yes, Boss! **Fairy Shine!!!**"

Zell unleashed a blaze of light, evaporating the wraith in midair.

Despite their tiny fairy figure, Zell was a hardened warrior, we must remember. Their magical powers were more than strong enough to do some major damage to their enemies. And even though wraiths were mostly impervious to physical attacks, they were notoriously vulnerable to light magic spells.

Now all that remained of the wraith was a scrap of silk cloth.

Proof of the wraith's slaying.

Zell scooped the cloth out of midair and tossed it into the bag.

"Ah! Boss! The bag's full to bursting!"

It was true. There wasn't even room for one more zombie jaw.

"Hmm. I suppose we'll have to head back for the day..."

Bash hoisted the bag onto his back.

The bag was a big one, even for an orc to wield. Bash felt the reassuring weight of it, and his heart thumped with anticipation.

"What?! Go back?! But this zombie horde might not even be here tomorrow!"

"The zombies aren't going anywhere. They're not migratory birds."

"Maybe so, Boss, but even so...!"

Bash cut a path through the zombie crowd using his greatsword, with Zell bobbing along behind him.

But just then...

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! How are there this many of them? What the heck is going on here?!"

They heard a voice.

Bash turned in that direction. There was a man there, facing off against a cluster of zombies.

He wore brown-blotched armor and carried a glowing sword in his right hand. With his left hand, he clutched a blazing shield. He was slicing away at the approaching zombie with swift swings of the sword.

His swings had none of the speed and ferocity of Bash's swings, but it was clear to see that the man could hold his own in battle.

"Yikes! This isn't good... This isn't good AT ALL!"

The man was yelping in panicked tones, but he actually seemed to be handling himself very well, and his face was lit up with the joy of battle.

From the sight of the bulging bag lying nearby, it was evident that he had come to hunt the zombies, too.

His grin showed that he was as delighted as Bash and Zell over the prospect of cashing in big once the day's hunt was done.

“I know that man...”

Yes, the man’s face was familiar to Bash.

It was the friendly fellow who had shared his wisdom with Bash back in the tavern.

At the same moment, the man noticed Bash.

“Whoa! A real orc! Not a zombified one?!”

Raising his flaming shield, the man suddenly came running right at Bash.

Bash readied his greatsword. He didn’t need a reason to cut down an enemy who charged him this way.

“...”

But the man came to a screeching halt just short of Bash’s swing radius.

His face was as white as a corpse. He was dripping sweat. And he was clearly out of breath.

“Orc Hero? Is it you?”

The man seemed to know Bash by reputation.

“Is it *you*, Strangler?”

All of a sudden, Bash realized he knew this man, beyond that one night in the tavern, that is.

He hadn’t made the connection the other day, but the man’s armor sparked Bash’s old war memory.

The armor had been white once, but now it was covered in bloodstains.

And the man had considerable magical ability as well. That was how he was able to make his sword glow—and how he kept his shield ablaze.

A human Magic Knight.

Breeze Kugel, the Strangler.

“What is an Orc Hero doing in elf lands...?”

“I already told you the other day.”

“What? But this is our first meeting...isn’t it?”

Breeze trailed off as the memory resurfaced.

Yes... He did share drinks with an orc the other night at the tavern, after both had been rejected by elven women.

But after getting completely hammered, he awoke the next day with no memory of what they’d talked about.

He could vividly remember the two of them clinking tankards together, drowning their sorrows as they cast yearning eyes on the beautiful elf ladies.

Breeze was a human, though.

Humans were pretty smart. They were quick-witted and had enviable deductive reasoning skills. Well, most of them.

So when Breeze spotted Bash’s bag, he was able to fill in the blanks fairly quickly.

“Huh... You know, for the life of me, I couldn’t guess what an orc would be doing in a place like this, but now I get it.”

“Yes, well... Ashamed as I am, I need the funds.”

“There’s nothing shameful about it. You’re a great man. Especially compared to me...”

“...”

Bash stared at Breeze.

The man stood tall, with his magical sword and shield. Anyone looking at him would take him for a capable warrior.

Humans could use magic regardless of their virginal status, so presumably there was no shame attached to Breeze’s magical powers.

But according to what he’d told Bash in the tavern that night, he was single.

In the human country, getting married after a certain age was simply what was expected.

Just as orcs feared the stigma that accompanied virginity, so, too, did humans

fear the embarrassment of remaining single well into their adult years.

“You and I are both doing the same thing, for the same reason.”

“Ha-ha... Well, I guess I can’t argue with you there. Thanks, friend.”

Breeze chuckled self-deprecatingly.

As if to apologize for standing in the presence of such a great man and failing to match up.

Bash, for his part, had no idea why Breeze looked so embarrassed.

They were both in pursuit of an elf wife, and they were hunting zombies to earn enough coin to procure a piece of jewelry that would capture one, after all.

“Hmm?”

Just then, Bash’s keen ears picked up on something.

It was the sound of clinking armor and clashing swords. Plus, faint voices... musical, very pleasant voices.

“It sounds like the elves have been attacked by the zombies.”

“...What?”

Bash strained to hear better.

Yes, he could hear it more clearly now. The sound of elves yelling and shouting in panic. They sounded as though they’d been ambushed and were losing the fight. Several of them were screaming.

“Ah. They’ve lost the advantage.”

“...”

Breeze narrowed his eyes in response to Bash’s casual remark.

The human’s mouth turned down, his brow furrowing as his expression grew solemn and serious.

“Don’t sound so detached and unconcerned! The elves are in trouble! Which way are they?!”

“That way.”

“Then, let’s go!”

Breeze set off at a run.

“What’s going on, eh, Boss?”

Zell looked quizzically at Bash as the funny human man shot off.

Zell didn’t even have a clue who the man was—or what he was doing there.

He seemed to be some sort of acquaintance of Bash’s. Some sort of clearly powerful human mage soldier.

“I don’t know. But I suppose we should go with him.”

Bash set off, following Breeze’s tracks.



They arrived on the scene to find all hell breaking loose.

There was a veritable swarm of zombies.

The elves numbered so few in comparison.

The elf soldiers had gone into battle formation and were valiantly fending off the waves of zombies, but it was clear they were losing.

The ground was already littered with the bodies of many elves. Some were already dead, others gasping their last breaths. Anyone could see that it was only a matter of time before every last elf was wiped out.

“Curses! I can’t believe a bunch of brainless zombies got the advantage over us like this!”

“I know... It’s so unfair that we, the members of the Thirty-First Independence Squad, should have to die like this, after we survived that hellish war...”

“Ugh... I was hoping to get married before my time was up...”

The surviving elves were beginning to lose all hope.

There were no rookie recruits here.

The younger soldiers had already fled. All that remained was the old guard.

But even with centuries of battle experience, they still didn’t have the

strength needed to hold out against a horde of zombies that kept relentlessly springing up all around them.

One by one, the elf soldiers incurred heavy injuries and fell to the ground.

“I’m out of magical power as well... I never imagined myself dying in peacetime, not after we fought so long and hard to end the war. Perhaps I let my guard down too much...”

“Yeah, and we got left behind...*again*. Those young squirts got to go on ahead to safety, leaving us lingering behind like expendable trash...”

“Ughgh... I just wanted to get married. That’s all I ever really wanted...”

Now there was only a handful of female elf soldiers remaining.

They kept fighting valiantly on against the zombies. But now their escape route had been lost. And they were out of strength.

Just as the zombie horde was about to swallow the women up...

“Sacred Edge!!!”

A flashing sword cut its way through the bodies of several zombies at once.

The sword was wielded by a lone soldier.

The sword cleaved the zombies in half, and the flaming shield worn by the man ignited the corpses, turning their bodies into ashes in a second.

But wait. The man wasn’t alone.

Behind him stood another great warrior, also fighting valiantly. He swung a gigantic greatsword, with which he sent the bodies of several zombies flying into the air in pieces.

“...?”

Dumbfounded, the elves could also see what looked like a small glowing orb zipping this way and that. It was flitting back and forth between the fallen elves, twirling through the air and leaving a trail of sparkling powder in its wake. It seemed to be dusting the bodies...

They weren’t sure what was happening, but it was certainly a spectacular sight.

The orb's movements had a certain clumsiness to them, though. It was just enough to convince the elves that what they were seeing was real and not a hallucination.

While the elves watched the orb dance, the two warriors continued to slay zombie after zombie.

It was like they were reaping their way through a cornfield, their swords slicing through the crowd in big, swooping semicircles.

They continued, doggedly, as if they had never felt tiredness or exhaustion in their lives.

They fought until the surrounding area was completely cleared of zombies.

"Hah..."

The man, Breeze, paused and checked that the area was, in fact, clear. Satisfied, he turned to the elven women.

Then he pushed his hair back from his forehead with one hand in a dashing manner and addressed them.

"All right, ladies?"

Overcome with relief, the elf women bobbed their heads emphatically.

They still weren't sure what had happened, but one thing was clear: They had been rescued.

The duo who had come to their aid were a curious pair, though. One, a human clutching a glowing sword. The other, an orc wielding a massive greatsword. What were they doing here, together?

Now the orc, Bash, walked over and approached the women.

He paused, frowning deeply. He seemed to be thinking of something to say to them. But before he could speak, his attention was distracted by something else.

"Hmm!"

He had spotted one of the injured elves, leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree.

She had a huge wound on her stomach, and her clothes were drenched with blood.

Her eyes were closed. Her breathing was shallow. Bash remembered this woman.

“You there... You all right?!”

Bash didn't know the woman's name.

But still, he remembered her. How could he forget?

Without her help, Bash would never have found his way to the Great Eagle's Perch.

“Ugh... What? Who's talking? That you, Mr. Orc...?”

“It is! It is me! Pull yourself together! That's just a flesh wound!”

“No, I'm done for... Everything's gone dark...”

“Because you've got your eyes closed! Snap out of it! It really is just a flesh wound!”

In fact, the wound had already begun to close...

Fairy dust could seal up any cut and heal any injury on the spot.

But her mind appeared to be addled. Perhaps she had been attacked by a wraith?

Fairy dust was effective against injuries and most illnesses, but its ability to repair mental damage was often limited.

The minds of fairies are already somewhat jumbled up, you see.

“Mr. Orc...tell her... Tell Lady Sonia, in the main unit, to the south... Tell her that the lich is...not here. It was a fake all along, a decoy... So many zombies...a trap... She may already be in grave danger... Please...”

Lady Sonia? In grave danger?

Bash's heart leaped.

Sonia. That was the name of the beautiful elf he wanted to marry.

She was in danger? Then Bash could not stay a moment longer.

“...Understood. Thank you for the intel!”

Bash rose before the elf.

Then he jerked his head at Breeze.

Breeze had been listening and knew exactly what Bash was trying to tell him now.

“Right. You go. I’ll take care of everything here. You can leave your swag bag; I’ll bring it home for you.”

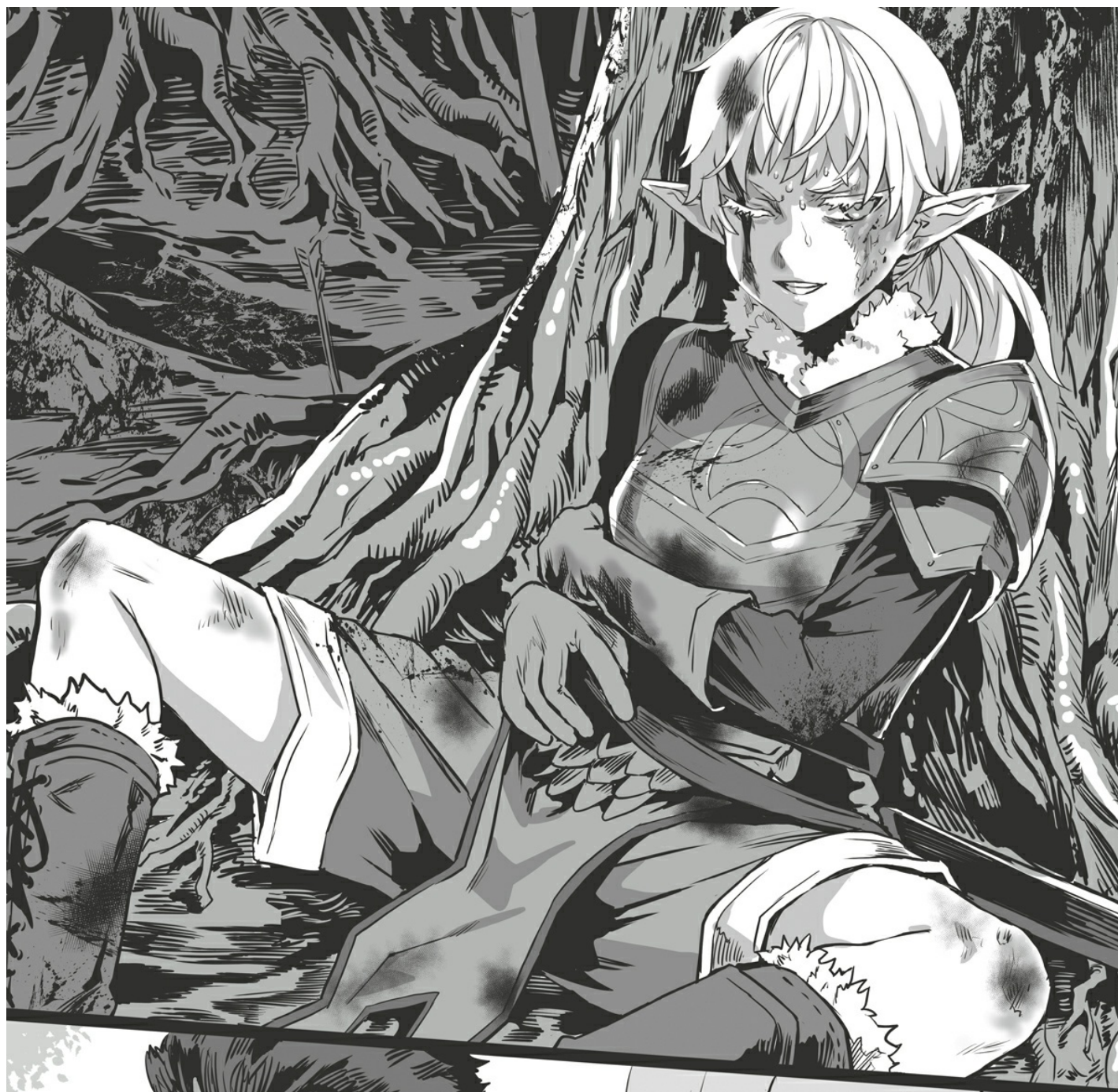
As Breeze finished speaking, one of the elves threw herself into his arms.

“Take *me* home with you!” she could be heard whispering into Breeze’s ear. The human man’s eyebrows shot right up to his hairline, and his lips formed a perfect O of surprise and delight.

“...”

Bash was overcome with envy.

If Bash took this opportunity to proposition another of the elf females they’d rescued, it was highly possible that he could have found himself in such a blissful position as well.



But Bash had set his heart on another. He already knew which elf he wanted to propose to. During the day's zombie hunt, he had thought of nothing but her.

"Thank you, friend."

And so Bash left the scene at a run.

Breeze watched him go.

Breeze, too, had fought in the war. He knew the code of honor. No man would dream of attempting to hold back his fellow soldier from the fight.

"Huh. Real-life heroes really are a cut above the rest of us..."

At any rate, Breeze had figured it all out.

He knew why the orc was traveling alone, when so few orcs left their homeland. He knew why the orc was here, in elf country. He knew why the orc had been hunting orc zombies in the elven forest.

He knew the *real* reason behind it all.

"Gugh... I wanted to see my darling hubby again one last time..."

"Um, Captain Azalea? I think your wound is completely healed already..."

"...Huh?"

Finally recovering from her mind-altered state, Azalea opened her eyes to find that Bash had already disappeared.



"Hah... Hah... Dammit..."

The fight against Clan Chief General Baraben had been in progress for nearly an hour now.

But it hadn't even been a full six minutes yet.

During that time, Thunder Sonia had unleashed a hundred spells, burned down all the surrounding trees, and turned the forest area into a flat arena.

But still he remained standing, the mighty man in the center.

"Grawwwrgh!!!"

“Gu-gu-gu! You fool! Foolish, brainless Thunder Soniaaaa!”

Baraben roared.

Gandaguza gurgled with laughter.

They had both taken a hundred of her spells to the face, and yet they were still alive and kicking.

Well, since they were technically zombies, perhaps *alive* isn't the right word. At any rate, they were still kicking.

The giant one was displaying the kind of speed and strength one would expect from an orc general.

The elves were nimble, thankfully. Any ordinary soldier would have already found themselves pounded into the dirt.

“Foul! Filthy! Enemy! Elf!!! Diiie!!!”

The orc general's mushy, rotten brain could only come up with a string of insults that sounded like dark curses.

In truth, Thunder Sonia had already suffered the full brunt of several of his attacks.

She was injured but still alive, thanks to the high-level protective barrier spell she had cast around herself.

She had to focus not only on her magical attacks but on expending magical energy on her defense as well.

Even though Thunder Sonia was the greatest mage among the elves, she could not outlast the battle while expending all her reserves of magical energy in this fashion.

But she could not let up. For if she did, it would spell the destruction of her fellow soldiers.

All around, her elf brothers and sisters were losing their lives one by one to the zombie forces.

She needed to defeat her enemy, and she needed to do it fast.

This was taking far too long, and precious lives were being lost as a result.

But Thunder Sonia had no ace up her sleeve.

All of her magic had been greatly weakened by the resistant paint. Her patented thunder magic—and the fire magic that proved so effective against the undead. She wouldn't even bother with the useless ice and earth magic, of course, since the zombies were already basically immune to those. It was the other two that she mourned the loss of.

And even if she managed to take down General Baraben, who was serving as their vanguard, he would simply be revived by Gandaguza, the lich backing him up.

If she tried to take down Gandaguza first, General Baraben would use his full power to block her. Even if she did manage to get an attack in, Gandaguza's powerful, high-grade magical defenses would deflect it.

"...This is NOT looking good."

Thunder Sonia had begun to realize that this was a battle she could not win.

She'd been in tough spots before, found herself in the midst of battles that looked completely unwinnable.

She hadn't made it to age 1,200 simply by idling the years away.

No, she had fought for years, centuries even, to become the great elf mage, Thunder Sonia.

Her enemies had come up with all kinds of ingenious countermeasures to use against her.

One notable incident involved the Demon Lord Geddigs, who sealed Sonia's magic and ransacked the elf town.

Yes, she had made it through countless battles that ought to have killed her.

She had made it here to this point through the skin of her teeth.

If she fell, it would destroy the morale of all elfkind.

If she perished, who would be left to protect them?

Without her, the kingdom of the elves would be left with only the rookies, the inexperienced youth, to turn to.

Those thoughts had always sustained her in battle before. They had kept her going as she fought through hell, survived off muddy rainwater and sparse rations, and clawed her way through to peacetime, to this moment right now.

“ ... ”

Thunder Sonia cast a quick glance behind her.

There stood Aconitum.

Calendula was gone. He had taken the main body of troops and withdrawn.

Just as she had told him to do. He had poured all his energy into the safe retreat of the troops, leaving Thunder Sonia to battle through.

Aconitum had stayed, of course. He was Thunder Sonia's personal guard, after all.

His job was to protect Thunder Sonia to the end. So he stayed.

And yet, thought Sonia.

Aconitum was due to be married.

Nothing was announced yet, but he liked a girl, and she liked him back.

Saying she wasn't jealous would be a lie.

But her feelings of happiness for her grandnephew were greater.

After all, she had known him all his life, changed his diapers when he was just a baby.

Even now, her chest burned with emotion as she recalled how he had followed her around, tugging at her robe and calling her Sandy Sonia.

Of course she loved the little squirt. He was her grandnephew.

The war...was already over.

It had been endless, bloody, grueling, and devastating, but it was over. It had ended just as this new generation, her grandnephew's generation, came of age.

He didn't have to die here. Not like this. Not now.

He didn't deserve to be dragged down to hell by these infernal zombies. No... by these lost souls who had already tasted defeat once.

If anyone was to be dragged down with them...

...then it only made sense for Sonia to be the one.

“All right.”

Thunder Sonia nodded firmly.

“Aconitum! It looks like it’s going to take a while to bring these ghouls down. It’s time to stop playing games! I’ll hold them back, but you evacuate first! I’ll be right behind you!”

She managed to sound quite convincing.

Or so she believed.

Actually, Thunder Sonia was notorious as a mage for having deep reserves of stamina during long battles.

Still, this was no longer a matter of simply holding out. That would do her no good. She needed to get everyone out ahead of her and then evacuate. It was the only logical solution.

But Aconitum shook his head and yelled back.

“Don’t be stupid! I’ll never leave you to die! Not ever!”

What?

Thunder Sonia blinked at him in confusion.

“Wh-what? I’m not asking you to leave me to die! Don’t *you* be stupid! I have no intention of dying here, believe you me!”

“Nuh-uh, you can’t fool me! You always do that whole fake *Go on, I’ll be right behind you* thing! Then if anyone protests, you start in with the whole *I’m the archmage, Thunder Sonia! Are you implying I can’t handle this myself?* thing!”

Thunder Sonia thought about it for a moment. Is that really what she did?

...Yeah, that sounded like her.

Thunder Sonia was always trying to reassure the other elves at her own expense.

Whenever the enemy had them outnumbered, and they were in a state of

extreme peril.

Whenever there was a break in the fighting, and Sonia played with the children to distract them from the war.

She had said that same speech almost verbatim that time when the Demon Lord Geddigs had invaded.

Although she had never used such a weak-sounding phrase as *I'll hold them back* before.

No, she was Thunder Sonia, the archmage of the elves, the Elf Hero herself. She didn't *hold the enemy back*. She *sent them to their graves, screaming*.

She was the greatest magician the elf race knew, after all. There was nothing she couldn't handle all by herself.

"Well, at any rate, I can't let you die, Tum-Tum! What would I tell your mother, huh?"

"Why do you assume I'd die, while you'd make it home to see my mother...?"

"It... It was just an example! Just in case I managed to make it back without you."

"...Well, at any rate...let's give it a try!"

Finally, Aconitum seemed to get on board with Sonia's order. He pressed his lips together tightly and gave a firm nod.

Then he drew in a large breath before speaking again.

"...Yes, you're right. But let *me* hold back the two undead creatures. You run back to town and warn everyone, Lady Sonia! Get reinforcements! You have to live, Lady Sonia! The elf race can't keep on fighting without you!"

"Tum-Tum..."

If Aconitum died, there would be no end to the tears.

His parents, his brothers, his army buddies. His beastkin betrothed. She would cry. They all would.

But...that was all.

He was a soldier. A military officer like any other. Even if the elf army's supreme commander fell, they would be replaced. The army was set up so as to constantly regenerate itself, through generations.

Aconitum, himself, was replaceable.

On the other hand, you had Thunder Sonia, the elf archmage.

She was *not* replaceable. To the elf people, Sonia was a symbol of hope and endurance. She had protected them for over one thousand years. She was their goddess of victory.

"...You snot-nosed little twerp! What do you think I...? Why'd you think I...?"

Thunder Sonia gnashed her teeth in anguish, wiping away tears with clenched fists.

It had always been this way.

Ever since the day she turned six-hundred years old, everyone around her had been trying to protect her.

She may have been only a civilian in military employ, but even though she was the blood relative of a clan chief, she was effectively retired. She had no jurisdiction over army matters.

And yet the young soldiers always sought to save her, to preserve her above others.

And they always had. That was how she was still alive, after all.

At the time, she accepted it. She knew she was needed for the war effort. The elf race would crumble without her. She knew that, so she accepted the help—the special treatment. For the sake of survival.

But the war was over now.

They had won, hadn't they?

So why were they still trying to keep Sonia alive?

"You've fought for twelve hundred years, survived every battle. It's time for you to step away from the battlefield altogether and find your own happiness. Get married, even. Don't you agree?"

“If you really think that, then why don’t *you* get down on one knee and propose to me?!”

“No thanks, Granny. I’d rather not keep the bloodline pure, actually. Besides, I already have a fiancée.”

“Right! That’s what I’m saying! That’s why *you* should be the one to survive!”

As Thunder Sonia and Aconitum continued to screech back and forth in their usual way...

...a rock came flying out of nowhere and struck Aconitum.

He went flying, right up into the air, and came down hard several feet away.

He was motionless.

“Gu-gu-gu! Enough games!”

Careless. She had been careless.

She had taken her eye off the enemy during battle.

Someone had died because of her carelessness.

“...Aconitum? ...Tum-Tum? Y-you can’t just die on me...not here. Come on...”

Thunder Sonia called out to her grandnephew, desperate for him to respond to her.

He remained silent and still.

“But...you’re supposed to get married. To the beastkin princess. You’ve always liked beasts of all kinds, ever since you were a kid... Oh, sorry. Look, I didn’t mean to imply that beastkin are the same as common animals. That would be prejudiced, now, wouldn’t it? Come on, Tum-Tum... Say something...”

There was no response.

The elf lay sprawled on the ground, not moving at all.

This had happened many times in the past. Careless Sonia had often taken her eye off the enemy, let her guard down, and caused good soldiers to get killed.

But...it wasn’t all her fault.

Aconitum was culpable as well. He had argued with her for fun, even with the

enemy nearby.

He should have just listened to Thunder Sonia and evacuated as she instructed...

...or so she told herself. But it didn't lessen the pain in her heart.

"I swear..."

Thunder Sonia shook her head, blinking back tears.

She was Thunder Sonia, an elven warrior.

A veteran warrior, of countless battles.

She hadn't forgotten who she was. She would return to her true form: a bloodthirsty demon of war, burning every enemy in her path into ash. She was the Elf Hero, after all.

"I swear you'll pay for that! I'm going to erase you from this world! I'll bury you so deep you'll have no hope of crawling your way up to the surface again, no matter how strong your necromancy might be!"

Thunder Sonia raised her staff.

Her expression was glacial fury, the calm before the storm.

Getting mad wouldn't change the situation. Her magic powers had been rendered ineffective.

But she needed to buy enough time for evacuation. If not for herself, then for Calendula and his soldiers, who had gone on ahead.

If the Elf Hero and the army general both died like this during a simple zombie cleanup operation, it would make the elf race look weak. The orcs might even be inspired to rise up against them. Even their allies, the human race, might take the opportunity to expand their borders by taking a slice of the elf territory pie for themselves.

It could lead to another war.

That couldn't be allowed to happen. If only one of them survived, the survivor could obfuscate the details of the other's death, spin the situation in the best way to benefit the elf race's image. But...how was she going to pull this off?

“No...escape! No elves...escape! All diiie!!!”

General Baraben’s roaring shook the trees in the forest.

Thunder Sonia agreed with him.

She wasn’t going to let a single zombie escape.

She just wasn’t sure how she was going to do that yet. That was the issue here.

“Silence! Get back in your grave and pipe down like a good corpse should!”

Just then...

Something came fluttering between Thunder Sonia and General Baraben.

With quick, somewhat erratic movements, it flitted and flapped through the air.

As Sonia watched, it made its way over to Aconitum’s fallen body. Then it began dancing and jittering in the air above him.

It performed a midair triple axel, then a double loop the loop.

All the while, powdery, glittery stuff was dropping from it, falling onto Aconitum’s body.

Its odd dance was almost hypnotic.

To an onlooker, the strange image could only have been chalked up to a hallucination.

There was no one around to explain what this odd apparition was or what it was doing.

But there was a more pressing matter at hand.

Something that concerned Thunder Sonia and General Baraben much more than some unusual, glowing apparition in the forest.

It was the imposing figure that was steadily making its way toward them now.

Even from far off, they could hear the sound of destruction its mighty coming wrought.

Zombie parts flying through the air. Trees uprooted. It was getting close now.

It was like a small, perfectly concentrated mass of pure violence.

Then the figure came into view.

“ ... ”

It was an orc.

Just an ordinary, green-skinned orc.

And a small one, at that, at least when compared to an average-size orc. Still, he was well muscled. He had the sharp eyes of a bird of prey, and his hair was a purplish-blue. He carried a greatsword in his right hand. He was just an orc soldier, same as you could find anywhere in the orc homeland.

But Thunder Sonia knew...

She knew how ferocious, how fearsome this ordinary-looking orc was.

She knew better than anyone in this world.

“Bash...”

It all made sense in that moment.

Why this Orc Hero was here now.

Why he had come to the Shiwanashi Forest. Why he had revealed himself to her.

“Aha! Bash! Long time no see! You been well?”

Baraben sounded delighted to see Bash.

He held his arms wide, still clutching his war hammer, as if inviting the orc in for a hug.

“Your coming strengthens us! Come, let us fight together, like old times! Let us crush the vile elves and take back our forest!”

Thunder Sonia’s heart sank.

Yes, she understood it all now. She knew why the Orc Hero had come to the Shiwanashi Forest.

Yes... The orc had come to take back the forest, on behalf of his people.

He had come to slay her. Then, with the elves disillusioned, he would reignite the fires of war once more.

But Sonia didn't have enough strength left to defeat Bash. She knew this all too well.

And with General Baraben and Gandaguza on the orc's side as well, there was zero chance of her escaping with her life.

"General...Baraben? Is that you?"

Bash was frowning, looking around in confusion.

Just then, the shining, fluttering thing came zooming over. Sonia could see it clearly now. It was a fairy, emitting a mellow glow.

It flew up to Bash's ear and appeared to be whispering something into it.

Bash was nodding, listening. Looking at Thunder Sonia and...grinning.

In Sonia's eyes, that grin signaled nothing more than the orc's glee over her impending death.

"C-come on, then! I'm... I'm the Elf Hero, Thunder Sonia! I'll fight you to my dying breath!"

Sonia raised her staff, prepared to face her end with dignity and die a hero.

But she was miles and years away, thinking back to the Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest.

It had been the worst situation in all her 1,200 years. A desperate, pitched, and bloody battle that she seemed to have no hope of surviving, let alone winning.

It had been so harrowing, so grueling, so terrible, that she knew she could never stand to face such a battle a second time.

"Hmm."

Bash was walking toward Thunder Sonia now, moving steadily.

She knew, though.

He may have been moving slowly right then, but he could pounce at a

moment's notice and operate so swiftly that he would be little more than a blur.

She wouldn't be able to land a hit on him...unless she acted with cunning. She could bait him into swinging at her, evade him by a hair's breadth, and then strike him before he could rally.

Could she pull it off, though?

She'd done it in the past. Even though she lost. Actually, she thought she'd gotten him pretty good. But she had been the one lying on the ground at the end of their last battle.

This time, Bash had General Baraben and Gandaguza on his side. Presumably, they would all attack her at once.

She would need to evade their attacks as well, even while she was dealing with Bash.

Could she do that...?

Of course not.

But she had to. She had to, or war would start up all over again.

A war between the orcs and the elves. Would the humans and beastkin ally with them again this time around?



Forget about the dwarves. They despised the elves. But the humans, they were a fickle race. If they realized that the elf race had been weakened, they might seize their chance and try to take the elf land.

Nor would the losers of the last war simply stand on the sidelines and watch.

The succubus race, the fairies, the lizardmen... They would side with the orcs, no doubt about it.

Then...it would all happen again...

No! She couldn't let that happen!

She had to do something! She was the Elf Hero, Thunder Sonia!

Why had she lived so many years, if not to rescue her people now?

She had to find a way...

"Hah... Hah..."

Thunder Sonia's heart was pounding in her chest.

The pressure was too much. She felt choked by it. Gasping for air, she began to charge up her staff with magical power.

Bash was right in front of her now.

He raised his greatsword...

Then he turned his back on her, pointing the sword directly at General Baraben!

"I won't let them harm a single hair on your golden head. You just stand back and watch."

"...Um, what?"

Thunder Sonia was frozen in shock, her staff held aloft in midair.

What was this orc saying...?

"Grawrgh! Baaash! You bastard! Siding with the elves?!"

"Gu-gu-gu! What for? Why?! Traitoor!!!"

General Baraben and Gandaguza howled with indignity.

Bash had betrayed them. The Orc Hero was taking a protective role over the sly, sneaky elves, turning his sword on his own countrymen! It was unbelievable.

But the two of them had no idea...

The war was already over.

The orcs had decided among themselves to live better lives in this new society.

"The Orc King has forbidden hostility toward other races."

"Bastard! Traitor! ...Weakling!!!"

General Baraben roared.

"Nemesis? That pathetic excuse for an orc?! How dare he pass judgment on meee!!!"

"Gu-gu-gu! What happened to the pride of the orcs?! What do orcs have besides combat?! Have you no teeth?! For shame!!!"

Baraben's crazed bellows. Gandaguza's burbling shrieks.

Bash was not deterred. In fact, the sound of them imbued him with strength.

"General Baraben. I respect your legacy and your great deeds in life. However, a zombie orc is no longer an orc. And only an orc can speak for orckind."

"Grwaaargh! Bwaaargh!!!"

General Baraben was incensed.

With a thunderous roar that shook the very earth beneath their feet, he charged at Bash.

The zombie general towered over Bash, the war hammer he wielded making Bash's greatsword look like a toothpick in comparison.

"Come, then!"

The Orc Hero lifted his sword and began to do battle against the zombie general.

HERO VS GENERAL

Bash had only fond memories of General Baraben.

When Bash was just an orc pup, General Baraben seemed like some kind of deity.

He was the childhood friend of the current Orc King, Nemesis, and the two were always as close as brothers. As both the clan chief of the Shiwanashi Forest and as a mighty warrior, he was known and respected by all orckind.

His towering stature, which put him head and shoulders above the next-tallest orc, made him an imposing figure on the battlefield, swinging his mighty war hammer as though it was featherlight.

Every orc looked up to him, with his brute strength and raw courage.

Every orc including Bash.

The first time Bash met Baraben in person was not long after Bash initially stepped onto the battlefield.

After staring down death several times, he could then be counted among the more seasoned warriors. But at the time, Bash had not yet distinguished himself from the others and had been barely scraping his way out of battles alive.

Then Bash's unit was assigned to General Baraben's army.

The battle that ensued straight after that was a bloody one indeed.

The orc side won, but Bash's unit experienced heavy losses.

After the fighting, while everyone was standing around the campfire digging into the evening meal, General Baraben approached Bash.

He looked the smaller orc up and down, and this is what he said:

"It's you! I saw you out there! You're going to be one of the greats!"

Then, with a wry grin, Baraben thumped Bash on the back before walking off.

Bash was dumbstruck. But also delighted.

The great General Baraben had said that he, Bash, would go far. What soldier wouldn't be overcome with joy to be praised like that, by such a great man?

The second time they met, Bash had already started proving himself to be a cut above his peers.

Yes, compared to them, Bash was cut from a different cloth entirely.

Bash was assigned to guard General Baraben directly.

Serving as protection for the top brass...wasn't anything special, though.

All Bash had to do was join in the fight as usual, keeping close to Baraben and decimating the enemy alongside the ferocious general.

But right before the battle, Bash was able to listen to General Baraben speak.

The general regaled his men with tales of his glory on the battlefield, something he always did to bolster morale before battle.

But he also spoke of the long history of orc warfare.

From his childhood days, Baraben had fought alongside Nemesis. The two had taken turns saving each other's lives during impossible situations. Always together, between them they upheld the pride of the orc nation.

It was certainly a rousing tale.

And it inspired Bash.

He made up his mind to craft such a legacy for himself.

The last time they met, it had been when Bash was dispatched to defend the Shiwanashi Forest.

General Baraben no longer smiled and laughed as he had done in the early days.

He was still a force to be reckoned with, however, as he proceeded to rally his troops to form one last, valiant stand, to fight to the very end.

To the south, the elves. To the east, the humans. They were trapped between

two great powers, with dwindling numbers. The situation seemed impossible, and all hope had been lost.

Bash had not spoken to Baraben on that occasion.

Instead, the general had shot Bash a silent, meaningful look. Nodding, Bash headed to the front line of the battle.

That's when Bash faced off against the elf archmage Thunder Sonia, and the two proceeded to fight to the death.

Despite landing a devastating final blow on Thunder Sonia, Bash had sustained severe injuries himself. He wandered lost through the forest for several days, in a haze of extreme pain and confusion.

If Zell hadn't found him in that hole, Bash might have died there.

When Bash eventually made his way back to headquarters, the war was already over.

It was a moonless night, and the elf army had attacked in the dark.

Usually, based solely on the power balance between the orc and elf armies in terms of raw strength, an overwhelming elf victory of this kind would have been unlikely.

But the elf army had stolen away the orcs' vision.

They eliminated all sources of light, cast darkness magic, clad themselves in black clothing, and on top of all that, they even used illusion magic to hide all traces of themselves from sight.

General Baraben was not the kind of man to be bested by such underhanded tactics alone.

The orcs had been fighting in wars for thousands of years, after all. They had countermeasures in place to handle all kinds of physical and magical attacks. Invisible or not, the elves shouldn't have been able to decimate the orc army in this, or any other, way.

The true downfall of the orc army, as Bash learned later on, had been General Baraben's doing. His prejudice against orc mages had been the real cause of their unraveling.

His aide, the orc mage Gandaguza, was the one to discover that the elves were launching a night attack.

He advised that the orcs should launch a counterattack, after first concealing themselves from view and hiding in the bushes and undergrowth, of course.

But General Baraben refused to even entertain such an idea.

Instead, he haughtily informed the orc mage that such a cowardly plan was hardly befitting their proud warrior race.

Baraben refused to budge on the issue.

In fact, he even went to the other extreme, calling for extra torches to be lit so they could face the enemy head-on.

As a result, both General Baraben and his aide, Gandaguza, met their end.

Nemesis immediately dispatched troops to the Shiwanashi Forest to help, but it was too late. Even though the battle had still been far from lost, the remaining soldiers had completely given up following the death of their leader, the great Baraben.

Bash held no grudges against the wartime adversaries, including the elves. Nor did he have any real regrets. Bash had done what he needed to do as the Orc Hero. He had knocked out their strongest elven opponent and lived to return home.

If the war was being lost in the meantime, then it was out of Bash's hands.

But Bash couldn't help wondering if things would have been different if he had been there during Baraben's last stand.

Or what would have happened if things between General Baraben and the aide Gandaguza had been better.

Yes, sometimes Bash couldn't help thinking about things like that.

And now, here he was, confronted once more with the mighty figure of General Baraben.

But Baraben was standing alongside his aide, Gandaguza, this time. Even after all the things he said during the war about how he would never cheapen himself

by fighting alongside an orc mage.

Now General Baraben turned to Bash and said:

“Come, let us fight together, as we did in the old days! Let us crush the despicable elves and take back our forest!”

Bash would be lying if he said he wasn’t somewhat pleased by this turn of events.

Yes, he often wondered what would have happened if he had been with Baraben—and if Baraben had allied himself properly with Gandaguza. Now, here was his opportunity to find out.

They would win this time; that seemed certain. Claim a glorious victory for the orc race. Bash could almost taste it.

But no. Bash was, after all, a living orc.

And he was a soldier. With a strong code of honor.

Accepting defeat with grace was also the mark of a true soldier.

The orcs have an old, old adage. It seemed most appropriate at this juncture.

The saying was simple enough. It went like this:

“An undead is no true orc.”

Zombies arose from the ground filled with vengeance and bearing grudges, unable to accept their defeat with honor.

That wasn’t the orc way at all.

The orcs had lost the war, fair and square.

And after losing the war, they had committed themselves to peace, to learning from the long years of conflict, and to forging a better future for their people. Yes, their progress seemed slow compared to the other participants of the long war. But even so, Bash would not waver. He would uphold the judgment of the true Orc King, Nemesis himself.

That was Bash’s own code of honor as an Orc Hero.

In other words, if Bash had to choose between partnering up with a horde of

zombie orcs or the elf race, with whom the orc race had been trying so hard to repair relations lately...then there was only one choice, really.

Bash didn't care what this fight was about.

Besides, the elf woman he had his eye on was in a tough spot, and he couldn't hesitate a moment longer.

(Boss! This is it! This is your chance! You saw that elf thrusting herself at Breeze just before, right? Now it's your turn! All you have to do is play the hero, and the elf will be putty in your hands!)

Besides, his loyal adviser Zell was on the same page!



Thunder Sonia was completely flummoxed.

Why was Bash standing in front of her, as if to protect her from harm?

Why was he pointing his sword at General Baraben, who by all rights ought to have been his ally?

Was she misreading the situation? Or had Bash somehow broken with the orc side?

Goodness, what if Bash was just like all the other orcs? What if he had taken a fancy to her, an elf woman, and now intended to have her become his personal baby maker?!

No, no, she knew firsthand that Bash had no interest in her. The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest, after all, had turned his nose up at the prospect of Thunder Sonia as a potential conquest.

Then, what of her old-person smell...?

But no, Sonia could not bear it if that was true! If she really did stink...

"I am Bash, the Orc Hero, former warrior of the Orc Royal Army, under Captain Budarth's company!"

Well, Sonia knew one thing for sure.

It seemed that this Orc Hero seriously planned to go into battle *against* General Baraben.

“I am the Orc Royal Army’s sub-commander and clan chief of the Shiwanashi Forest, Orc General Baraben!!!”

“And I am aide to the Orc Royal Army’s sub-commander, the great warlord and mage, Gandaguza!!!”

Thunder Sonia had heard, ad nauseam, about this orcish custom of announcing one’s name and title before a battle.

It was basically a prerequisite that the orcs never skipped before throwing down.

After the declaration of names, no orc would back down until either he or his opponent was felled.

But Bash’s opponent was the great General Baraben. Sonia knew well enough how respected and venerated the zombie orc had been in life.

Why, the first names the rookie orc army recruits ever heard in their lives were the names of Orc King Nemesis and Orc General Baraben.

Baraben was a mighty warrior who had triumphed over and over again on the battlefield.

He stood on par with the Orc King in the eyes of the people.

And he was backed by the finest mage the orc race knew, Gandaguza.

He was the most dangerous element in this particular fight. As long as Gandaguza remained standing, he could revive General Baraben over and over again.

But it would be no easy feat to get to Gandaguza, who was hanging back, hiding behind the bulking figure of General Baraben.

And yet, thought Sonia.

Gazing up at Bash’s wide back in front of her.

What a broad, reassuring, masculine back that orc has, she thought.

“Graaargh!!!”

“Raaaghhh!!!”

The war cries boomed out.

They were so loud that they shook the trees in the forest. So loud that they could have pulverized any small animals that may have been dwelling within the undergrowth.

But General Baraben stepped forward first, faster by a mere half second.

He swung his giant war hammer at Bash. It was destruction incarnate on a collision course with Bash's face.

But Bash moved with surprising agility.

Not to retreat, however. No, Bash moved forward, steadying his upper body as he swung his greatsword up, up, up, toward his enemy...

CLASH!!!

The forest was filled with the ringing of steel against steel, which was louder than any sound Sonia had heard before.

The echoes rolled across the forest. *Crash, clang, clink...*

Bash's greatsword valiantly parried the blow inflicted by General Baraben's war hammer.

General Baraben managed to keep his grip on the weapon, but he was knocked off-balance and had to take a large step backward to re-center himself.

Bash, too, was knocked off-balance by the recoil.

"Gugggh!!!"

But he remained on his feet.

What incredible muscles he must have had, to have withstood that sort of recoil.

Bash took another step forward, advancing on General Baraben again.

A second later, Bash's mighty sword cleaved its way through the great General's chest.

The wound was deep and had clearly reached his heart.

It was a precise, beautiful swing—simply perfect.

And the wound was fatal.

...Or it would have been, had Bash's opponent been *alive* to begin with.

“Graaagh!!!”

General Baraben swung his war hammer at Bash, as if he hadn't even noticed the wound.

His attack had the bite of a hurricane.

But Bash did not retreat. Sometimes he dodged; sometimes he struck. Now and then, he managed to get a wide swing in and landed a few hits. The whole thing looked fast and furious, and somewhat crude, but it was a shrewd fighting technique focusing on self-preservation.

Then Bash finally landed a decisive blow on General Baraben, a slash that sliced through his internal organs.

But General Baraben didn't even pause.

His heart was cleaved in two, and his arteries had been shredded, but he still kept on coming.

Because he was a zombie, after all.

A zombie won't stop coming, not unless its head has been destroyed or removed entirely.

Actually, the body can keep on moving around without the head in some circumstances, but it will be blind and directionless. Usually, the body won't last long, either.

But this time was different.

The zombies were being necromanced by the lich, so no matter how badly injured they might have been, their bodies would keep on attacking relentlessly.

Bash was more than a match for General Baraben in battle.

If Baraben had been alive, Bash's blows would already have put him down.

But he was not alive.

“Gu-gu-gu! *Earth Bind!!!*”

“Hmm!”

A split second after Gandaguza’s burbling curse, Bash found himself suddenly sinking down a foot into the ground below his feet.

His feet were trapped. It was like the mud had a hold on him and refused to let go.

“Grawrgh!!!”

Distracted, Bash was a second too late.

He managed to shield himself from the blow using the flat of his greatsword, but the impact plucked him from the earth’s grip and sent him spinning through the air, until he smashed into a tree and fell to the ground again.

Naturally, Bash could easily shake off an impact like that.

He leaped to his feet and dashed back toward General Baraben as if nothing had even happened.

But he had incurred heavy damage from the impact.

Thunder Sonia recalled how Bash had been during their own vicious duel.

She had thrown spell after spell at him, but it was like the orc was immortal. By the end of the battle, though, it was clear that the orc was moving stiffly, as if in pain.

Yes, Bash had immense strength—and an incredibly robust physique. But even he had his limits.

“Gu-gu! Fool! Foolish man! Hero Baaash!!!”

And right now, Bash had more on his plate than just General Baraben alone.

The mage, Gandaguza, was backing the general up.

Even if Bash managed to fell General Baraben, it would all be meaningless in the end unless something was done about Gandaguza.

Thunder Sonia knew how blessed she was to have the Orc Hero fighting on her side.

She, better than anyone, knew just how strong the orc was.

But the orc was a foot soldier and had little in the way of magical ability.

Was Bash even aware of how liches worked? Did he realize that the battle would never end unless someone took out Gandaguza first?

“...Nnng!!!”

Thunder Sonia hesitated for a moment.

But then she made up her mind in a flash.

“...Bash! I’ll help you! This fight belongs to the elves, after all! And this way, it’ll be two versus two! A fair fight!”

Bash shot a glance at Thunder Sonia briefly, before returning his gaze to his opponents once more.

“I accept your assistance.”

“G-great! The two of us together will be unstoppable!”

The corners of Bash’s mouth turned up in a slight smile.

Then he chuckled out loud.

Thunder Sonia laughed, too. Wryly.

“GRAH-HA-HA-HA-HA!!!”

Bash’s war cry shook the forest. This was his second war cry of the fight.

Thunder Sonia cringed, ears ringing.

Too loud! My ears! I thought orcs were supposed to do that war cry thing at the start of the battle, not in the middle!

But she said nothing aloud. Instead, she swung her staff.

The odds were much more favorable for her now.

“Listen, if we don’t take out Gandaguza, then he’ll just keep on reviving General Baraben over and over! I’ll draw Baraben’s attention, and you use that chance to make mincemeat out of Gandaguza!”

“...”

But Bash didn’t even nod in response to Sonia’s garbled yelps.

He was too busy evading a fierce swing from Baraben and readying a counterblow.

If his opponent had been mortal, then this strike of Bash's would have finished him off. But General Baraben barely flinched.

"Hey! Are you listening to me, Orc? I'm telling you, that's not going to do any good!"

"General Baraben was a fine warrior in life. Even as a zombie, he followed the traditions of our people and engaged me in a duel with honor by putting his name on the line! I owe him the warrior's death he deserves!"

"What the...?"

Was this orc stupid or something?

But Thunder Sonia kept her mouth shut.

The orcs considered fighting a way of life. They based their self-worth on how many opponents they slew and how many women they bedded. Sonia couldn't really understand that last part, but she knew how much the rituals of battle meant to their culture. How much they shaped their sense of honor.

Bash was attempting to give General Baraben an honorable burial, to preserve his legacy.

Thunder Sonia could understand that.

After all, she was an Elf Hero.

If an elf was to turn into a zombie and be denied a warrior's rest, then she would want to do all she could to give them a decent elven funeral and deliver them into death's embrace with honor and dignity. Even more so if the individual in question had contributed much to elf society in life.

"I understand. In that case, I'll handle Gandaguza and his magic myself..."

"Then I shall leave it to you and be in your debt."

"Um, no, you shall not! Get on with it! My magic power is running low enough as it is!"

"Affirmative!"

Then Bash ran at General Baraben again.

Swinging his greatsword like it was a broken tree branch, Bash blocked General Baraben's strike and countered with one of his own.

Thunder Sonia watched in awe.

The orc's swordplay was *beautiful*. Even though it was orcish swordplay, which wasn't exactly known for its grace.

During her own battle with the orc, she had felt nothing but terror and the adrenaline of the fight running through her veins. But now that the orc was fighting on her side, she had a chance to appreciate his skill.

His swings were so calculating, so precise...

Usually, the follow-through from a hard swing would be difficult to counter from, but Bash used the momentum to spin and slash again, making sure no movement was wasted.

He was fast.

Swinging to the left, spinning and re-centering, then swinging to the right.

He had more than speed, as well.

His blows were heavy, imbued with the raw physical strength of the orc, and easily able to knock back even General Baraben's mighty war hammer.

He was also nimble and quick-thinking and had never missed an opportunity to strike whenever he found an opening.

Thunder Sonia shivered from the spectacle.

Who would ever want to be faced with an opponent such as this?

"Hey! Not so fast!"

Thunder Sonia swirled her staff, pointing it at Bash.

More precisely, at the ground beneath Bash. Quickly, she blasted away the magical power that had been swirling and charging itself on the ground beneath the orc's feet.

"Gu-gu-gu! Fool! Thunder Soniaaaa!!!"

“Oh, learn a new word, will you? You’re the fool, Gandaguza, for thinking your vile plans would ever work!”

“Gu-gu-gu!”

Cutting off Gandaguza’s magic...

That wasn’t such a difficult feat for a seasoned mage like Thunder Sonia.

Sure, Gandaguza might have been the finest mage among the orcs, but Thunder Sonia was an elf archmage. The finest of the magic wielders. The best the elf race had ever known. And who was more magically powerful than the elf race?

Yes, her opponent was a lich, a strong undead sorcerer, with increased magical abilities compared to the ones he’d had in life. But fundamentally, he was an orc.

In a magical fight, there was no way an orc mage like Gandaguza should have been able to beat Thunder Sonia.

In fact, this was the perfect opportunity for Thunder Sonia to show her stuff and snuff out the undead orc.

She wouldn’t be pulling off an insta-kill or anything, but with her magic, she should easily have been able to back the lich into an impossible corner within five moves—and then deal a finishing blow with the sixth.

Twelve hundred years. That was how long she’d been polishing her skills as a mage. She had fought countless battles. It would be easy for her.

But Thunder Sonia did not do this.

“Hmm. Well anyway, you’re an orc, too, aren’t you? You should just stand back and watch. Witness the final, honorable fight of your beloved General Baraben.”

“Fool! Fool! Who cares for honor? Who cares for a fair fight? All that matters is victory! The destruction of the hated elves! Justice for orckind!!!”

“You see, that’s why General Baraben never trusted you...”

Thunder Sonia had decided to watch Bash’s fight unfold.

Why? She didn't know herself.

She knew she ought to be getting on with killing as many zombies as possible.

Even now, the elf army was under siege from the zombie horde. Many more soldiers would become casualties of the battle.

But somehow, Thunder Sonia felt that her rightful place was to hang back and wait.

It didn't look like she had much reason to worry anyway.

Bash was dominating General Baraben.

Baraben was not slow on his feet. Nor was he unskilled.

His swing had plenty of force and raw strength behind it, and he was shrewd as well, able to predict Bash's evasive movements easily. A typical soldier would have no chance at even getting close to the zombie general.

But Bash met every powerful swing with his own sword. And countered each blow with an equally matched one of his own.

The only reason Baraben still had his head attached to his neck was because of luck, really. He had been evading Bash's killing blows by a hair's breadth.

But it was only a matter of time until Baraben's luck ran out.

Thunder Sonia had been observing the battle for only a few rounds of attacks.

In truth, less than a minute had elapsed.

Meanwhile, Gandaguza cast useless spells at Thunder Sonia, which she easily deflected. He'd gotten five or so shots off so far.

In this extremely short space of time, Bash and General Baraben had each exchanged numerous fast-paced blows.

Then something happened.

There was a colossal cracking sound.

The head of General Baraben's war hammer went sailing off into the sky.

The head rolled over and over in midair, before crashing back down to the ground. Gathering mud, it flew across the forest floor like a cannonball,

crashing into at least three zombies and dragging them away along its trajectory.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to watch the head roll.

Thunder Sonia's jaw dropped as she chased the rolling head with her eyes. Gandaguza was doing the same thing.

When they turned back to the scene of the battle, it was clear that it was all over.

The giant undead orc general collapsed slowly to the ground, still clutching the war hammer, even though only the wooden grip remained.

The impact of the general's mighty knees sent the ground shaking beneath everyone's feet. There was a colossal thud.

Then something fell down from above.

It was a zombie head.

A huge zombie head, with two big tusks. An orc's head.

The head crashed to the ground, before slowly rolling across the forest floor, and came to a stop at Gandaguza's feet.

"Gu-gu-gu... General..."

Thunder Sonia waved her staff, infusing it with her magical power.

If Gandaguza revived General Baraben right now, then all would be lost.

Sonia had to prevent the necromancy from taking effect, had to prevent the whole thing from starting all over again.

But Gandaguza made no attempt to cast a spell.

He simply gazed down at General Baraben's severed head for a few moments, leaning weakly on his staff, before lifting his chin and looking at Bash.

He looked at Bash...with pleading eyes.

In a weak voice, with a meek, un-orc-like expression on his face, Gandaguza spoke: "Bash... Foolish Bash... Would you, please?"

"Of course."

Just before Gandaguza's body was cleaved in two, a smile could be seen, ever so briefly, on his face.

THE PROPOSAL

And so the zombie uprising of Shiwanashi Forest saw its conclusion.

Every now and again, stray zombies would crop up here and there, but there would be no more large outbreaks, the people surmised.

Also, there were far fewer casualties among the elf army than had been initially feared.

They were elite soldiers, yes, so that contributed. But what really helped was the fact that Zell had gone around healing them all while Bash was wiping out the zombie horde.

While they had all been close to death, fatally wounded by zombies and slowly bleeding out, an orc appeared all of a sudden, saving their lives.

What's more, the same orc had broken through the ranks of the zombie horde to reach the lich and come to Thunder Sonia's aid.

The elf army was filled with talk of the heroic orc and his deeds.

Some debated over which events had actually transpired and which were mere rumors. Many found it hard to believe that Thunder Sonia would ever have had trouble felling a single lich. But then when Sonia came out and confirmed it herself, everyone had to accept it.

"We must express our gratitude to the Orc Hero. But how? Shall we write a formal letter of thanks to the orc nation?"

"Hmm..."

Thunder Sonia crossed her arms, thinking over Aconitum's suggestion.

She was grateful, of course.

Aconitum's cheeks were flushed pink with good health. He'd been right as

rain ever since Bash's fairy companion, Zell, healed him along with the others.

After the fight, Sonia had dashed back to her poor fallen grandnephew, hoping to at least retrieve the body for a decent burial. But she had found him sitting up, a pile of shining white fairy dust on top of his head.

She couldn't help but notice the look of disgust on said fairy's face as the tiny creature hovered nearby, muttering "*So gross...*" under their breath.

"Hmm..."

Bash and his companion had saved her precious Aconitum, her darling Tum-Tum, from certain death.

And they had also come to the aid of Thunder Sonia herself, in her hour of darkest need.

So yes, of course she was grateful.

Buuut...

"Okay, but what I still want to know is: Why did he come to this town in the first place?"

"*Why?*"

"Yeah."

Sonia nodded emphatically. For a moment, Aconitum paused. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling as if he was thinking, *Strength! Give me the strength to deal with this senile old granny!*

"Wipe that look off your face! How dare you mock your elders?"

"But... So... You *really* don't know?"

"Are you saying *you* do?"

"Of course I do."

Thunder Sonia mashed her lips together and jerked her chin at Aconitum as if to say, *Spit it out, then!*

"He came to stop the zombie orc uprising in the Shiwanashi Forest, of course."

“Okay...but why?”

“Well, think of it this way. His own people were causing trouble in what’s now effectively a foreign country. The orcs are a prideful people, and they tend to take responsibility as a group when one of them does something bad. The orc was here trying to protect the image of the orcs.”

“Huh?!”

“I mean, think about it. His actions. They all make sense. He comes to town and starts off by gathering information. Then the next day he’s out there slaying zombies. He keeps it up, gathering zombie heads, then at some point he finds out General Baraben is back and zombified. I was kinda out of it at that point, but I definitely remember the orc confronting Baraben and dueling him one-on-one, in a fair fight. I mean, what better way to show everyone the true pride of the orcs than by sending an Orc Hero to dispose of their own country’s trash, right?”

“Hmm, I suppose.”

Thunder Sonia nodded.

The orc’s actions certainly tracked with Aconitum’s theory.

And that was the conclusion Sonia had pretty much come to during the battle, as well.

It sure seemed like Bash had traveled here to save the general he once admired from the fate of undeath. To grant him eternal peace.

But Sonia was still filled with a nagging sense of doubt.

Something was plaguing her.

If she were the Orc King, she would never have sent Bash to take on an entire zombie horde, plus zombified general and mage, as a solo operation.

Ah, he had the fairy with him as well. All right, so there were two of them.

Still, wasn’t it standard to at least send a few troops along to provide backup?

If she had been the one to go out alone... Ah, but wait. No. She never did. She always had Aconitum with her.

What was it that was bothering her anyway? Thunder Sonia couldn't put her finger on it.

"Apparently, a similar thing happened in the human country. Bunch of bandits got wiped out."

"Huh? Nobody told me about that."

"I just heard it as a passing rumor."

"Why didn't you tell me?! Something like that is major news, and... Wait! I know what's been bugging me now!"

It had come to Thunder Sonia all of a sudden.

The day Bash came to town. When they ran into each other at night on the street.

"Answer me this, then, why did the orc deliver that whole *I'll be back to see you again* speech to me? That was so weird! How did he know I'd end up fighting General Baraben?"

"I'm not sure..."

"And then remember how he said '*Heh*' to me? '*Heh!!!*' Unbelievable! Remember? '*Heh, you'll find out, soon enough*'—that's what he said! When is 'soon enough' supposed to be? Wait, what if he was the one who stirred up all the trouble in the first place, just so he could swoop in and look like the hero later?! Although, I doubt it; I didn't sense any magical ability in him at all, let alone the amount needed to conjure up a lich..."

"Hmm..."

Aconitum was looking doubtful now, too.

It was true. Bash's actions that night on the street were very odd indeed.

It definitely seemed fishy, as if the orc was plotting something in secret.

But from the way he had handled General Baraben with such respect, it was hard to believe he was the true mastermind behind it all.

In fact, Bash had acted like...well, a hero.

"Lady Thunder Sonia?"

There was a knock at the door just then.

“Yes? What is it?”

“You have, um, a visitor downstairs.”

“Gah, who could that be? Cally? Tell him I’m taking the day off. I’m tired from all the work I did yesterday. Even Thunder Sonia needs to recharge! Tell him to finish the rest of the cleanup on his own...”

“Ah, no, it’s not General Calendula. It’s...the orc.”

Thunder Sonia and Aconitum turned to look at each other, eyebrows raised as far as they would go.



The great tree where Thunder Sonia lived was home to the elite.

Naturally, it had a lobby on the ground floor with a twenty-four-hour concierge service—and guards.

When Sonia arrived in the lobby, she found all the guards surrounding a single figure in the center.

There was also a considerable throng of spectators in attendance.

The guards didn’t seem tense, though. In fact, they were smiling in a welcoming way as they gazed at the guest.

All eyes were on this one man, standing in the center of the crowd.

He had green skin and a swarthy face. His chiseled body had been stuffed into an elven outfit, for some reason.

It was unmistakably an elf-made suit.

It was the kind of thing an elf male would wear to a ball or formal event. It was dark green with black piping.

It was far too short around the wrists and ankles, but the overall effect was quite dapper.

Perhaps he’d left his greatsword behind. Sonia couldn’t see it anywhere.

Beside the orc’s ear floated his fairy companion, arms crossed, legs spread

shoulder-width apart in a haughty, prideful, midair stance.

It was Bash and Zell who had come to see Sonia.

Why's he wearing those fancy duds? What does he want?

Frowning warily, Thunder Sonia made her way over to Bash.

The crowd all began to murmur with excitement.

Maybe he wants to discuss a loosening of the rules of the treaty we signed after the war? What a fool! Choosing this opportunity to renegotiate the treaty just proves that he set up this whole thing to get something out of it! I had no idea orcs were capable of such sophisticated subterfuge, though. Ugh, but I guess I should give him some kind of pass for the great deeds he committed during the zombie battle. After all, it helped out the elf nation as well. Dammit!

Thunder Sonia put her hands on her hips and glared up at Bash.

The orc's expression was stern and grim, with just a hint of nervousness.

"Well? What's your business with me? And are you sure you want to speak right here?"

"Yes, here's as good as anyplace else."

"Then, spit it out. I'm a busy woman, you know!"

"Hmm..."

That's when Thunder Sonia actually took a good look at Bash himself.

She hadn't actually gotten a good look at him since the whole Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest incident. Not up close anyway.

The Orc Hero Bash...

At the very least, he hadn't caused any trouble to speak of since he came to Shiwanashi.

And despite the town being filled with lady elves, there had been zero reports of any attacks on women.

Truth be told, he'd been nothing but helpful to the elves ever since he arrived.

He was magnificent in the zombie battle, too. Certainly, he had earned his

rank of Hero.

Right... This man's a true hero.

Titled as such by the people of his nation.

In fact, they seem to revere him as much as my people revere me, the great elf mage, Thunder Sonia.

Which means he's shouldering the expectations of the orc race. So all his actions have to be oriented toward guiding them to a more prosperous future, right?

So it's obvious that what he wants is to renegotiate better terms for the orcs.

The terms of the treaty had been particularly harsh on the orcs, and as such, they were lagging behind the other nations when it came to rebuilding and forging a better future.

"Elf Archmage, Thunder Sonia."

"Hmm?"

Bash withdrew something from his breast pocket.

The object glinted gold in the light. The guards took a step forward in alarm, but Thunder Sonia was as still as a stone statue.

What use did a strong man like this have for a pocket-size weapon? Even without his greatsword or shortsword, he could do just as much damage with his meaty fists, couldn't he?

"Here."

The orc offered Sonia the object. It was...a necklace.

A shining, gold, expensive-looking necklace.

Just like the ones elf men offered to their sweethearts when proposing marriage.

"Huh? What in the world?"

"I've been smitten with you ever since I first laid eyes on you. I want you to marry me and bear my children."

There was a pause.

A moment of complete silence all around.

Thunder Sonia blinked, unable to process what the orc had just said.

Um...what did he say? What does “marry” mean again? Why is he trying to hand me a necklace? What’s going on?

The cogs and gears clicked and turned in Thunder Sonia’s head, until finally things made sense.

What the—?! Did he seriously just propose to me?!

The gears started whirring and turning faster.

Why marriage, though? Calm down, Sonia; think about this rationally! There must be some explanation! Think! Right, right... He did say he’d be back to see me again. So this was his goal all along. To propose...to me! How ridiculous! Why?! Why marriage?! Why me?!?! From the first time he laid eyes on me? That’s too much! I won’t fall for that! He left me lying on the ground untouched like spoiled food! When he had me right where he wanted me!

Thunder Sonia was often guilty of losing her cool, but she was not an unintelligent elf.

In fact, all her centuries spent thinking about what was best for elfkind had made her cautious. She was always trying to think two steps ahead.

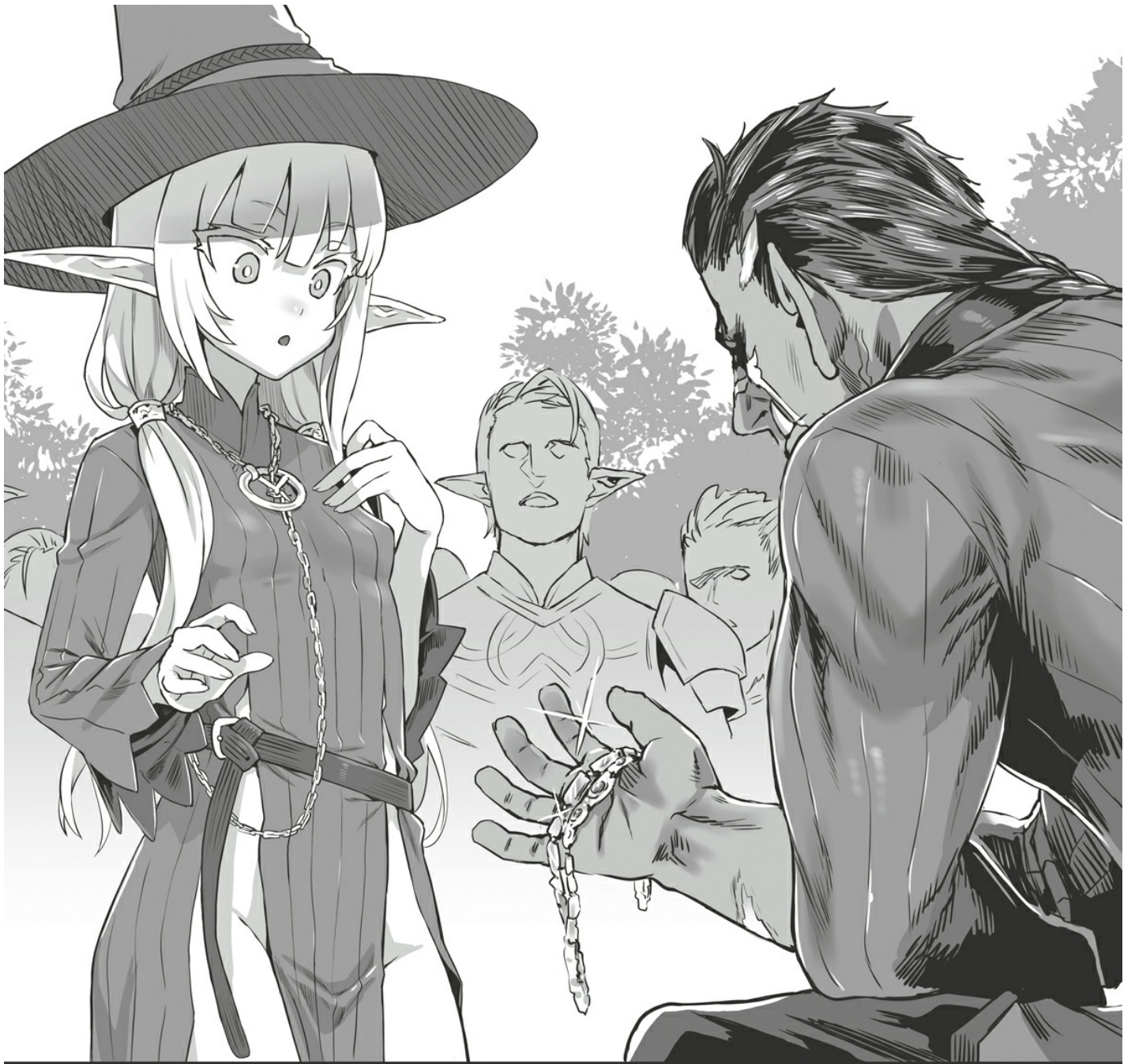
She had only met this orc once before.

There was absolutely no reason for him to be interested in her this way.

If it was true, and he really had fallen for her at first sight, then why had he not taken her during the Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest incident? Why had he not done what orcs were known to do with their conquests? If he had only done that, she’d probably be a mother of three fat little orc pups by now.

So what he was saying right now was a lie. It had to be.

What was the truth, then?



Hmm, but wait. She heard he was gathering information in town.

Mostly, from the still-single elf ladies, the ones who were desperately looking for foreign hubbies.

Perhaps he had heard about Sonia's...predicament...from them?

About how she was desperate to find herself a man as well—and had struck out countless times when trying to ensnare a human male and trap him in her web? Goodness, what if he knew about all of it? She couldn't take the shame!

(He probably thinks I'm desperate! An easy lay!!!)

The blood rushed to Thunder Sonia's head then as her anger bubbled over.

"The answer is no!!! Who'd want to have *your* babies?!"

The crowd all gasped.

Then they began whispering and nudging each other.

What? Stop it. I'm right here. Enough with gossip already!

Thunder Sonia was extremely annoyed, but she kept her sharp gaze focused on Bash.

Glaring at him as hard as she could, she tried to project an aura of apathy, so she wouldn't look like a loose woman, or an easy lay, as he clearly thought she was.

Bash, however, was pouting slightly.

"I see. That's too bad."

Then, putting the gold necklace away inside his breast pocket, he turned on his heel and walked out.

Without even looking back.

His exit was so sudden that Thunder Sonia had to fight a wild, random urge to call him back.

The orc's shoulders were slumped, and he looked...sad.

"What the hell was that about...?"

Thunder Sonia was muttering to herself.

The orc's true motivations were a complete mystery to her.



Bash was heading back to the inn with heavy footsteps.

“Aw, Boss. You know, I really thought you picked the perfect opportunity and all. You helped the lady out when she was in dire straits, then when she was still swooning, you showed up looking all dashing. You know, in the texts the elves print, that strategy was ranked number three in the ‘Top Ways to Win Her Heart’ article...”

“Thunder Sonia is an elf archmage. She has her status in society to consider.”

During the course of the zombie battle, Bash had started to remember who Sonia was.

She was the elf mage who had inflicted such heavy wounds on him after General Baraben fell during the battle of the Shiwanashi Forest.

At the time, though, he didn't see her face, and he didn't even know her name.

Thunder Sonia had worn a mask during their battle.

Bash wasn't sure why, but actually, it was a special mask designed to heighten and focus her magical abilities.

She had also been strung all over with heavy, clunky, enchanted elf protective gear and reinforced armor pieces that concealed her figure when she fought Bash. What's more, neither of them ever introduced themselves at any point either before or during their bout.

Bash had heard of a great elf mage, of course, but he had never heard the name Thunder Sonia.

In truth, he had never seen her face nor heard her name until he came to Elf Town.

In a way, he was not lying when he said he fell for her at first sight.

Their battle had left a deep impact on Bash as well. He had been wounded

badly in battle many times before, but by the time the war drew to a close, Bash was so skilled that it had become a rare, outlier event.

So he was somewhat shocked to find himself so grievously injured right as the war ended around him.

He had been dazed and could not remember how the last stand of the orcs had been lost in the end nor how he had managed to escape from the elf army that had closed ranks around him.

All he remembered was crawling into a bear hole and being discovered by Zell some time later.

The elf archmage.

Bash had heard of this person.

She was a high elf who had been alive since ancient times. She was said to be 1,200 years old.

Tales told of a blessed child who was born with power gifted to her by the god of thunder. Should this guardian goddess of the elves ever lose her virginity, it would completely nullify her powers.

With her virginity being the source of her magical gifts, she could never be wed.

So Bash had already pretty much predicted how his proposal would go down.

But to hear the rejection from her own lips... It had been a heavy blow to take.

“I saw the whole thing!”

All of a sudden, Bash realized someone was calling out to him.

He turned to see a female elf standing there. Arm in arm with a human man, the lucky dog!

The woman had the look of a high-class warrior, and Bash immediately recognized her.

It was the female elf who had given Bash the tip about the Great Eagle's Perch.

“Ah, I know you...”

“You proposed to Lady Sonia! Good for you! I didn’t know the orcs had it in ‘em!”

“Uh, yeah...”

It was Azalea, of course. Bash still did not know her name. For some reason, she seemed very excited.

“Too bad she turned you down, though! I know you’re an Orc Hero and all, but really, Lady Sonia is just way out of your league.”

“So it seems. But there are still plenty of other female elves about.”

“Wait... What did you just say?”

Azalea’s expression darkened.

Bash tensed up by reflex, curling his hands into fists. But the next moment, Azalea’s expression cleared again, and she snorted with laughter.

“I get it... You really are an orc, aren’t ya?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Well, I don’t know about *your* people, but here in elf country, we hate men who chase after anything in a skirt! You’ll find that out the hard way if you try to offer the necklace to any other elf woman right after proposing to Lady Sonia, of all people!”

“So you’re saying that my chances of taking another elf to be my wife are... low?”

“The lowest!”

“Hmm.”

Bash growled, annoyed.

Had he known the shiny gold necklace was a one-time-use item, he might have rethought his purchase.

Still, it was just like war, wasn’t it? If you missed your chance, then that was it.

You could only know the real repercussions once the opportunity was already

gone.

“Then there is nothing to be done but to move on.”

“Aw, don’t look so sad. You’re a fine fellow! I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

“I hope so.”

Bash couldn’t help feeling sad, though.

He tried his luck with Sonia, knowing his chances of success were slim. But he hadn’t realized that doing so would ruin his chances with all other elf women.

Bash was levelheaded and stoic, to be sure. But he had feelings, too.

“Well, I gotta get going now. I’m having a nice dinner with my hubby to celebrate a successful battle!”

“Um...excuse us...”

Azalea began marching off, dragging her husband by the arm. The man had a weak sort of face and tottered along meekly behind his wife.

So this was her “hubby,” was it?

He looked to be the weakest specimen among all the human males that Bash had ever seen. He didn’t look like he had any special magical powers, either.

Based on everything Bash knew about what women wanted (which did not amount to much knowledge), he couldn’t imagine how this man ever had a shot at getting married.

“Wait. I want to ask that man there a question.”

Bash called the couple to a halt.

Azalea turned around slowly.

Her eyes were as fierce as a dragon’s. They seemed to say: *Lay one finger on my darling hubby, and I’ll show you what true pain is!*

“How did you manage to get this woman to marry you?”

“Huh?”

Azalea’s eyes flicked over to her hubby.

Now her eyes were filled with curiosity, as if she'd like to know, too.

The man hesitated, shuffled his feet, and coughed before answering.

"Um... Azalea saved my life during the war. I was captured by a succubus, and it wasn't looking too good. I was completely out of strength—and mentally almost gone, too. If it wasn't for Azalea... Well anyway, after the war, I came to the elf country to track her down... I wanted to thank her for saving my life, you know? And I found out she was looking for a husband. I thought, *My goodness, this is my chance!* Azalea was way out of my league, and I knew it was a stretch, but I just had to gather my courage and ask her..."

"...I see."

Bash was ashamed of himself.

For a moment there, he had suspected the man of casting some kind of spell or using some other underhanded method to win her affection.

But no. The man had simply taken a chance. Fortune favors the bold, after all.

The man may not have been much of a fighter, but he still went out there and faced the battle head-on. As a result, he emerged victorious.

Bash was no stranger to throwing himself into impossible battles. But this man was different. He saw a chance and fought for it, despite the odds.

The orcs did not shy away from fighting battles with unfavorable odds. The act of battle itself was what was sacred to them.

But even Bash knew it was foolish to throw away your one chance on a battle that was impossible to win.

Which philosophy was correct? Bash couldn't say.

All he knew was that General Baraben and the great war chief, Gandaguza, had done a similar thing and lost.

"Thank you, that's very helpful."

"Oh, uh, okay. Well, good luck out there."

The man bowed politely to Bash, before heading off arm in arm with Azalea.

Maybe it was Bash's imagination, but it looked like Azalea had an extra spring

in her step and was snuggling up closer to her hubby than before.

Bash watched them go, his heart aching with envy, as they walked away. He imagined he could see little cartoon hearts floating over the happy couple.

“Well, if it isn’t Bash! You’re still in town then, Boss?”

Now someone else was calling out to Bash.

He turned to see another human male–elf female pair.

But this time, it was the man with whom Bash was acquainted.

It was Breeze...otherwise known as the Strangler.

Ah, but he’d seen the elf woman before, too.

Now he remembered. She was one of the three women who’d been chatting up that man when Bash first came to town. The one who’d said: *“I’d fight a dragon for you, honey! I really, truly would! After all, I’d do anything for my man!”*

“...So it seems you’ve found yourself a match.”

“Yep! I sure did!”

Breeze grinned lecherously, his arm around his beloved’s waist as he squeezed her buttock possessively. The elf blushed but made no protest.

Bash got a faint whiff of a musky, animalistic smell. It was the same kind of smell that wafted from the Breeding Grounds back in the orc country. Apparently, the two of them had spent an enjoyable night together.

Filled with such envy he could barely stand it, Bash gulped.

Now he would never have a chance with an elf lady like this.

“What’s next for you, Boss?”

“Hmm. It looks like there’s nothing left for me here. I’ll have to move on, but I’ve got no leads for where to go next.”

“Oh yeah. The business that brought you to this town is over and done with, I guess.”

The orc lich had been defeated, and all the zombies were slain, after all.

On top of that, Bash had saved the elf archmage *and* put down the zombified orc general, to boot. You could say that the orc reputation was well and truly restored in elf country.

Yes, the Boss's mission here had been a smashing success, but now it was over.

...So concluded Breeze.

"...But if you're looking for your next objective, I heard something that might interest you."

"What?"

"Well, I don't know all the details myself, buuut..."

"Just say it."

"No, I mean, I really don't know the details. All I've heard is that in Dobanga Pit... That's in dwarf country, you know... Well, I've heard there's a similar kind of situation going on there right now."

A similar kind of situation...?

Bash's brain lit up with huge, flaming letters spelling out the obvious.

Interspecies marriage boom!

Here in elf country, both Azalea's wimpy hubby and Breeze, who was also down on his luck, had managed to land themselves hot elf brides.

Bash had as much chance as either of them, but he'd blown his shot. Still...he had been so close.

His mistake was gunning for Thunder Sonia, who was too far out of his league. Still, he'd gotten pretty close. He had a *shot*. Just like he had with Judith, the sexy knight from the human country.

If the dwarf nation was experiencing an interspecies marriage boom as well, then there was no reason for Bash to strike out a third time. The next time, he could very well meet...the one.

"Understood. I appreciate the information."

"No problem! Well, it will probably be a tough fight ahead, but good luck! I'll

be rooting for you!”

Then Breeze and his new bride walked off together.

“The dwarves, eh...?”

“Dobanga Pit is due north of here, Boss.”

“Let’s go, then.”

“Roger that! I’ll follow you anywhere, Boss!”

Bash’s search for a bride in the elf country had ended in failure.

But Bash decided to shake off the defeat and pin all his hopes on this new prospect, up north, in dwarf country.



That day, a shock wave rippled through the elf country.

A certain piece of information spread through the grapevine like wildfire.

If this was the human country, they would have rushed to print newspaper headlines about it.

The elves didn’t have a cheap, tabloid news culture, but this rumor concerned the great Lady Sonia, so everyone was immediately interested.

It was passed around by word of mouth, and soon it was all anyone was talking about.

“The reason Lady Sonia wasn’t defiled in the Shiwanashi Forest was because the orc in question was so captivated by her beauty! She awakened his heart to *true love!!!*”

The gossip soon spread far beyond the Shiwanashi Forest region, and within a few days had permeated the entirety of the elf nation.

EPILOGUE

Several days had passed since Bash's proposal.

"How shocking that Mr. Bash came to town to restore your reputation on top of his official duties, Lady Sonia! Who could have imagined that?"

The stain on Thunder Sonia's personal image was being cleansed at a breakneck pace.

The reason the orc hadn't defiled her that day? It wasn't because she had old-person smell at all.

No. It was because her very loveliness, her pheromones, had captured the orc's roguish heart!

Which had to mean that Thunder Sonia actually smelled great!

Ever since this new rumor started spreading, Sonia noticed young elves surreptitiously trying to sniff her and get a whiff of her fabled scent.

This made Thunder Sonia highly self-conscious, and she took to spritzing on extra perfume after every bath, not wanting people to know what she actually smelled like—whatever that was.

"Wiping out the zombie horde, restoring your good name, Lady Sonia... All the unpleasantness with the orc race that arose in the Shiwanashi Forest has been put to rest, and we have the orc to thank for it!"

"Hey! Don't write off what happened after my battle with Bash as 'unpleasantness with the orc race'! How dare you! ...But you're right. I'll have to write and thank the orcs officially for the help. We can't have them thinking the elves are ungracious!"

"So you're going to thank them officially for clearing up the rumors about your stench, too?"

"...Stop bringing that up!!!"

Thunder Sonia huffed, gazing indignantly out the window.

From her home on high, the whole of the Shiwanashi Forest could be seen spread out below.

It was a peaceful scene, with the red-roofed houses all in neat rows, each painted with fire-resistant paint.

It was the kind of peaceful day they had been yearning for during all those long years of war.

If Sonia had been eaten by zombies the other day, then all this could have been lost.

The thought made her realize just how much she really owed to Bash.

And how grateful she should probably be to the vials of perfume arranged on her vanity, as well. You know. Her *pheromones*.

“Well, whatever! I wasn’t sure about him at first, but I’ll say it now: He’s a fine figure of a man! The orc race is full of blockheads and dunderheads, a bunch of ham-fisted, self-serving unsophisticated oafs! But the one they call the Orc Hero is clearly a man of distinction, with far more refined tastes!”

“You’re certainly an acquired taste yourself, Lady Sonia...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“That said, don’t you find it somewhat...unwise that you rejected an actual marriage proposal from such a great man?”

“You fool! I had to turn him down! If I hadn’t, the rumors about my old-person smell might have gone on unabated!”

“Yes, but you could have gotten married.”

Aconitum had a point.

Bash’s proposal had wiped away Sonia’s smelly reputation. Unfortunately, it came with an unpredicted side effect. Now Sonia’s reputation was *too* squeaky-clean. Almost holy, in fact. Yes, she had become Untouchable.

“Thunder Sonia’s virginity is the source of all her powers as the goddess protector of the elf race! No man must lie with her, for to do so would be

tantamount to treason!"

That particular rumor had spread throughout elf country and into other countries beyond.

So now not only would no elf man *dare* to approach her, she was also flat out of luck in any of the other countries where the rumor had permeated. So much for her pinning her hopes on an unsuspecting foreign man, then.

Now that absolutely everyone assumed laying hands on Sonia's sacred flesh would spark war with the elves, her marriage prospects had dried up like a zombie in the baking sun.

And to make matters worse, now everyone knew she was a twelve-hundred-year-old virgin!

Even Aconitum had been mocking her, saying things like, *"For a woman with zero experience in the actual act of baby making, you sure are good at changing diapers."*

"Hmph! Hmph, I say! Who wants to marry a gross orc anyhow?! You know what the orcs do to their wives when they're pregnant? They strip them naked and show them off all around the village! You're saying you'd be fine if that ended up being me, are you?!"

"That doesn't sound very good for the unborn baby. Still, this part of the world stays fairly warm all year round. Probably wouldn't do the fetus any harm to have the bump exposed to the elements for a bit."

"I'm talking about the shame!!! The shame brought down on the entire elf race!!"

"Now, now, Lady Sonia, don't pass judgment. Many innocent elf women were subjected to worse during the war. Using the word *shame* in this context is basically victim blaming. You do realize that, don't you? You really want to discriminate against women who sacrificed so much for the good of the elf nation...?"

"H-hold on! I'm not trying to *discriminate* against elf women! I'm just saying, I'd be ashamed if it happened *to me*. I mean, the nude female form shouldn't be shown off to others, should it? No, it should be preserved for her husband's

eyes only...”

Thunder Sonia backpedaled frantically, shaking her head.

She was desperate to get married. She always thought she’d be fine with anyone, anyone at all, but it turned out that she had standards for her future, even after the marriage.

After all, she was the Elf Hero, Thunder Sonia, wasn’t she?

“I don’t know how it was during the war, but that sort of thing was outlawed in the treaty the orcs signed. So I’m sure that wouldn’t happen nowadays. And Mr. Bash seems like quite the gentleman. I’m certain he would have treated you with respect.”

“L-like heck he would have!”

Thunder Sonia crossed her arms, turned her face to the wall, and quietly seethed.

And yet there was a hint of a smirk on her lips.

She was thinking back on that fight against General Baraben.

She had sunk into the depths of despair, feeling completely outmatched, and was beginning to acknowledge defeat when that orc showed up. She could still see him, standing in front of her and guarding her with his body. She could see that broad, chiseled back. How masculine he was! How...protective!

“I won’t let them harm a single hair on your golden head.”

She hadn’t heard such a swoon-worthy line in a long time. And she’d *lived* a long time. Twelve hundred years, to be precise.

Sometimes it was nice to have someone else protecting her for a change. Someone who was willing to risk his own neck for hers. Someone brave.

The more she thought about it, the more handsome her mental image of Bash started to appear.

The mental image of Bash dropped Sonia a saucy wink, white tusks sparkling in the light.

“Well, if the orc comes back around and puts some real effort into wooing

me, I may begin to warm up to him...just a little!”

“Oh...?”

“Elves live a long time, you know. I guess I could reward him with one night between the sheets... Or no, if he really insists, I could give him a baby. Just one, though! Yeah, we could make sure everything’s done respectfully. No parading me naked and pregnant through the streets, just so we’re clear on that. And if I became the bride of an Orc Hero, that would really make relations between the elves and the orcs so much friendlier. Yeah... I could do it! For the good of the elves! I could take one for the team!”

Aconitum sighed as he listened to Sonia rambling on.

His great-aunt was always like this.

She would openly protest until she was blue in the face, all the while hoping the person would persist, just so she didn’t seem too eager.

She would make up excuse after excuse for why she couldn’t just come out and say yes from the beginning.

“S-so anyway, where is he now? Where’s Bash? I warn you, I’m not agreeing to marriage or anything like that! Just... I should probably thank him again for his service, right? As a representative of the elf nation! Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Mr. Bash has already left town. He left the day after you rejected him.”

“Wh-what? He’s gone?!”

“Did you really think he’d keep coming back to, um, ‘woo’ you?”

“Nnng!!!”

“You do realize he’s an Orc Hero, don’t you? Not some lovestruck puppy you can string along for your own amusement. Can you imagine how many stunning women he must have mated with during the war? Women much younger and fresher than you, *Granny...*”

“Gack!”

Actually, Bash had never mated with anyone. But Aconitum had no way of knowing that.

Still, anyone would come to the same conclusion. An Orc Hero must surely have availed himself of *all* the spoils of war that he had earned.

And no one would express disgust over it, either. Because, after all, the orcs had been hit with heavy sanctions after the war, and they were doing their best to uphold the terms of the peace treaty. People respected that.

The important thing was to move forward and be better to one another in the future.

Even so, Thunder Sonia's face was bright red.

It's not like she thought of herself as a great catch, especially compared to younger female elves. But to have someone look her right in the eye and say, "*Who'd want you, Grandma?*" ...Well, that stung! That hurt her feelings! That boiled her blood!

"I'm... I'm... I'm...!"

"Hmm?"

Thunder Sonia bellowed.

"I'm going on a journey!!!"

"Huh?"

"A journey! I won't stay in this country another minute! I'm going far away, where the rumors can't follow me! I'm going to find myself a man—or die trying!"

"...Hahhh..."

"You can't stop me! My mind's made up! I'm going! I am GOING!"

"..."

Aconitum raised one eyebrow sardonically as he gazed at the infuriated Thunder Sonia.

His great-aunt said the funniest things sometimes.

Half the things that came out of her mouth were ridiculous.

This was no doubt yet another one of her wild flights of fancy, the ones that

never got off the ground.

And yet... Aconitum grinned slyly.

"I won't stop you, Lady Sonia."

"Y-you won't?"

"Oh, no. You've given your life to the elves. Everyone's relied on you far too long. You deserve to live life on your own terms for once. But as long as you stay here, you won't be able to stop yourself from sticking your neck out for your people. So I think it's a great idea for you to get away for a bit and see the world. Take advantage of peacetime and spread your wings, you know?"

"..."

Thunder Sonia's lips flapped soundlessly.

She thought Aconitum would try to stop her. After all, she had so much to handle here in the elf country... Didn't she?

"Yeah, but... Well...okay, if you say so... But are you sure it would really be all right? Could you all get along fine, without me?"

"Of course. Leave everything to me. I, Aconitum...well, all the elves, really... will shoulder the responsibility and take care of our country ourselves!"

"Oh... Oh, okay, then..."

Great. Now it was far too late for her to say, *"Actually, I wasn't serious. I just wanted to see how you'd react! Yikes!"*

"...Okay, then. I'm going!"

"Have a nice trip!"

And so Thunder Sonia departed on a long journey.

A sightseeing tour around the whole world...in pursuit of the perfect husband.



At the same time, Bash was headed north.

Through thicket and bush, using his senses to orient himself northward.

Breeze had given him a hint, and that hint had formed his next objective.

He had to go north. In Dobanga Pit, in the dwarf country, there was a situation happening that was similar to the one he had just left in elf country.

Dwarf women weren't exactly a favorite of the orcs.

Bash, too, much preferred human or elven women.

Still, the last hint he'd received from a human male—that is to say General Houston—had led him to an absolutely exquisite elf.

No doubt he could expect something similar with the next toss of the dice.

"Okay, so you struck out this time, Boss, but shake it off and focus on what's coming up next! You can do it, Boss!"

"Right!"

Bash pressed on.

His fairy companion by his side. As always.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone, it's been a while. I'm Rifujin na Magonote.

First, I'd like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks to everyone who picked up a copy of *Orc Eroica*, Vol. 2.

Thank you all so much.

Now, I'd like to talk a little about what inspired the story of the second volume.

It was around halfway through the year 2018, as I recall.

At the time, there was a kind of craze going on among the underground light novel authors.

Burning down the elven forests.

Right, all the underground light novel authors were sneaking into the elf villages and setting fires. It was like some kind of competition. Then they'd hang around to smirk at the elves, who were devastated over the loss of their homes. They even posted about it on social media, bragging about what they'd done and describing how they burned down the forest. Putting up pics showing the final days of the elves they captured, like they were trophies or something. Pretty horrible, right?

Well, when I saw all this going on, I thought...

Man, I wanna burn down an elf forest, too... No, wait, I didn't think that. I thought, Man, I wanna rescue the elves who had their forests burned down and then reap the sexy rewards!

What got me thinking that way, you ask? Well, it all came about because of a movie I saw that came out that same year.

Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms.

The race of creatures in the movies aren't called elves by name, but they're this long-lived race that looks super youthful, so it's kind of the same thing. Anyway, their village gets burned down.

I don't want to spoil the plot or anything, but anyway, it's a good movie.

After seeing that movie, I felt really inspired. I was like, *In the next volume, I'm totally going to have an elf village burned to the ground... I mean... I'm definitely going to have the elves saved by a valiant hero! Who then has his way with—* You get the picture.

What I mean is: The elves are gonna be saved, right? But first, I have to get them in a situation where they're pretty much doomed, don't I? So the forest is gonna have to get burned. So we can save them in the end. You understand, right?

So I decided to torch the elf forest.

But then, something crazy happened!

The darn thing wouldn't burn!

In *Orc Eroica*, the elves are totally prepared against fire and make sure to paint all their buildings with fire-resistant paint. Right, I totally forgot! My elves are super flame-resistant!

When I really sat down and thought about it, it made no sense for the elves to have a weakness to something like fire, not after so many years spent fighting other races in battle. Also, it would be weird if only elves used the flame-resistant paint. If they were the only ones to use it in battle.

So I had the orcs, their enemy, use the flame-resistant paint on their armor as well. So now all the races in this world are resistant to fire.

Treasures, stratagems, and spoils! That's the fun part about writing fantasy, right?

So I had our Elf Heroine try to use fire magic against the highly flammable orc zombies, only to find that the orc zombies have taken preventive measures.

Then the Orc Hero appears to save the elf damsel in distress. Their eyes meet. Their bodies meet... Oh, no they don't. The Orc Hero gets rejected.

Well, as you can see, *Orc Eroica*, Vol. 2 pretty much wrote itself after that.

I feel pretty confident that the story will satisfy readers.

Shame I couldn't burn down the whole forest, though!

Oh dear, I've already taken up a few pages already. Well, now I'd like to talk for a little while about the video game *Ghost of Tsushima*.

Ghost of Tsushima is an action-adventure game for PlayStation 4 developed by Sucker Punch Productions.

Set during the Battle of Bun'ei, the protagonist, Jin Sakai, must fight the Mongols in Mongolian-occupied Tsushima.

Told by his lord to "Fight like a samurai, with glory," Jin tries to be a true samurai, yet he is but one person, and the Mongols are many. With a head-on attack proving unfeasible, Jin has no choice but to use underhanded, un-samurai-like tactics. The main crux of the story involves Jin's struggle to behave as a samurai should, while having to go to extreme lengths to save others—and, at the same time, somehow trying to make his lord proud.

The locations are stunning. The canopy of red foliage, the mountains, the fields of pampas grass, all the beauty of Japanese nature is represented.

Traveling through the scenery freely, defeating the Mongols, thinking about what it means to be a samurai, about what it means to fight for glory, all the while working hard to save Tsushima.

Anyway, there was an update released for *Ghost of Tsushima* in late October that added online multiplayer capability.

I thought I was going to be able to play through the main story with a bunch of other people, but to my surprise, a completely original expansion story was added, one that was distinct from the main story of the game.

"To the now-peaceful Tsushima come...*Mongols of darkness!* Their leader, Iyo, uses dark magic to summon the *oni* and *tengu*, steals power from the Japanese gods, and attempts to destroy Tsushima! Arise, ghosts! The hour is at hand!"

Anyway, it's the kind of story that really breaks away from the realism-soaked

Japan the game has presented until this point.

The content of the story is all fantasy, of course, but it's pretty fascinating.

Now, as for this kind of network game, what you'll notice is that there are very few newbie players, the kind who can hardly tell left from right. Makes sense, doesn't it? Almost everyone playing is a seasoned ghost who has already fought with Jin to save Tsushima. Together with these talented players, I teamed up to launch powerful attacks on the enemy, eventually battling our way to Iyo. Then, after traversing several obstacles along the way, we managed to stop Iyo's evil ambitions in their tracks.

The controls have also been improved, and now the weapons selection has been easily mapped to one of the four buttons, so it's not the hassle it was in the main game. It's become much more playable.

If I have one complaint, it's about the ending. You can't complete the game unless you have a full party of four to take on Iyo with.

It's still really satisfying, though, so if you haven't played *Ghost of Tsushima*, I encourage you to gather together in groups of four and give it a try.

Oh, this went on for longer than I realized...

To Asanagi, who drew such wonderful illustrations, to Editor K for putting up with me being distracted by *Mushoku Tensei* and making their job a lot harder, to everyone else who was involved in the publishing of this book, and to everyone who's always patiently waiting for the next update on the Let's Become a Novelist website, thank you very much this time around, too.

Rifujin na Magonote

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