



PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT



3

ORCEROICA

Conjecture Chronicles

"I've
still got
my pride,
you know."

Donzoi

One of Bash's old war buddies,
whose survival was left in question
after the war. He is currently an
orc slave, forced to fight in
Dobanga Pit.



"They've
always looked
down on me.
They call me
a half-blood
half-wit."



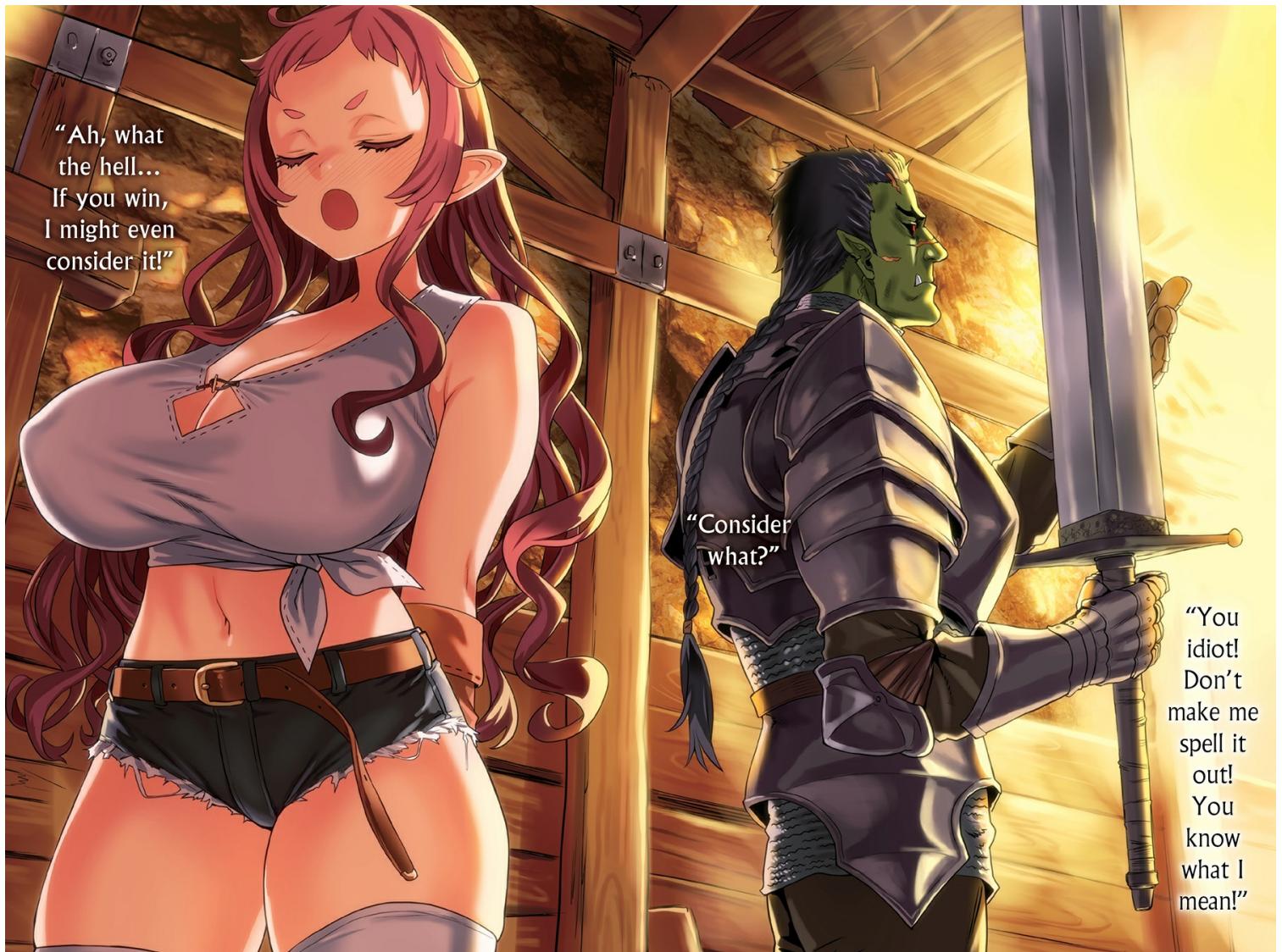
Primera

Primera
A dwarf weapon smith. She hopes
to enter the God of War Festival's
tournament to prove her skill in weapon
forging to her siblings and gain acceptance
as a half-dwarf with a human mother.

Characters

ORC EROICA





"Ah, what
the hell...
If you win,
I might even
consider it!"

"Consider
what?"

"You
idiot!
Don't
make me
spell it
out!
You
know
what I
mean!"

ORC EROICA
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ORC EROICA

CONJECTURE CHRONICLES

3

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Asanagi



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Orc Eroica 3

Rifujin na Magonote

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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)

ORC

Book Three

The Dobanga Pit Saga

Dwarf Country

EROICA

1

THE NONPROPOSAL

Dobanga Pit.

That was the name given to the cavernous chasm situated within Mount Rind, located north of the Shiwanashi Forest.

The pit was formed when the evil ogre warrior Gugugora and the dwarf prince Bongobongo engaged in combat. So ferocious was their battle that it caused the dormant volcano to erupt, opening up a gigantic pit.

The eruption killed Bongobongo, leaving the ogre victorious.

In the aftermath, the ogres claimed the pit as their own land, constructing the stronghold of Fort Rind there to use as their forward base.

The Coalition of Seven used the fort to gain a foothold and invade the territories of the Alliance of Four. It proved its use many times over as the war progressed.

But eventually, the fort fell.

It was taken by a single dwarf warrior.

Leading a dwarf battalion, he attacked the fort in an all-out assault. Taking on the ogre general in a man-to-man battle, he overthrew him and laid claim to the fort.

The fort and the area around it became the domain of the dwarves.

His name? Doradoradobanga. Yes, the very same Doradoradobanga who was henceforth known throughout the land as the Dwarf Battlelord Doradoradobanga.

The pit was given a new name, too, in honor of its liberator: Dobanga Pit.

Bash and Zell were traveling along the road that led to Dobanga Pit.

“I can see it up ahead already, Boss.”

White plumes of smoke were chugging out of Mount Rind in various places, as the mountain loomed in front of them.

It was as if the entire mountain were bubbling over.

This was no natural phenomenon. The mountain was home to a dwarf city, you see.

Most dwarves are weaponsmiths by trade, and each household has their own personal forge. The smoke billowing from the mountain came from these forges.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been back. I used to get lost all the time in there.”

The city was built like an anthill.

The dwarves who resided there had excavated deep into the mountain, leaving it riddled with tunnels.

With each family carving out their own household and neighborhood as it suited them, the city’s layout was haphazard and mazelike, making it even harder to invade. The humans and other races feared for its structural integrity, half convinced that the walls would come crashing down around them. But the dwarves were masters when it came to construction. Their home was far safer than any human hut dwelling above ground.

Bash, too, had participated in many a battle at Dobanga Pit.

But his memories primarily involved getting lost in its tunnels.

“Surely not, Boss! Surely you never lost your way...”

Zell remembered no such thing.

Bash had always returned to camp promptly, after all.

“I certainly did. I got lost here all the time.”

Once, he went in and he couldn’t find his way back out for three days. He could make no contact with the outside world. There were random fights breaking out everywhere. His comrades became scattered, and it was hard to keep track of who was still alive. All Bash could do was keep on fighting.

It was a regrettable memory.

“Interesting. You always came back just fine and dandy, so I figured you had the whole place mapped out in your head!”

“That would have been most unfeasible.”

Of course Bash did not have the entire network of tunnels mapped out in his head.

He would inevitably lose his bearings and get lost. He would start to grow hungry. Then, frustrated by the situation, Bash would use brute force to smash his way through the walls to reach the outside, and freedom.

Since Dobanga Pit was located inside a mountain, all you needed to do was keep burrowing upward at an angle and you’d be free sooner or later.

Unfortunately, all of Bash’s burrowing caused several serious cave-ins.

It was for that reason that the dwarves gave him the nickname of Destroyer.

“Well, the dwarf city has undergone reconstruction lately, and they’ve put in easy-to-follow roads!”

“Oh, have they?”

“I saw it myself the last time I came. Before, it was like a crazy anthill, but now it’s got actual residential streets and little towns! I was astonished! The towns are especially interesting! I saw a whole row of ten different taverns standing shoulder to shoulder! And they were all connected! The dwarves went into the tavern on one end and came out of the far end of the row totally hammered! Now that’s what I call a pub crawl!”

“That sounds fun indeed. I hope we can find some decent booze.”

Dwarves may be hard-core drinkers, but orcs like their liquor, too.

Orcs didn’t have a single creative bone in their bodies, so they were notorious for swiping everything they needed from other races. One thing they did make for themselves, though, was liquor. It was swill compared to the alcohol brewed by the dwarves, but the orcs drank the stuff down like water.

Bash, of course, was an orc among orcs. Naturally he had a taste for the

sauce, too.

Each night he was to be found frequenting the tavern, despite his terror of being questioned by the young'uns regarding his amorous past, or lack thereof.

Bash was very much excited for the opportunity to down a tankard or two of dwarf ale.

"Let's hope you'll be able to find a bride, too, eh?"

"...Hmm."

But Bash's crotch showed no excitement.

"Excuse me, Boss, but you don't seem too perky. What's up?"

"Hmm. Is it that obvious?"

"Well, duh, of course! I know you better than anyone, Boss. I'm the best in the world at telling when you're feeling off-color! And just so we're clear, I don't have any fancy fairy ability that lets me read minds or anything like that! Nope, it's all pure intuition! I can interpret your expressions at a glance! I can read your soul like a book! So tell me, what's eating you, Boss? You better fess up! Even if it's something minor, you'll still feel a whole lot better if you unload on someone else!"

"Hmm, well, to be honest with you..."

But just as Bash was about to speak his soul aloud...

"Now listen here, you!"

"Get off! Get your hands off me!"

The sound of some sort of altercation came from just ahead.

As they both looked up, wondering what all the fuss was about, they could see a single bridge ahead, and right in the middle of it stood a pair of dwarves and an elf, having a furious argument.

"Yikes, sounds like trouble ahead, Boss..."

"It's no concern of ours."

Elves and dwarves were always at each other's throats.

Dwarves chopped down the forests and burned them, but elves harbored a deep love for the forest, so the two races were ever in diametric opposition. Therefore, they were always squabbling about something.

“Hmm? On second glance, it doesn’t seem like they’re actually arguing against each other, though, does it?”

As they drew nearer, the situation did indeed seem to be quite strange.

Instead of the elves and dwarves arguing with one another, it was more like the dwarves were fighting among themselves, with the elf looking on in bewilderment.

“Like I keep telling you! Your attempts to get ahead by relying on a third party are why you’ll never amount to anything!”

“Then what am I supposed to do?! Go and fight all by myself using my own handmade sword?! Weren’t *you* the one who hired a decorated warrior? Where do you get off lecturing me?!”

“Don’t twist my words!”

As Bash and Zell drew even closer, the situation became clear.

Two dwarf women were having a furious argument. One of them had a grip on the other’s arm and seemed to be trying to drag her back in the direction of dwarf country.

Meanwhile, the other dwarf was struggling in the opposite direction, like a dog on a leash.

“What I’m telling you here is that your forging skills need a lot more polishing!”

“They’re polished enough! I can make better weapons and armor than you lot! I’m sure of it!

“You’re a thousand finished swords away from making such a claim!”

“No need for that! The God of War Festival is where I’ll prove it!”

“Oh, for crying out loud! You stubborn brat! I keep telling you, you haven’t got a chance in hell at your current level!”

"No, you're wrong! As long as you stay out of my way, Big Sis, then I'll win the tournament for sure and rub it in your face!"

The girl who was clamped on to her big sister's arm was muscular but very short, with a nose like a squishy rubber ball, and she was menacing the other one with a truculent expression on her face.

Her face was wide. Her forehead was wide, too. She had a huge mouth, and huge hands. She looked exactly like your stereotypical dwarf woman, the type you would expect to find sitting cross-legged on a chair, laughing in a crude and unrefined manner.

"..."

The sight filled Bash with disappointment.

Dwarf women... I was right after all...

This was the reason why the only thing about dwarf country Bash had high hopes for was the alcohol.

The sight of the dwarf woman only confirmed his doubts.

Dwarf women simply didn't fit Bash's aesthetic preferences.

Of course, Bash didn't need a refined lady.

But just looking at the state of her... She evoked the image of some horrible cackling golem.

There wasn't an orc alive who could get hard as stone for a woman who seemed carved from stone herself.

Now if it was a simple matter of casting off his virginity, then Bash would accept anyone.

The average appearance of dwarf women wasn't to his tastes, sure, but compared to lizardwomen or killer bees, well...let's just say, there were worse options in the world.

But Bash was a manly, virile orc.

He wanted to experience his first time with a woman he found attractive, at the very least.

"Huh? An *orc*...?"

The dwarf woman looked up just then, having spotted Bash. Perhaps she'd sensed him watching her.

She tilted her face up toward his, scowling openly.

"I'm a traveler."

Bash spoke dispassionately.

It was always tough guessing the age of a dwarf, but this dwarven girl didn't seem too old.

In addition to her fierce scowl, she seemed rather short-tempered, and didn't appear all that sharp, either. Clearly, she had never known the battlefield. In this new, postwar age, all those without a battle past had to be youngsters by default.

But from the large circumference of her arms, it was clear that she had been doing *some* sort of physical labor.

A youngster with aspirations for the future, then?

"A rogue orc, huh?"

"I'm no rogue. My name is Bash. I'm on a quest in pursuit of something. I wish to enter the country of the dwarves."

"In pursuit of something, eh?"

The dwarf scrutinized Bash's face.

Then all of a sudden, she laughed, jerking her chin toward the road.

"...You're free to pass, then."

"Wait, what?!" the elf soldier yelped.

She was beautiful.

She had a slender body with a narrow waist, and her bottom was plump and curvaceous. Feminine beauty oozed from every pore.

She wore her golden hair in braids, from which the scent of flowers wafted. So she was married, then. The sight of the white flowers woven into her hair

filled Bash with quiet dismay.

The elf woman looked at Bash and took three steps backward.

Apparently, this elf had some experience with orcs in wartime. Her features stiffened as she took in the sight of Bash.

Her face was beautiful, and her quivering lips made Bash feel weak in the knees. If only he could take her in his arms. How sweet she would smell. How soft her flesh would be in his hands.

“He’s an orc, you know?! Are you serious? You’re just going to let him pass?!”

“Who cares...? Anyway, it’s not up to me, is it? And we dwarves aren’t like you elves. We don’t police our borders like tyrants. We don’t care who enters, as long as they’re not some ruffian who’s probably up on a wanted poster somewhere. Hey, orc. Are you up on a wanted poster somewhere? You here to cause trouble in dwarf country?”

Bash shook his head solemnly.

“I am not.”

“All right, then. Enjoy the country.”

“Hold on... Listen here... Don’t you have any idea what kind of people these orcs are...?”

The elf shuddered, but the dwarf woman merely laughed.

“Oh, believe me, I know. But orcs haven’t got the teensiest bit of interest in dwarf women. I mean, he’s been staring at *you* this whole time, hasn’t he? Barely even gave me a second glance.”

“Ack!”

The elf soldier quickly wrapped her arms protectively around herself and took another step backward.

Slowly, Bash tore his eyes away from her.

This elf was radiant, to be sure. How could Bash help himself from looking at her?

By comparison, the dwarf woman was a lump of misshapen rock.

When he looked at her, he felt nothing at all. If he took her to bed, it would feel more like a wrestling match.

If he had met her on the battlefield in the past, it might have been quite fun to square off against her. But he wouldn't have felt like taking her home afterward.

"My boss is a proud orc, and I'll have you know that he actually just *left* elf country, even though it was practically bursting with gorgeous elves, his personal preference. Now he wishes to enter dwarf country. He is in search of something most vital. Something far more noble and important than lady hunting in the country of the elves."

"...Hmm, well."

Now it hardly bears repeating, but Bash's objective actually *was* lady hunting.

He wanted to find himself a bride and finally lose his virginity to her. That was the entire point of his quest.

To be brutally honest, he would have loved to marry an elf.

However, he had already been to the Shiwanashi Forest, the only place where elves made their home. Once it became clear that he would find no success there, he had instead come here, to dwarf country.

He had heard that here in Dobanga Pit, the same type of situation was underway, just like what had been going on in elf country.

The elf country was undergoing a huge interspecies marriage boom. If the same was true in dwarf country, then Bash thought he might have a chance here.

Relying heavily on that sole nugget of information, Bash had come. But upon actually laying eyes on one of the dwarf women, he had to admit to himself that there was little to attract him here.

That said, Bash was a man who had made it through the long war.

During that seemingly endless war, he had fought against the dwarves, too, of course.

From this experience, he knew that there were some beauties to be found

among the dwarves, some who even managed to turn orc heads.

There weren't as many beauties to be found as there were among humans and elves, of course, but they weren't all *that* rare. Surely Bash would be able to find a dwarf woman who was to his liking.

He wasn't confident in his chances of success...but it wasn't *impossible*.

So he continued ahead, tempering his expectations all the while. In search of that very slim chance.

"Go ahead and pass, would ya? We're in the middle of something here."

"I will, then."

And with that, Bash made to pass the women by.

As he did, he clocked the face of the other woman, the one who was being held back.

Well, well...

She was a beauty, without question.

She had the characteristic flame-red dwarven hair, and her eyebrows were very thick, but her face... It bore a slight resemblance to the other woman's face, but there were some key differences.

Her nose was delicately shaped, and her eyes were a limpid blue. You couldn't exactly call her slim, but she had curves in all the right places—she went out, in, and then out again at the bust, waist, and hips—just like human women did.

For a dwarf woman, she was fairly tall, and very well-stacked.

Yes, she fit the description of a beautiful woman, and for Bash, she was a home run.

Who could have imagined such a beauty could be found among the dwarves?!

Bash ground to a halt.

He had no idea what kind of mating customs were in fashion in dwarf country. To be honest, he hadn't been expecting much.

But if a beauty of this caliber dwelled here... Well...that changed things.

Bash began to think. He knew it was best to act quickly.

Back when he was in other countries...

...Bash searched his memory, thinking about the methodology involved in wooing women.

In human country, Bash had learned to clean up his body, act mysterious, and show manliness.

In elf country, he had learned to procure a shiny gold necklace and wear elven clothes when he went proposing to women.

He had failed both times, but surely that wasn't because the methods were wrong.

How would things go in dwarf country? How best could he approach the women here...?

Damn. I should have asked Zell before we got here...

But Bash had never dreamed that he would meet such a beauty at the very gates of dwarf country. So it had not occurred to him to come prepared.

As I recall, skimping on the information gathering never did lead to anything good. It was the same way when my war buddy, Donzoi, fell during the war. It happened here at Dobanga Pit, when we lacked intel and got separated. He never returned... What's more, during the battle of the Zalico Plains...

Bash was fretting, his brows furrowed, when...

"Hey, you! You there! Are you a warrior? You look like you could be a famous warrior!"

The girl was yelling.

She seemed to be getting excited as she stared at Bash.

"I am...but what of it?"

Bash answered her question plainly, and the girl's face lit up.

Then she said it.

She spoke the fateful words. The words Bash had never expected to hear but

had always longed to be on the receiving end of... In her sweet and melodic voice...

Yes, she said...

"Be my warrior, please!"

It was a *proposal*!



2

A YOUNG GIRL'S HUMILIATION

Dobanga Pit had changed a lot since the last time Bash had seen it.

The first thing that stood out was the entrance.

A huge tunnel had been carved out, a yawning mouth.

It was as tall as a three-story castle, and it was wide enough for three horse carts to pass by at the same time.

The tunnel hole gaped like a wide-open maw, going back deep into the heart of the pit.

It was the dwarven interpretation of a Main Street, one might say.

“Zell was right. The dwarves really have opened up.”

Dwarves were an insular people.

At least that was the impression of them held by the other races.

They favored dark caves and loved gold. They spent each day in their smithing workshops, tinkering away at one thing or another. They occasionally emerged, but it was only to drink, fight, and drink some more. Unlike the elves, the dwarves weren’t an exclusionary race, but they were blunt and stubborn. They never considered the feelings of others. Nor did they ever bother to explain themselves. As long as no one bothered them, they cared not. They hardly seemed the type to construct a large entrance into their dwarven city or go out of their way to welcome outsiders.

That was the kind of people they were.

“What do you mean, ‘opened up’?”

It was the girl who responded, the one who had been forcefully detained on the bridge just before.

She had escorted Bash here, as a means of escaping the other dwarf woman, the one who was trying to hold her back.

“This tunnel.”

“What about it?”

“Hmm, it’s hard to explain...”

As Bash tried to think of the right words, the fairy on his arm started babbling, as if to prevent him from saying anything further.

“Well now, you see, this tunnel, it’s like a big old welcome mat that’s been rolled out, isn’t it? The old dwarf town, now, you never knew how to find your way in! But look at this nice big entrance here! It’s like we’re being invited in as VIP guests! It would be rude not to just stroll on in there, now, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, right... Well, it’s not like the dwarves built it. It’s like this because of what that crazy demon did, during the last big battle right before the war ended.”

“Ah yes, I have heard the tale! The Dobanga Pit Demon Cannon!”

It had happened while Bash and the other orcs were defending the Shiwanashi Forest.

Another battle had ensued right here, at Dobanga Pit.

The demon general had brought along a combined force of ogres and harpies, and had attacked Dobanga Pit in an attempt to recapture it.

Down on manpower, supplies almost depleted, the demons fought on, their hopes of winning barely existent, when...

It was a crazy attack, by anyone’s standards.

But the demon general had a secret weapon.

A weapon dubbed the “Demon Cannon.”

It was supposed to be brought out during the final battle of the Remium Plateau, but upon the death of the Demon Lord Geddigs, this plan was put on ice, and it was decided that the cannon would be utilized at Dobanga Pit instead.

The Demon Cannon was a unique ultimate weapon.

It fired not cannonballs, but human souls. There was an altar of sorts mounted on the back of the weapon. Living sacrifices were made upon it, and with each soul that was harvested, the cannon's power grew. Once the cannon was fully charged with souls, the sheer destructive power of its discharge was so immense that it most definitely deserved the title of "ultimate weapon." It was powerful enough to bore a tunnel right through the tallest mountain.

The strategy was to point the cannon right at the dwarf army and shoot. If the plan had succeeded, then it is likely that Dobanga Pit would not be under dwarf jurisdiction today.

If the war had gone on just a little longer, then perhaps Bash would have been able to lose his virginity by now. Hmm, maybe not.

In actuality, however, the dwarves had already received information regarding the demons' plan to use the cannon against them. The dwarf army promptly abandoned their stronghold and fell back.

After evading annihilation by the Demon Cannon, the dwarves rallied and went on the offense, taking down the demon general.

To fall back was a shrewd decision, some said, if not very undwarflike.

Dwarves never backed down from a fight. They preferred to meet their challenges head-on, relying on their bulky armor and heavy weapons.

For them, withdrawing from battle was sure proof of cowardice.

However, at the same time, the dwarves were engineers.

From the leaked information, they were able to glean what kind of technology had been used to build the Demon Cannon, as well as how it worked and how much power it had. By running simulations, it soon became apparent that even dwarven armor would not be able to defend against its might.

The dwarves were not foolish enough to ignore scientific fact.

Ultimately, the dwarves won the battle, and returned to gaze wordlessly into the huge hole running sideways through the middle of Dobanga Pit.

Even though the dwarves had riddled the mountain with holes, it did not collapse.

They were proud of their home and how it had held strong. To commemorate this, they reinforced the hole left by the Demon Cannon and developed it, building a well-ordered city within.

Living in a city built around one long main strip wasn't really how the dwarves would have preferred to do things, but the other races found the new development most agreeable.

"Come on, this way. Follow me."

As they set forth along the main strip, they were surrounded by hustle and bustle.

People of many different races wandered here and there as the clanging of dwarven hammers on steel filled the air.

Most of the people belonged to either the dwarf or beastkin race.

There were few humans, and even fewer elves.

But that wasn't all there was to note. There were also lizardmen and killer bees, and others belonging to the Coalition of Seven.

"Hmm."

Bash caught sight of one man who was easily twice as tall as any other.

He had reddish-brown skin and stood a colossal ten feet tall or more. He also had rocklike muscles, proportionate to his height, and a hammer-like jaw.

"So there are ogres here, too."

Bash had seen this one before.

He had fought with this warrior, side by side, during the final battle upon the Remium Plateau.

His name was Golgol.

But he was also known as the Iron Titan.

"Ah yeah, because the God of War Festival is coming up soon. And it's going to be bigger than ever this year. The artisans are recruiting fearless fighters from every country for the Armament Tournament."

“I see.”

Bash did not know of the God of War Festival or its Armament Tournament. But he had prior experience with festivals.

While the Demon Lord Geddigs was still alive and well, there had been a festival held every year.

For the Orc Festival, the tribal chiefs got everyone together and threw a feast. Then, while everyone was enjoying the festivities, representative warriors from each tribe would be nominated, and then they would fight bare-knuckle to see who was the strongest.

Many from other races also came to attend.

They, however, did not participate in the fistfights, but... Well, no doubt this Armament Tournament would be much the same sort of thing.

“This is my place.”

The girl turned a corner and went down a side street.

The way ahead was dimly lit and seemed extremely complex. The path twisted and turned, with slopes and stairwells branching off in different directions. It was the old style of dwarven construction that Bash was familiar with.

As they walked farther in, the sound of the hustle and bustle behind grew dimmer and dimmer.

It was replaced by the clanging of iron, which filled the air.

Bash paid the din little heed. His heart danced in his chest as he gazed at the girl who walked ahead of him, his eyes fixed on the top of her head.

She was a true beauty, a rarity among dwarves.

Even a man of Bash’s tastes could appreciate her beauty.

In truth, he hadn’t expected much when Breeze told him to go forth to dwarf country.

This exceeded his wildest expectations.

“Be my warrior.”

And to find himself on the receiving end of a proposal... Never had he even dreamed of such a possibility.

That human knew what was up, all right.

His nickname, the Strangler, was no mere affectation, it seemed. Bash was ashamed of himself for not having had more faith.

(Zell. Coming here was the right call, after all.)

(You're right, Boss! Who'da guessed that we'd find one so quickly? Much less that she'd come on to us! I mean, of course, I knew that you would find one straight away, but to have one practically leap into our arms... It was...a bit anticlimactic, don't you think?) (It always feels like that a little when you win the battle.) (At any rate, this means that our journey has come to its end, doesn't it...? I must confess, I was looking forward to traveling longer with you, Boss...) (The feeling's mutual.)

Bash and Zell followed the girl as they murmured together in hushed voices.

"This is me."

She went through a door located at the end of the passage.

It was a small door, dwarf-size. Bash had to crouch down to get through.

"It's a bit of a tight squeeze, but, well, please make yourself at home."

There was a small, yet fully equipped, blacksmithing forge.

A hammer, a slack tub, an anvil...

The flame was out just then, but all the tools showed visible signs of heavy use.

When Bash looked closer, he could see that her hands and fingers were covered in calluses, and that her nails were stained black.

This was *her* forge. She was a blacksmith.

Humans might look at the level of grime on the girl and call it a mark against her.

But of course, Bash had no such qualms.

"Whew... I packed all this because I had anticipated a long journey, but I suppose I shouldn't have bothered, huh?"

The girl unshouldered her huge pack, took off her overcoat, and cast both aside.

Underneath, she was clad in leather, shoulders almost completely exposed, in traditional dwarven style.

Resistant against fire, dwarves spent all day at their forges, so they never wore clothes that had any sleeves.

Bash's eyes were assaulted by the shocking sight of her white shoulders.

Like any good blacksmith worth their salt, her skin was streaked with soot, and she had many burn scars. But to Bash, her skin was radiant and beautiful.

"...!"

Come to think of it, the last time he'd seen a woman's bare skin was back in human country, when he'd encountered Judith as she was disrobing.

But unlike how it had been with Judith, *this* woman had taken her clothes off willingly.

It could only mean one thing, couldn't it?

"Waaah!"

Bash grabbed the girl by her shoulders.

If she truly meant to go through with it, then Bash certainly wasn't about to hold back.

She was muscular, but still tender, and her skin was smooth. Bash's voltage was cranked up to the max.

Farewell to the menacing threat of impending wizardhood.

A mixture of excitement and anticipation had whipped Bash into a sudden frenzy.

"Yeek! Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

But the girl looked disturbed.

Unable to stop himself, Bash's hands pawed at her clothing.

"Huh? H-hey! What?! Get your hands off my clothes! Cut it out!"

The girl grabbed hold of Bash's hands.

She was truly strong.

To Bash, of course, she still seemed weak. But she was fervent enough for him to realize she was resisting him.

"Hmm? Is this unwelcome?"

"Unwelcome...?! What are you talking about?! *Of course* it's unwelcome!"

Oh, perhaps this was a no-go after all.

But Bash was already almost beyond the point of no return.

He did not wish to withdraw. In war, there were times you had to push forward, even if victory seemed remote. Was this not one of those times? After all, the girl had already proposed to Bash. And Bash had accepted.

The next logical step was copulation.

It was time to cast aside the heavy burden he had been carrying all these years.

"But you said you wanted me to be your warrior. And I have accepted. Correct?"

"What...?"

The girl looked stunned for a moment.

But then realization dawned as she took in the sight of the orc looming over her, panting and snorting with excitement.

"Ack, y-you mean *that*, do you? So that was your plan all along, was it...?"

"...It was."

Yes, that was Bash's intention.

He did not hesitate when responding to her question.

After all, that was why he had set out on his quest.

“Ha-ha, I really am an idiot...”

Large tears began to spill from her eyes.

“And here I was, thinking orcs didn’t have any interest in dwarf women...”

“You’re the exception.”

“Of course... I’m only half-dwarf, after all...”

She turned away from Bash’s face and squeezed her eyes shut.

“All right, then. Do as you please... But in exchange, you must keep your promise, and fight for me as my warrior...”

The tears continued to slide down her cheeks, falling onto the floor.

“...”

She had told him to have his way with her. You could say that he had consent.

But she was turning away from him, looking as though she did not want this at all, and furthermore, she was crying.

Orcs almost never shed tears, but they could still understand the tears shed by others.

Perhaps she was not okay with this after all.

Unable to discern the situation on his own, Bash looked to Zell for help.

“...”

Zell hesitated for a few seconds, before lifting their arms up high over their head and crossing them.

A big *X*, meaning *no*.

Ah, I thought as much...

Bash stepped back and took his hands off the girl.

“I apologize. I seem to have misunderstood.”

“...Huh?”

Finding herself released all of a sudden, she looked up at Bash with confusion in her eyes.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"The Orc King has forbidden nonconsensual mating. I mistakenly believed I had consent and lost my head just now. Please forgive me."

"Um, it's okay... I mean, if you understand consent and you're willing to apologize, then I can forgive you, I guess... Wow, so even orcs can stop themselves when they're with a woman, huh...? Or is it because I'm half-dwarf...?"

But Bash still had his quest.

The girl in front of him right now was gorgeous.

And sometimes warriors had to shoot their shot, even when the chances of victory seemed slim.

"Let me ask you once more, just to be sure. Would you have my babies?"

It was the standard orc proposal.

But of course, the girl's face went crimson and she shouted back at him.

"No!!! I will not!!!"

"I see."

Despite being rejected, Bash didn't mind very much.

It was the answer he expected after all.

He had struck out in human country and in elf country, too, his proposals failing despite all the prep work he had done.

So it was no surprise that this completely unplanned proposal of his had failed as well.

His initial impression, that she had proposed to *him*, also seemed to have been nothing but a misunderstanding.

"Then I bid you farewell."

But this was dwarf country.

And in dwarf country, there was one very big difference—something that set the dwarves apart from the humans and the elves.

In this country, polygamy was the norm. Bash could try his luck with as many ladies as he liked, without damaging his chances with the rest of them, as it had been in elf country.

All he had to do was go out and find another woman.

Although it *was* difficult to get all that excited over the prospect of a dwarf woman...

But recall what Breeze said. He had told Bash that he was bound to find success here.

“H-hang on!”

Bash stopped.

He didn’t dare cling to hope. Bash may not have been particularly smart, but he was a gifted warrior, that much was true. And gifted warriors did not step twice in the same wheel rut.

“Let me ask *you* once more then, just in case. Will you please be my warrior?!”



Bash's face showed inner conflict.

A warrior and a husband, they were two different things. Bash understood that much.

But what did she actually mean by *warrior*...?

"What does it mean...to be your warrior, though?"

It was Zell who asked this.

The fairy took the words right out of Bash's mouth. Zell had spent long years honing their fairy intuition, so that they could accurately assess all situations.

"Oh, so I have to explain everything starting there, do I...?"

The girl nodded as if she had just understood something important. Then she got to her feet, realized Bash was still staring at her, spotted her overcoat, and scooped it up to cover herself.

"All right, I'll start from the beginning, then."

And so, she began to explain.



In Dobanga Pit, dwarf country, the God of War Festival was held each year. The festival was intended to celebrate the honor of warriors and to show appreciation toward the weapons and armor that were the tools of war. In essence, it differed little from most celebrations of the military arts.

The festival took the form of a tournament.

The participants fought man-to-man in repeated bouts, with the one who remained standing at the end crowned the victor.

What was noteworthy about this tournament, however, was how the theme of appreciating the tools of war was at the forefront.

All warriors would carry weapons and fight while decked out in armor.

Each warrior's supplies would be crafted by a single artisan.

If the warrior was killed, they would lose the bout by default, of course. But the fight could also be lost if the armor or weapons wielded by a specific

warrior broke at any point during battle.

When the festival was initially held, the dwarves would fight by themselves, clad in the armor they had crafted. But as the war progressed, the dwarves began to feel increasingly sure that it was better for the crafting to be left to the artisans, and for the fighting to be left to those who were more suited to it.

Thus, at some point, it became the norm for tournaments to feature two-person teams.

Some dwarves continued to pull double duty as both artisan and fighter, of course, opting to compete alone.

The Dwarf Battlelord, Doradoradobanga, was one such man.

He always competed alone. After winning ten tournaments in succession, he was inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Now, however, it was one warrior for one artisan.

The artisan would craft indestructible armor and weaponry, and the warrior would win the bout.

It had turned into a spectacle to showcase the artisans' skill and the warriors' battle prowess.

To win the tournament...there was no higher accolade available to dwarf artisans.

Of course, winning the tournament would be enough for the artisan in question to silence any critics they had.

“So I was thinking of entering... The only problem is *them...*”

“Them?”

“My siblings. They’ve been going around sabotaging me, warning every soldier in the land not to fight for me.”

“...Why would they do such a thing?”

“They’re afraid of me beating them.”

The girl spread her arms wide as she spoke.

Her breasts, large in proportion to the rest of her body, quivered, and Bash's heart quivered, too.

Giving her up as a lost cause had sparked a great ache within him.

"They've always looked down on me. They call me a half-blood half-wit."

"A half-blood half-wit? You?"

"Yeah. As you can see, my mother was a human. So I'm half-human, half-dwarf."

Bash could see the truth of this very well. He took another hungry glance at the girl's form.

True, she was far too beautiful to be fully dwarf. And her form was too slender to truly belong to that stocky race. Her hair, though. Its color was classic dwarf. Interesting. If she was the product of a human and dwarf pairing, it made sense that she was more to Bash's liking.

"You know what they're always telling me? They say that a child born of a dwarf and a human can never be a great blacksmith."

"Is that so?"

Bash's question was genuine.

The majority of orcs grow up never even knowing their own mothers.

The so-called colored orcs, at least, were said to be born of women with strong magical powers.

Since many colored orcs tended to possess greater abilities than average, green-skinned orcs, it was said that the maternal lineage was of some importance. But on the other hand, Bash had never heard anyone suggest that an orc who grew to be ineffective as a warrior must have come from a weak mother.

"Of course it's not so! Don't you see what they're doing?! They're mocking both me and my mother!"

The girl slammed her fist down upon the table.

The table shook, its rickety legs trembling, the items on it rattling.

But Bash was beginning to understand.

What was going on here was that this young girl wanted revenge for being disrespected.

In orc society, the only way to handle being insulted was to either roar back a retort or to punch the offender.

The orc who could not do this was no orc at all. Just a pathetic coward.

“In that case, you must prove them wrong.”

“Right, right, that’s what I was thinking! That’s why I tried to enter the God of War tournament! If I could have won, after the way they mocked me... No, even better, if I could have just managed to defeat the warrior *they* clad for the tournament! Then that would really have paid them back and showed them who’s the best! If they lost against me, it’d really show them up in front of everyone! ...But now I can’t even enter, just because of how they conspired to block me from the tournament!”

Tears bubbled up in the girl’s eyes. Clearly, her family had deeply humiliated her.

“Then you should enter and fight by yourself.”

“Ha! With these puny arms?”

The girl held up one arm and curled her hand into a fist.

Her arm was fairly meaty compared to a human’s but appeared like a skinny twig compared to a standard dwarf arm.

“I’ve got too much of my mom’s blood in me when it comes to my face and my build. I haven’t got what it takes to cut it as a fighter.”

“I see.”

“But when it comes to smithing, I *know* I’ve put in the training, and I’ve got the talent. So my plan was to look for a warrior outside of the country. My siblings have some pull in this land, but it doesn’t extend to foreign countries. Only, my sister wouldn’t even let me do that. She chased me to the border and detained me...saying she’d never let me go abroad...and, well, that’s when you came along.”

"I see."

The girl stared at Bash, intensely.

"I need you to lend me your strength. I'll prove to them all that I'm not just a half-blood half-wit. I'll teach them that my mother's blood is not to be mocked!"

Bash understood.

What the girl wanted was revenge.

She wanted to prove herself as a talented blacksmith. To that end, she was searching for a warrior who would not be influenced by her siblings and their scheming.

In that case, was Bash not the perfect candidate?

However, Bash had no intention of accepting her proposal.

He may have agreed if there was a chance of sleeping with her, but it appeared that would end up being nonconsensual sex, which was strictly off the table.

In that case, Bash's answer was immediate.

"I'm sorry, but I won't be helping you. I am in search of something myself."

Bash had not come here on a sightseeing tour.

If he had been here on a simple journey, without a burning objective, he might have been willing to help her out. But he was not. He had something he wanted, and limited time in which to acquire it.

Ah, but it wasn't so much something he wanted, as something he wanted to get rid of... At any rate, he had already been rejected by this woman, so he needed to make haste and find the next.

If she had not yet rejected his advances, then he may have helped her, to curry favor with the girl and increase the chances of his proposal being accepted. But it was too late for all of that now.

"I... I see. Well...that makes sense, I guess..."

The girl was unable to hide her disappointment.

But it could not be helped. Bash did not have the luxury of time.

“Excuse me, then.”

Bash left the house, the girl’s forlorn figure in the corner of his eye.

He headed down the main strip, never once looking back.

She was a beauty. A most delectable candidate. However, she had rejected him, so it was only polite for him to move on to the next woman. Dogged pursuit would bring him no closer to obtaining her consent.

She had told him no, and so he had to withdraw.

And time was short.

Bash did not have much time left as a warrior.

Nor could he continue to waste time on any further false leads or missteps.

“Shame about that, eh, Boss?”

“Indeed.”

“Still, Breeze said this was the place to be. I’m sure he knows what he’s talking about! Just do your best, Boss, and you’re bound to find a willing lass! Now, let’s do like we always do—find an inn for the night, and hold a strategy meeting!”

“Agreed.”

Bash and Zell looked at each other and nodded before continuing back down the main avenue.

3

THE SIMPLEST WAY TO GET A WOMAN

“I like the look of that woman there, as well.”

“Okay! I’ll go ask her name right away!”

The next day, Bash and Zell were on a girl hunt along the main strip of Dobanga Pit.

But this wasn’t the usual kind of girl hunting done by most orcs on a daily basis.

Bash would find a girl he liked the look of, and then Zell would zoom off to ask for her name.

Zell would also find out her marital status, and whether or not she was a resident of dwarf country.

Zell would jot down everything on paper.

And in this way, the two continued gathering information.

Thinking back on it, Bash’s previous failures could all be chalked up to a lack of information.

That had led to him proposing to an impossible candidate.

Thunder Sonia was a gem far out of Bash’s reach.

But if he had gone for a different elven woman, someone like the foot soldier Breeze had managed to snap up for example, then perhaps his proposal would have been accepted.

He had to make sure the woman was attainable before he made his move.

Then he would propose in the style that was most fashionable in dwarf society, and bag himself a bride.

That was the plan of action this time around.

“All right, I asked her. Her name is Pauline. She’s single and a commoner who works as a barmaid. Sounds promising! But to be honest, Boss, I think you should shoot for someone on a slightly higher level than her.”

“No, what’s most important is locking someone down as soon as possible!”

“Okay, you’re right! You’re right every time, Boss! All righty, we’ve amassed quite the list. Now, let’s start thinking about how best to subdue these females, shall we?”

“Good call!”

First they gathered names, then they gathered intel, and then they would make their battle plan.

What kind of men did the dwarven lady in question favor? Would she be accepting of an orc?”

At the very least, Bash wasn’t picking up on any blatant animosity, the likes of which he’d felt in human country.

Still, it would be imprudent to let his guard down.

Once he’d gotten a firm grasp of the situation, it was necessary to move forward with a decisive strategy.

Bash and Zell were seasoned fighters.

All right, so they had struck out twice...but there would not be a third time.

“Indeed, I... Hmm?”

Just then, Bash’s ears picked up a familiar sound on the air.

It was the sound of a crowd, yelling in unison, a kind of sonorous, reverberating noise.

It was a sound he had heard every day during the war.

“What’s up, Boss? Did another woman catch your eye?”

“No. I can hear a crowd.”

“Oh, that’s because the coliseum is close by! Shall we go and take a look?”

“Hmm... Let’s do that.”

Bash nodded, and the two set off, following the sound of the roaring crowd.

They found the coliseum straight away.

It was located at the end of the strip, in the very heart of the mountain, you might say.

From far off, it looked like a wall. However, as they drew closer, it was revealed to be a large, circular structure.

Looking up, there was a huge hole in the cave’s ceiling, and a thick beam of light shone down from the sky above.

It was a large, sturdy stone dwarven fighting arena, located right in the center of town.

The cheering voices were coming from within.

But that’s not all. The air was also thick with the sound of clanging swords, a sound so familiar to Bash’s ears.

“It sounds like this is the place to be, huh, Boss?”

“That it does.”

People were passing through the entrance to the coliseum en masse. No doubt they had come to watch the bout.

“Ah. Apparently, there’s a fee to enter.”

“It matters not. I still have the money I earned back in the Shiwanashi Forest.”

The two made to enter, discussing money, when...

“Hmm?”

Something caught Bash’s eye.

A group of individuals, sitting on the dirt floor outside of the coliseum’s thick walls.

They looked familiar to Bash.

They were orcs. But why would orcs be sitting outside the wall of the coliseum? And what’s more—their wrists and ankles were shackled.

“Those are orcs, ain’t they, Boss? Wonder what they’re doing.”

“Who can tell...”

“Probably rogue ones, right?”

“It’s possible.”

But despite Bash admitting to this possibility, it wasn’t as if he knew the faces of every orc that existed.

Naturally, Bash knew the names and faces of every orc he had shared the past three postwar years with, but the rogue ones... Many of them had slipped out and disappeared since peace reigned, and so he did not know them.

In other words, it was hard to say for sure who had died in combat and who had left their villages and gone rogue.

At any rate, Bash did not know the faces of these orcs.

However, he had the odd feeling that he had seen them somewhere before. Perhaps he had fought with them at some battle or other. In that case, they must have left orc country immediately after the war.

But seeing them enslaved here now, it was easy enough to guess that they had ventured to dwarf country, caused some kind of a ruckus, and been captured.

If they had been prisoners of war, Bash would have sought to liberate them. But rogue orcs were true orcs no longer.

Slavery was a fitting end for them.

“Let’s go.”

Bash tore his eyes away from the enslaved orcs and headed to the battle arena.



The arena was filled with excitement.

Out on the arena floor, three warriors were fighting against a sole magical beast.

A manticore. A beast that dwelled in the thick forests of the far northeast, they had the rust-colored bodies of tigers and the heads of humans, although they were incapable of speech.

The tails were covered in multiple needlelike projections, like the spines of sea urchins, and each spike dripped with venom.

Even an ogre would drop to the ground and die within moments, should it be stuck with one of those poisoned spines.

Other races impervious to venom, such as orcs, would only froth a little at the mouth and pass out. The manticore would use this opportunity to devour their helpless prey while it was still alive, though, so it was the same thing when you thought about it.

This beast lived far from where the orcs themselves dwelled, but Bash had fought against many of them in his time.

By the time Bash arrived at the coliseum, six orc warriors had already lost their lives.

That was how vicious a creature the manticore was.

Out there on the arena floor, two more warriors were in a dead faint, visibly foaming at the mouth.

With two of the original five warriors of this bout out for the count, it was clear their united front was on the brink of collapse, their chances of victory growing slim.

However, upon closer scrutiny, Bash could see that the manticore's right eye had been gouged out, and it had a chain wrapped around its leg.

Of the remaining three warriors, two flanked the manticore to its left side, while the other went around it on the right.

The two on the left kept pressure on the beast, distracting the manticore, while the one on its right made a decisive blow, inflicting heavy damage.

It was a well-matched fight.

Perhaps some among the five had experience fighting manticores.

"They targeted its eyes and its legs, and now they're bringing it down bit by bit. Not bad strategy, eh, Boss?"

"Not bad indeed. The one circling around to the right has a good arm. They should be able to bring the beast down like that, sooner or later."

It was just as Bash said. Not long after that, the man on the manticore's right side thrust his sword all of a sudden into the beast's side, just behind its foreleg.

A decisive blow to a vital spot.

The manticore thrashed its tail wildly for several moments, before vomiting a large quantity of blood and finally collapsing to the ground, lifeless.

There was scattered applause.

It was a methodical way to dispatch the beast, to be sure, but in the eyes of the audience it lacked a certain panache.

As far as spectacles go, it was mediocre. To Bash's eye, it certainly wasn't particularly fascinating to watch. After all, it was merely an example of group hunting of an animal. Bash did that sort of thing every day. What was enjoyable about watching that?

"Ah! Next up there's going to be a fight against two humans, apparently!"

While the bodies of the manticore and the fallen warriors were dragged away, two men in armor walked out onto the arena floor.

It was impossible to see their faces, but they seemed well-built.

But that wasn't the part that Bash and Zell were suddenly focused on.

"Hey, Boss... That's..."

"..."

The skin of the warriors...was bright green.

Yes, the same color as that of Bash himself.

"Grawrgh!!!"

"Groooargh!"

Listless war cries...

Only one such race unleashed war cries before a fight.

They were orcs.

"It's a fight between two orc warriors!"

"This should be good!"

Bash doubted his eyes for a moment, but the excited shouts of the crowd were saying the same thing.

For some reason, the two orcs were fighting each other.

With shields in hand, their swords clashed together.

At first glance, it appeared to be a heated battle. The spectators screamed in excitement each time one landed a blow on the other. They were really getting into it.

However...

"...What in blazes is this?"

Bash and Zell were not so enamored.

Bash knew what happened when two orcs decided to fight each other.

The fighting wouldn't end until one of them was dead.

They would spare no effort to annihilate each other.

Both were prepared to kill or be killed.

Filled with bloodlust and the desire to end their opponent. Leaping into the fray with thoughts of nothing but victory. Swinging their swords to fight off their own imminent death.

Even the young and inexperienced would fight with as much ferocity as they could muster. If you weren't prepared to die in the name of victory, then you had no right to start a fight with another.

That was what an orcish duel was supposed to look like.

Otherwise, it wasn't what they considered a duel at all.

The scene unfolding out there on the arena was something else entirely.

It was unlike anything Bash had seen.

It was almost like...they were dancing.

There was no hint of bloodlust. No grim awareness of an encroaching death. Their swings were lackluster. Neither seemed willing to finish off the other. Their swords clanked together performatively. It was as if they did not care which of them won. They seemed more willing to surrender than face actual injury.

How could *this* be called a duel?

“...”

“Boss, are you... Are you angry?”

Bash did not respond. He continued to stare silently at the bout.

Finally, the fight seemed close to its end.

One of the fake fighters struck his opponent's thigh with an exaggerated swing of his sword.

The stricken one fell to his knees, and the other one placed his sword edge on the man's neck.

A victory.

“RAWWWRGH!!!”

The winner raised his sword high in the air, bellowing.

His voice tore through the air, so much louder than his earlier war cry.

Holding his arms up high and wide, he paced around, eyes running over the coliseum's spectators.

“What in the world is he doing? He took his eyes off his opponent! Now he's strutting around and yelling! You fool, why don't you slit his throat?! What if he counterattacks?”

The spectator to their right looked over as Zell yelped in confusion.

“Calm down, fairy. What is this, your first time at the coliseum or something?”

It was a red-faced dwarf who had just spoken.

Holding a tankard of ale in each hand, he burped loudly with unabashed enjoyment.

His beer breath wafted toward them.

"Listen here, 'cause I'm gonna tell you what's up. The victor's entreatin' the crowd to spare the loser's life."

"Why would he do that?"

"He's sayin' that their bout showed him the loser's fightin' spirit. But it's up to the crowd to decide if he lives or dies. Like that."

Just as the dwarf said, the majority of the crowd were holding their thumbs up high in the air.

The winning fighter pulled his opponent to his feet, then offered him his shoulder as the two shuffled off into the coliseum's inner area.

"If it's a particularly borin' fight, the crowd might vote to just have the loser killed. But when they feel like they got to witness a true spectacle, well, it's just manners to show mercy, ain't it? After all, we've all seen enough of death in war. No point killin' someone indiscriminately now, is there?"

"Interesting. So even after the war, you have people fighting to the death here, and you dwarves see it as a spectator sport? You're a surprisingly savage people, aren't you?"

"Huh? Don't be ridiculous. Only the slave fights go as far as killin'."

Slaves.

Right. The dwarf race kept slaves. Prisoners they captured during war, who they forced into working for them, in order to increase their manufacturing efficiency.

Having those slaves also fight for their amusement at the coliseum...that was a practice that dated back years.

"Boss, did you hear that? Does that sit well with you? Keeping orcs as slaves..."

"...It's a fitting punishment for any orc who goes rogue."

Again, if this had been wartime, and if those orcs had been POWs, Bash would have leaped in there and saved them already.

But rogue orcs are not true orcs.

They deserved such a shameful fate. The way they pantomimed fighting each other in public like that...

Bash felt embarrassed that such a display was being passed off as a genuine orcish duel.

“Yeeek!”

Just then, a feminine shriek split the air.

Looking in its direction, Bash saw that its owner, a dwarf woman, was gazing out at the arena, continuing to scream.

Bash realized quickly that the noise coming from the woman was not a scream of fear.

She was screaming, yes, but she was also smiling.

It was the excited scream of a spectator. She was screaming with admiration... Admiration for...

Bash followed the woman’s line of sight, to see that the next bout was already underway.

Of course, it was another battle between two orcs.

But this time, the fight was much more harrowing.

It was the same kind of neutered, play-fighting exhibition as the one they had just seen, but this one did seem to have some style to it.

One of the men, sword and shield in hand, seemed to know how to move his body to make it look like he was only escaping blows by a hair’s breadth. His swings and jabs, too, looked almost authentic.

Bash watched the man fight, having the strangest feeling that he had seen him somewhere before, only...

“He’s so cool!”

“He’s amazing! I’d take him to bed!”

After that, Bash found himself distracted by the cheers and shrieks of the dwarf women.

Apparently, the man with the shield was extremely popular.

One had even said that she would go to bed with him. The very words that Bash had longed for a woman to say to him, just once.

What’s more, the women who were screaming weren’t half bad to look at.

Bash would like to give her what she asked for, once, twice...no, *three* times in a row.

“So I’m not completely certain on this, Boss, but it seems to me that these dwarf fillies have got something of a thing for big, strong orcs.”

“It does seem that way.”

“If they could only see how strong *you* are, Boss, then I reckon you’d have it in the bag... The question is, how to demonstrate it...?”

“Hmm.”

So strong orcs were popular with dwarf women.

In other words, if Bash could only manage to show off his strength, perhaps his list of women might actually come in search of *him*.

After all, Bash was an Orc Hero.

As far as strength went, well, Bash had already proven he had that.

His virgin status seemed to dangle precariously by a thread.

“You come to the coliseum only to focus on the *women*? Hey, hey, you’re an orc, ain’tcha?”

The drunkard to their left leaned in just then, talking to Bash.

His face was as red as a beet. He clutched a tankard of ale in both fists, and he had a cask of the stuff by his feet.

He was clearly three sheets to the wind.

“Hic! Yeah, you’re an orc all right. No wonder you want a woman. But you

know, hate to inform you... You're fresh outta luck! Fresh out!"

"Excuse me, the boss is not fresh out of *anything*! He's incredibly strong, I'll have you know! He could dispatch any of those fools out there with one flick of his wrist! Wait, not even that! He could do it with one finger! One flick of the pinkie, and *poof*! When the ladies see that, they'll do more than just squeal about wanting to go to bed with him, just you wait and see!"

"Listen here, little fairy, you're wrong about that. Those wenches you see there? They're only interested in watching the fights. They love catcalling the orc slave fighters, but they're not being *serious*. They're only here for the spectacle, got that? The spectacle!"

"Hmm...so that's how it is."

The light of hope faded away, and Bash felt defeated.

Maybe the dwarf noticed Bash's crestfallen expression. Or maybe he just wanted to run his mouth, on account of being drunk. Either way, the dwarf kept talking.

"Still, if you really want a woman, you should enter the God of War tournament!"

"...Enter it and do what?"

"Win the big tourney, of course! Then you can have any one wish you desire!"

"One wish...?"

According to the dwarf, this was the situation.

The God of War Festival's tournament was the biggest event in the dwarf calendar, arranged by the Dwarf King himself.

Bash had learned that much from the girl he'd met the previous day.

But there was more. Whoever was crowned the victor in the tournament won the right to make one request in the name of the Dwarf King.

Of course, the Dwarf King would accept such a wish within certain boundaries. But those boundaries were nice and wide.

Take the Dwarf Battlelord, Doradoradobanga, for instance.

The first time he won the tournament, he wished for Dobanga Pit and became its lord.

The next time he won, he asked for, and received, more gold than he could spend in one lifetime.

And after his next win, he was granted a title.

The win after that, he got the Dwarf King's daughter's hand in marriage.

And so, the rascal dwarf who came from nothing had achieved everything he had ever desired.

"In other words, if you win, it'll be a done deal! You can get any woman you want!"

Bash and Zell looked at each other.

If Bash won, he could have anything he wanted. Even a bride. It had worked for Doradoradobanga, after all.

The tournament was exactly what Bash needed.

"I get it, I get it! This must be what Breeze was talking about!"

"Right, it must be! I owe that human a true debt!"

Actually, Breeze hadn't said anything of the sort. He probably didn't even know about the God of War Festival.

However, Bash and Zell were bursting with gratitude for him.

They believed that he had no doubt predicted this scenario and had directed the two to dwarf country for this purpose.

What a well-informed human he was! His nickname of Strangler was well-earned, indeed!

"You two! Planning to join the festival, are you? Good for you! But you know, all the artisans worth their salt in this town have already found themselves warriors. Too bad, eh?"

Right. In order to enter the tournament, they needed an artisan to partner with.

“Boss, that’s it!”

“...Right!”

The girl from the previous day sprang instantly to mind.

She had turned Bash down, but it was true that she desired a warrior.

In other words, they had a mutual goal now.

“We can’t just sit around here! We have to get back there now!”

Zell zoomed forth.

The fairy zoomed faster than they had ever zoomed.

Zell’s wings flapped like a hummingbird’s, sending a tiny shock wave rippling through the air in their wake.

Bash, too, seemed to move faster than the speed of light.

The cyclone whipped up by the two sent the nearby drunkards toppling from their seats, where they rolled on the ground chortling.



By the time they reached her house, it was already nightfall.

She was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she had gone in search of a warrior, like she said...

But just as that thought occurred, the girl suddenly emerged from the house.

“Hey.”

“Yeek! It’s not what it looked like, Sis! I wasn’t sneaking off to leave the country...!”

The girl whirled around in a panic, babbling, but she breathed a big sigh of relief when she saw Bash’s face.

“Oh, it’s you again... What do you want? Just so we’re clear, the answer’s still no to having your babies. I don’t care how many times you ask. I have important stuff to do. And that’s why I have to go and find myself a warrior.”

“Hmm. I have come here to fight as your warrior.”

"You can try to force me but think hard about it! This alley is visible from the main street, which is patrolled by guards, and this time I'll really resist, and... Wait, what did you just say?"

She blinked, looking up at Bash.

"I have come to be your warrior." Bash repeated himself.

But even though the girl appeared to understand him, she seemed to be having trouble absorbing the situation.

Lost, she looked to Zell for clarification.

That was the worst possible thing to do in this situation.

"He's goin' for the win! And I'll be there supporting him every step of the way!"

Zell raised their fairy voice as loud as possible, helping Bash out.

The girl looked suspicious, clearly not swayed by the fairy's frank speech. She returned her gaze to Bash.

"Are you sure? Didn't you say you were looking for something? Incidentally, what is it that you're looking for?"

"...Ah yes. I'm looking for..."

Bash hesitated, unsure whether he should respond or not.

This girl had already rejected him. And the dwarves were a polygamous race. There should be no risks involved in telling her. As long as he kept the part about his virginity nice and secret.

"...A woman."

"Huh?"

"I seek a woman to become my bride."

"Oh... Oh, right. So you want to win the God of War tournament and get a woman the fastest way possible, huh...?"

"Precisely."

The girl looked at Bash, disgusted.

Almost as if she was thinking to herself, *So that's why he pounced on me.*

"Eh, it makes no difference to me either way. But are you sure you want me as your artisan? My stuff's top-notch, but my family... My brother and sister... they might try to sabotage us, you know?"

"It matters not."

Bash was an Orc Hero.

During the war, he had been attacked head-on by many enemies. Not a day had gone by without his battle plans being hindered in some way.

But with an objective in front of him, Bash was unstoppable. He would slaughter any who stood in his way.

What did he care about petty sabotage?

"But... All right... So you'll be my warrior for real, then...?"

The girl still seemed unsure for several more seconds.

But then the reality of the situation finally registered.

Tears sprang to her eyes and threatened to spill forth.

She had almost given up hope. She had almost resigned herself to a bleak future, without recognition, never having the chance to showcase her skills.

But no longer.

Now, she had a warrior. Someone to fight in her corner.

She didn't know how good of a fighter this orc was, but she would do her best to clad him in her finest armor, furnish him with her finest weaponry, and aim for victory.

Finally, she could silence her siblings once and for all.

"All right!"

She brushed away her tears and put on a big grin to make up for them.

"Then I look forward to working with you!"

"Likewise!"

“...Erm, so what was your name, again?”

“It’s Bash. And this is Zell.”

“I’m Primera. Primeradobanga. Just call me Primera, though!”

And so, Bash and Primera joined forces, determined to enter the God of War tournament together.

4

A SWIRLING CONSPIRACY

The following morning, Bash left the main town of Dobanga Pit and arrived at a forest some distance from the mountain.

An area of the forest had been razed, providing a wide clearing.

What appeared to be prototype weapons and armor were strewn about everywhere.

It was a dwarf rubbish dump.

The majority of dwarves at least attempt to melt down their failed attempts for reuse, but they couldn't always recycle everything they made straight away.

The leftovers were piled up here in a big heap, free for anyone to use.

Primera stood in the clearing, hands on hips, gazing up at Bash with her chin jutting out.

From her stance, her enthusiasm was evident.

“If I’m going to enter, I’m going to enter to win.”

“Right.”

In contrast, Bash’s response was distracted.

Well, who could blame him?

After all, Bash’s gaze was fixed on Primera’s cleavage, which was on full display. A feast for the eyes, one might say.

“Every smith worth their salt tailors their weapons and armor to the warrior they’re fitting. I intend to craft the best possible equipment for your size and style.”

Primera offered a sword to Bash as she spoke.

It was a wide, double-edged sword with a thick blade. Its flat surface glinted red, as if it had been crafted using a metal with some kind of special properties.

The blade was almost five feet long.

A human would need both hands to wield it, but it was the perfect size for an orc to grip one-handed.

“What we have here is one of my finest pieces...or, well, I wouldn’t go that far. But anyway, it’s a pretty decent sword.”

“Hmm.”

Bash took hold of the sword.

His fingers brushed Primera’s as he did so, making his pulse quicken.

He recalled the soft feel of Primera’s bare shoulders when he had embraced her the other evening.

She had rejected him, yes, but she was still a beauty... How could Bash *not* get excited?

Right now, she wore a thick overcoat wrapped around her body, but Bash knew that the figure concealed within boasted some killer curves.

For her part, Primera wasn’t accustomed enough to orcs to have picked up on the change in Bash’s expression.

Nor did she suspect Bash’s ulterior motives.

“Lucky for us, there’s a ton of old armor lying around here that we can test that sword out on.”

Primera picked up a piece of armor as she spoke, placing it on top of the stool she’d brought with her.

“Try taking a swing with it and tell me what you think. If you want something adjusted, just let me know.”

“All right.”

Bash waited until Primera stepped back, then raised the sword up high, swinging it downward.

His swing was simple.

But it happened faster than Primera could see it.

Bash had swung a weapon like this hundreds, no, thousands of times.

Bash's swing, which had the power to bisect anything in its path, homed directly in on the thickest part of the armor, burrowing through the metal.

Then it came straight out the other side with a clean metallic *ting*.

"Ah..."

In the time it had taken Primera to blink, the armor had been turned into shrapnel.

Ribbons of the metal went tumbling to the ground with a series of metallic clinks.

If anyone who'd known Bash on the battlefield had happened to be present, they would no doubt have shuddered with recognition.

Even if they had no prior knowledge of Bash, any seasoned warrior would have to realize from this one swing that they were in the presence of someone formidable, and would no doubt proceed to tremble.

A wild beast who witnessed this display would instantly know they were outmatched and turn tail to flee.

That was how impressive the swing was.

But witnessing it, Primera did not think of fleeing, nor of begging for mercy.

She shrieked with anger instead.

"No, no, no, you fool!"

Still shrieking, she ran toward Bash.

"Who would ever think to use a sword like that?! It's not a stick, you know!"

She snatched the sword back from Bash and inspected the blade.

It was bent almost double in the middle, as if someone had used it as a crowbar to dislodge something heavy.

"Ugh, just look at this mess! It's completely bent!"

“Hmm...”

“Just what kind of idiot are you, anyway? Ugh!”

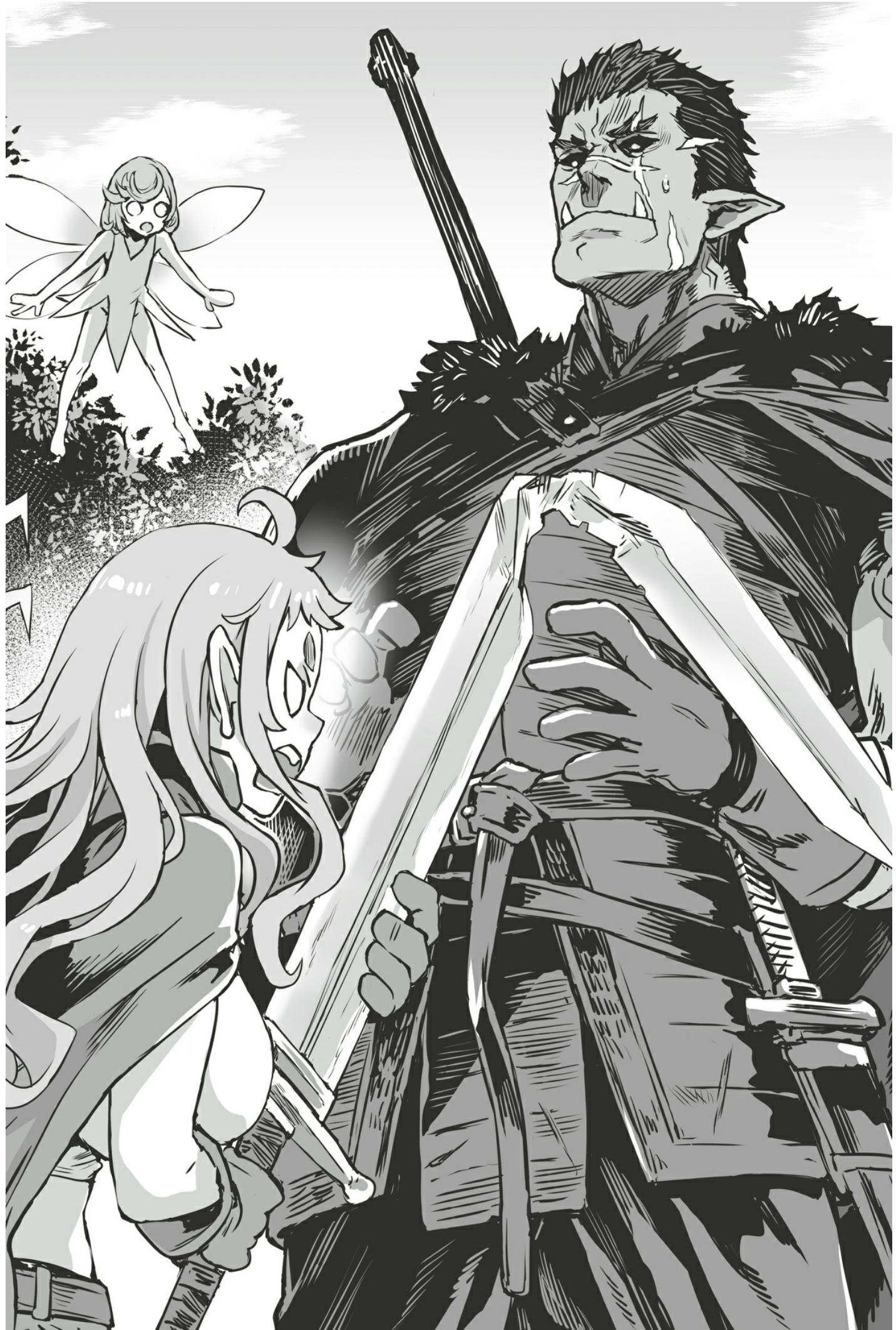
Primera continued to grumble as she fingered the bent piece of metal, sighing theatrically.

However, a moment later, she looked over her shoulder at Bash, eyes narrowed, as if she had re-centered herself.

“Still, I think I see the problem here. You’ve got far too much brute strength, and your sword-handling skills leave a lot to be desired. Yes, it’s durability we need to focus on, not sharpness.”

“What?!”

Zell’s eyeballs bulged in disbelief.



How could they not? Zell had never encountered anyone who could witness the boss's swing and conclude that his sword-handling skills "*left a lot to be desired.*"

What usually happened was that they all either died silently of fright or else fell to their knees in terror, gazing up at Bash with a look of horror on their faces.

Take that swing just now, for instance. In Zell's estimation, it was on par with anything Bash had pulled off on the battlefield. Its power and speed were in perfect balance. *Truly excellent stuff*, Zell would have said, nodding sagely with the wisdom of the enlightened.

"What? Are you going to say I'm wrong?"

"...No."

For his part, Bash did not care.

Bash had heard this said about his sword skills before.

After all, Bash personally knew several warriors who were far better with the sword than he was.

So he himself didn't really think of his swordsmanship abilities as anything special.

"That's why I use this blade."

"Hmm... Well, you'd be better off with something big and solid rather than some rough-hewn excuse for a weapon... All right, then."

Primera eyed the sword on Bash's back with a beady eye before clapping her hands together.

"Anyway, I think I've gotten a pretty good idea of your personal weaponry needs now."

"Ah."

"Now, I'm off to go and buy the iron I need to forge all your gear. You come, too."

Then Primera set off toward town, walking quickly.

Bash and Zell did as they were told and followed her.



There is a large marketplace located in Dobanga Pit.

In this dwarf-style, mazelike complex of shops, one can find all kinds of metals that have been dug out of the mines located throughout the Gonglasha mountain range.

Dwarf merchants have little flair for business. They simply pile up their wares in the front of their shops and let the customers pick through the piles, appraising the quality for themselves before they make their purchases.

An artisan who doesn't know how to pick good metal will never succeed in their craft.

That was a saying left behind by Doradoradobanga, and it was known and believed by every dwarf.

The ability to pick out good raw materials for crafting is said to be one of the vital skills any dwarf blacksmith needs.

Of course, that's not at all they need, though.

"You've got raw, brute strength, so I was thinking I should make you a blade of smelted iron. That way I can keep the forge heat nice and high and make a good, durable sword."

Selecting the best kind of iron for crafting each individual weapon and armor piece was also a vital tool in any artisan's belt.

A weapon or piece of armor can change drastically depending on the kind of material used and the crafting technique.

And if you're planning to enter the God of War tournament, you can't compromise quality.

"Yes, the blade part will be of smelted iron, and for the shaft, I'm thinking Carollmite. And for the cutting edge, Kinner steel..."

Muttering to herself, Primera sifted through the chunks of raw ore, picking up one piece and examining it with the magnifying glass she took from her breast pocket. Then she tossed it into the basket Bash was holding.

Bash and Zell gazed down at the collection of ore chunks in the basket, surprised by their appearance.

"I hadn't realized ore was so shiny," Bash mumbled, staring down at it.

He'd never closely examined any rocks before, but these ones seemed to sparkle with red and green light. The arms the dwarves made always seemed dull to him, but the raw ore itself was so colorful.

"Of course it is, Boss. The dwarves make shiny necklaces out of this stuff! Why, that sparkling elf necklace you bought, that was made from the same type of ore!"

"I see. I never realized that weapons were made from the same materials..."

Come to think of it, the bright glitter of the ore did remind Bash of the necklace he'd procured in the Shiwanashi Forest.

Well, to be more accurate, the necklace in question had been made from gold and silver, but fairies weren't exactly a smithing race, so Zell couldn't really be blamed for getting them mixed up.

"What? What do you mean you won't sell to me?!"

While Bash and Zell were distracted by the shiny ore, Primera had started arguing in an angry tone.

They looked over to see her glaring at the shopkeeper, who was seated on the other side of the shop's counter.

The shopkeeper was glaring right back at Primera, not even trying to hide his contempt.

"I heard you talkin' that nonsense just before. Usin' smeltd iron fer a blade? And a Carollmite hilt? Are you seriously a dwarf? I ain't sellin' my ore to someone who don't know the first thing about smithin'. Get outta here."

"Oh yeah? Well, your way of thinking is seriously outdated! Okay, so everyone says that smeltd iron isn't suitable material for crafting a blade. It's not tenacious enough under extreme heat, right? But I've developed my own special refinement method that keeps it well-formed throughout the process. You sacrifice a little of the sharpness, but I'll finish the blade with Kinner steel,

with the smelted iron acting as a cushion. Sure, it won't be the sharpest blade around, but in terms of weapon durability, it'll turn out just perfect."

"...Tch, it's pointless even talking to you. Put down the goods and get lost."

The shopkeeper spat in disgust, folded his arms, and gave Primera a mulish look.

"...!"

An expression of pure rage flashed across Primera's face. Her fingers itched to seize the shopkeeper by the neck, but she resisted.

Even if she did want to get into a fight with the shopkeeper, the circumference of his arms was twice as big as hers.

It wouldn't be much of a fight.

"What's wrong?"

Primera turned to Bash, who had just spoken, her teeth gritted together.

"Like he said. This bigot won't let me buy any ore."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. Ask the bigot."

Bash approached the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper looked up at Bash.

"You're Primera's warrior? Mind your own business, you ignorant orc..."

The shopkeeper trailed off, mid-insult, his eyes fixed in place.

He took another look at Bash's face.

"..."

Then, despite his face having frozen into its quarrelsome snarl, the sound of his teeth chattering became audible.

This was the face of a man who knew who Bash was.

It was the face of a man who had seen Bash on the battlefield before.

It was the sort of reaction Bash was very used to.

"Why won't you sell to her?"

"Ah... I mean, it's not like I *won't* sell to her. I was just, uh, giving the young lass some advice. It's part of my sales patter. But I'll sell to her. I'll sell, okay? So please... Please, at least...spare my life..."

The shopkeeper's eyes slid away from Bash's face.

"Looks like he'll sell."

"Hmph. That wasn't bad. You settled this old bigot's hash with a single look. I guess there's a reason you were out there on the front lines of the battlefield. Well, whatever. I'll put the money down here. We're off!"

Primera slammed a bag of coins down on the table, then exited the shop.

Bash followed behind her.

"..."

The shopkeeper was left alone, trembling behind his counter.

A short while after Bash and Primera had left, he got to his feet and peeked outside.

He scanned the familiar dwarf shopping street in both directions. No sign of the fearsome orc. He breathed a sigh of relief.

But still, he trembled as he mentally replayed the scene from moments before.

"That damned Primera... What manner of beast has she invited in...?"

He had seen Bash on the battlefield, only once.

It was an embarrassing memory for him. At the mere sight of Bash, he had wet his pants and lost all battle morale.

He still clearly recalled seeing the bodies of his comrades nearby, the ones he had been laughing and joking with moments before they were felled.

"Dammit, Primera..."

Pondering that traumatic memory, the shopkeeper muttered under his breath once more.

“Is she going to be all right...?”

His voice was filled with concern for this young girl he barely knew.



“All right, I’m going to shut myself up in my workshop now and get to work. Why don’t you two go and have a look around town or something?”

“Can I watch while you make my sword?”

“N-no, you can’t!”

Bash raised an eyebrow. His request was innocent enough, but she had rejected it most vehemently.

“Why not?”

“Why not? *Why not?!* Dwarf blacksmithing is a secret art, don’t you know?!”

Primera wrapped her arms protectively around herself and took a step back from Bash.

Seeing this, Zell figured out what was up straightaway.

Sometimes, the fairy could be surprisingly perceptive.

Because of this, there were certain places in the world where they were known as Zell the Telepath.

(Boss, Boss. She’s still on her guard around you after you tried to put the moves on her the other day.)

(Is that right?)

(Blacksmiths often work close to naked—not just the dwarves, but all of them. You may have failed in your attempt the other day, Boss, but you can’t blame the girl for thinking you might take a second go at it.)

Almost naked... Bash certainly would have liked to see that up close.

How could he not?

However, he would not push the matter since the girl herself had said no. Nonconsensual sex had been outlawed in the name of the Orc King Nemesis, after all.

“All right. We’ll head to the town, then.”

“I’ll be done with my prototype by nightfall... Oh, right. So when the big hand points to seven, return here. You know how to tell time, don’t you?”

“No worries!”

One could not see the sun inside the dwarven city.

Accordingly, large clocks were situated throughout, so that its residents always knew what time it was.

It was ingrained in dwarf culture, but few of the other races, the Coalition of Seven members in particular, could tell time.

Zell, however, could.

Being able to tell time had been of valuable importance when spying on the dwarf army, after all.

“All right! Then I’m off to smith! I’m going to forge something that will make every weapon you’ve touched up until now look like absolute garbage! Prepare to be amazed!”

Then Primera broke into a run and sped back to her workshop.

Bash watched her go, then turned to Zell with a *Well, what now?* kind of look.

Zell put their hands on their hips, cheeks puffing out.

“...Ahhh, it’s just unbelievable, if you ask me.”

“What is?”

“What is? *What is?*! That strumpet said that your sword-handling skills leave a lot to be desired! She said that all you have is brute strength! How dare she say that about my boss, the Orc Hero himself?! Why, that sword arm has laid waste to countless enemies!”

“But it’s true that my swordsmanship is lacking. The man who gave me this sword said as much himself.”

Bash unsheathed his greatsword as he spoke.

The sword, which was more of a big lump of iron really, had been given to

Bash by the Demon General after Bash had already lost countless weapons on the battlefield. "This one is more suited to a big brute like you," the general had said.

"And to be true, there are other orcs out there much more skilled than I."

"Are there? Really? Boss, are you sure you're not selling yourself short, here? You've never seen yourself at work on the battlefield, have you, Boss? Well, I have, and I'm saying that you're the best of all the orcs, you know?"

"Indeed, I am the strongest of all orcs."

"Right?"

A human might have waved this off, acted modest. But Bash was the Orc Hero. He had received the highest accolade an orc could receive, and he knew it. There was no need for false modesty.

"But in battle, it is not always skill with the sword that decides the outcome."

"Ah! Indeed! You could be right there, Boss! Being handy with a sword doesn't mean you've got the required strength, does it?"

To endure to the end of the battle, to slay so many enemies... Zell knew that fancy sword skills weren't what was needed to pull that off.

Strength was an integral part of it.

Sword skill was but a single factor.

Throughout the history of the land, many a warrior confident in their sword skills had met an untimely and disappointing end at the hands of another.

And the winners, those left to survive the day, weren't all master swordsmen. Many of them were average, albeit possessed of above-average strength.

Fight, win, and survive.

Those who had nothing but their sword skills to brag about would more often than not fail to pull off all three.

"All right, Boss, I think I get it now! Let us gird our loins once more and head off into town! We need to find a willing woman who fits the boss's requirements, so we've got someone to name when you're crowned the winner

of the tournament!"

"You're right!"

Bash nodded, and they headed back off to town.



A few hours later, Bash arrived at a tavern in the center of town.

Happily, no one in Dobanga Pit was paying much attention to Bash.

With so many different races about, the dwarves weren't really looking at orcs as enemies.

Bash wasn't sure why exactly, but at least he wasn't being stared at with hostility like he had been in human country, nor did he have to deal with the suspicious glances of the elves in elf country. He found an open seat inside the tavern and sat down.

His objective, of course, was the day's information-gathering work.

"Ooh, fascinating, so then your current mom and dad aren't your real parents?"

"Right, right! But I love them just as much—no, more! More than if they were my real parents, even! I was a war-stricken orphan on the brink of death when they came for me, and they've raised me to be who I am today!"

"What a heartwarming story! What a fine example of dwarven familial piety! Ah, the dwarves really are a race with such a strong sense of duty, aren't they? But I have never before seen one so caring as you! And a beauty such as yourself must get all sorts of attention from men, I expect? Ooh, you vixen, you!"

"Oh my, what a flirtatious fairy you are!"

Their target was this tavern's fairest maiden.

Her name? Pauline.

Bash watched with excited eyes from his corner of the tavern as Zell worked Pauline for information about herself. It was better that Bash didn't speak to her himself.

When he won the God of War tournament, he could have any woman he wanted.

However, from what he'd heard, he could only claim one bride.

In that case, it was critical that he make the correct choice.

Bash would have been fine with almost anyone, but if he was going to pick just one, then he wanted to select the best woman he could find. He didn't want to suffer buyer's remorse later.

To that end, he needed detailed information. Not just her name and occupation, but anything he could learn.

From the list they had drawn up yesterday, the two had selected the best-looking candidates and were now probing their personalities in more detail.

Armed with whatever information they could learn, Bash would simply select his optimal bride and then go ahead and win the God of War tournament.

It was all so simple.

Bash had selected the finalists based on their comparatively pleasing appearances, but truth be told, they all paled in comparison to Judith or Thunder Sonia. Still, as long as Bash could finally have a woman of his own, he was fine with making some concessions.

“...”

Bash pictured himself entwined with the winning candidate, and his jaw slackened.

Pauline was on the taller and slimmer side for a dwarf.

She wore her dwarven red hair pulled back in a ponytail and served her tables with an openhearted sort of expression on her face.

True, she was no stunning beauty. If you gathered together a random selection of a hundred women of different races and picked out the top ten best looking, Pauline wouldn't even make the list.

Naturally, Bash's loins did not stir as they had when he beheld Judith or Thunder Sonia.

However, as far as dwarf women went, she wasn't half bad.

Because you see, Pauline's chest was much, much larger than either Judith's or Thunder Sonia's.

Bash swirled his drinks around in their glasses as he imagined having free rein to play with Pauline's chest however he pleased.

It was dwarven custom to hold two drinks at once and take alternating sips from them both.

In Bash's right hand, he had some sort of distilled liquor, and he had a beer in his left. He took a sip of one, and then the other.

The distilled liquor was very good. It was clearly a dwarven specialty. The initial sip filled the mouth with sweetness, and then the heat of it hit the back of your nose. It burned going down. Most enjoyable.

The beer was not of dwarven make. No doubt they had imported the human-brewed stuff. The characteristic malt taste was most refreshing. It slaked Bash's thirst well, and he gulped it down like water.

He was all but assured a woman of his very own. And he was enjoying some very good booze.

He could ask for nothing more.

Ever since Bash had embarked on his travels—no, for the first time since the war had ended...Bash felt a sense of peace. He observed Zell and Pauline through his drooping eyelids.

"So what kind of men do you prefer?"

"Hmm, let's see. Well, I like a strong man. Someone who'll live long, never get sick, and will protect me when the chips are down. But yeah, just someone who won't go dying on me. I've seen enough loved ones go before their time."

Didn't Bash check all those boxes?

Zell shot Bash a quick thumbs-up, and Bash was just about to nod in return, when...

"Oi."

A shadow fell on Bash's face.

Pauline's bountiful bosom was obscured from view by a broad and meaty chest.

Bash looked up to see a bearded dwarf standing there.

"The heck are you looking at, huh?"

"That woman."

Bash answered honestly.

Surely no one would have a problem with him simply looking.

"Huh. So you've got yer sights set on our enchantress, have ya? You dirty bastard!"

"Hey, you! What's this about you stalking our Pauline?!"

"Don't think we'll let ya get away with it!"

There was a clattering sound as the angry dwarven men got to their feet, surrounding Bash.

But even standing up, the dwarves were only about the same height as a seated Bash. Bash looked down slightly into their faces, eyes scanning the group.

"Why can't I? I was only looking at her, wasn't I?"

"You shut your mouth."

"We all know what it means when an orc's eyeing up a woman!"

"It's written all over your face. Prepare to die!"

Bash couldn't quite grasp what they were saying.

However, it was clear to him what the men wanted to do.

You saw this sort of situation play out in orcish taverns. Everyone would be having a good time, getting drunk, then someone would get offended, and the whole group would end up getting kicked out.

Then they'd all enjoy a brawling session out in front of the tavern.

In other words, a bar fight.

Apparently, these men wanted to throw down.

They were drunk, in high spirits, and wanted to show off their strength to the other patrons.

“...Hmm.”

Bash had not come to this country to start fights.

In elf country, too, he had started no trouble, and none had come to him.

But right now Bash was feeling tipsy. And he was in a great mood. His blood was charged up.

Backing down from a fight against a group who so badly seemed to want it... That would be disrespectful to his title of Orc Hero.

If Bash had been surrounded not by bearded dwarves, but by beautiful women, he would have had a convenient excuse for not getting on board. Bash was not here to gain a name for himself, after all.

But how could he back down from a fight in front of a woman who had just been heard to claim that she liked strong men?

“All right, then.”

Bash grabbed his sword, which had been leaning against his legs.

He didn’t plan to use it in the brawl, of course.

But he didn’t want anyone swiping it while he was distracted. He planned to put it safely into a corner, out of harm’s way.

“...!”

“Wh-whoah! Isn’t that...?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding... That’s the Indestructible Demon Sword!”

But the moment the dwarves noticed his sword, their faces paled.

The red flush of their cheeks was replaced by a pallor that brought to mind a terrible hangover.

Their eyes were flicking back and forth between Bash and his beloved sword.

“Could it be... Are you...Bash? The Orc Hero...?”

“I am.”

The dwarves had recognized him.

They had realized that they had picked a fight with a formidable opponent.

Anyone who fought on the battlefields during the war knew of Bash. Even if they didn't know his face, they would recognize the distinctive weapon he wielded.

“You've gotta be kidding...”

“Man, they picked a fight with the wrong orc...”

“A silver coin's not even worth all this...”

The dwarves all stood aside and made way as Bash headed outside.

Orc brawls followed a similar pattern, in that all involved would head outside to fight. Only in orcish custom, the one who had instigated the fight would leave first and wait for the other party. It was a kind of unspoken rule.

Bash, assuming that the rule was the other way around for dwarves, left first.

The main strip was as lively as ever.

Bash glanced to one side and saw that a similar brawl was taking place outside of a tavern two doors down. It seemed to be the same wherever you went, among every race.

Bash had recently gotten acquainted with the societies of humans, elves, and now dwarves for the first time. Realizing that all races seemed to have drunken brawls in common filled him with a sense of reassurance that made him blow air out of his nostrils.

But he could not let his guard down. Bash had seen too many good men lose their lives to a momentary lapse in attention.

He folded his arms and stared at the tavern's doorway, waiting.

“...?”

However, the dwarf group did not emerge.

At this rate, there would be no brawl, and no chance for him to show Pauline what a strong man he was.

Perhaps dwarven custom dictated that the instigator had to remain behind for a moment and perform some sort of preparations?

Just as Bash was beginning to suspect something like that, a figure emerged from the tavern.

Someone much, much smaller than a dwarf. It was a little fairy.

In other words, Zell.

“Huh, it’s you, Zell. I’m about to have a fight. Care to join me?”

“I don’t think you need any assistance, Boss... Um, it seems your opponents have fled out the back door.”

“...Oh?”

“Best guess? They’re scared of you, Boss.”

How anticlimactic.

Bash’s disappointment with the dwarf race only increased. Asking for a fight, and then fleeing... It was a display of weakness he would have not expected of the dwarves, who were said to be so robust.

If this had happened in orc country, those involved would never have been able to show their faces in public again. They would have no choice but to go rogue. At any rate, Bash would never accept such cowards as true orcs.

But this was dwarf country. Apparently, they had no such honor.

Bash unfolded his arms and headed back into the tavern.

As expected, there was no sign of the dwarves who had been starting trouble with Bash only minutes before.

And there was no sign of Pauline, either.

“What happened to Pauline?”

“She’s gone home. Looks like her shift was over for the day. So what do you wanna do, Boss? Should we follow her?”

“Have you gathered sufficient information?”

“Sure did, Boss.”

“That’s fine, then. Let’s move on.”

Bash was still slightly annoyed about the fight, but a man of Bash’s caliber would not fixate on such a thing for too long. It didn’t sit right with him, but since his opponents had fled, he supposed he had won by default.

Besides, he hadn’t come to this town to fight.

Bash and Zell hurried on to the next tavern. They had a mission to complete.

◆ Dobanga Pit – Elsewhere ◆

Doradoradobanga was said to have sired at least ten children.

They were known as the Dobanga Dynasty, and they ruled over Dobanga Pit as a collective gubernatorial class of their own.

With the blood of a battlelord running through their veins, they were superior to ordinary dwarves in every way.

They excelled in smithing, in fighting, and some even excelled equally in both.

Barabaradobanga.

Known simply as Barabara.

He was the epitome of everything a member of the Dobanga Dynasty should be.

He was the firstborn son, and he had excelled in battle and distinguished himself, earning numerous accolades.

As the eldest son, he acted as a guide for his younger brothers and sisters, helping them out whenever they came to him, and tried to be their support.

On top of that, he sought endlessly to polish his skills as a blacksmith and warrior instead of coasting on his natural ability.

Just as his father, the magnificent Doradoradobanga, had done before him...

In fact, he had won the previous year’s God of War tournament, and he planned to win this year around, too.

The other children of the Dobanga Dynasty looked up to him and respected him.

All save for one. His little sister, who had been born from a human woman.

“Primera has been kidnapped by an orc, you say?”

“No, no. Listen, will you? I said that Primera has *gone off* with an orc!”

Barabaradobanga was busy at work in his smithy, preparing for the God of War tourney, when someone came bursting into his workshop. It was his sister, Calmera.

Calmeradobanga was the second-born daughter and looked over the others like a mother figure. In fact, she was quite the mother hen to her brothers and sisters.

Even the Dobanga offspring who resided in locations other than Dobanga’s Pit knew of the delights of her cooking.

Naturally, as a child of the Dobanga Dynasty, she was also a skilled artisan. Her fighting skills, meanwhile, were nothing to write home about.

Recently, she had been beside herself with worry over the antics of her little sister, Primeradobanga.

The members of the Dobanga Dynasty were the hope of all dwarves, a symbol of a prosperous future.

Naturally, most of the Dobanga children worked hard to live up to their legacy, and to fulfill the people’s expectations.

But Primera was different. She was the only one from whom greatness was not anticipated.

She had been a weakling since birth and had too much of her mother’s human blood in her.

A scrawny body, skinny arms... A girl like that could not make it as either an artisan or a warrior.

That was what everyone said.

Even though she was a child of Doradoradobanga.

Nevertheless, she had applied herself diligently, so as not to bring shame upon the Dobanga name.

She was hopeless as a fighter, but she still aimed toward success as an artisan.

And yet, her smithing skills still needed work, and she hadn't produced anything impressive so far. The only thing she was proficient at was running her mouth.

Naturally, no one acknowledged her as an artisan.

Worried, Calmera had tried to get through to her sister.

You're still green, you should at least learn to hold your tongue, and focus on improving your skills, and if you can't even do that, then you should quit...and so on. Of course, Primera was impatient and refused to listen...

And then, she'd started talking about entering the God of War Festival.

Calmera had plenty to say about *that*.

You'll only bring shame to us all, it's not just your reputation that's on the line, and you'll end up making a mockery of whoever you choose as your warrior... You should just give up on the idea...and so on.

Naturally, Primera refused to listen.

Her sister wasn't going to get through to her saying things like that.

But Barabaradobanga and Calmeradobanga both knew that Primeradobanga was still too green, that she lacked the necessary objectivity.

She had yet to fully grasp the fact that her weapons and armor could mean the difference between life and death for her warrior.

That was why no warrior in the country was willing to help her.

But the girl had now snagged herself a foreigner, an orc who knew nothing of the situation...

"I'm just so worried. I know that orcs have no interest in dwarven women, but that girl is half-human... I just hope nothing terrible happens to her..."

"...I don't think you need to be worried about that. Orcs are forbidden from mating with other races without consent. If he's a decent orc, he'll uphold that

rule."

"Hah! You're a man, of course you'd say that. There's plenty of men out there who only stop to think about a woman's consent after the deed is already done!"

"..."

Barabaradobanga practiced his sword swings as he listened to his sister talk.

This was ostensibly a brother-sister discussion to decide what to do about Primera, but it was more like a ranting session than anything else.

It was always this way. Calmera did not care for Barabaradobanga's opinion.

"Even if she herself remains unharmed, it's not like she has a chance of winning with the arms *she* crafts. Don't you remember what happened last year, when that defeated warrior took out his anger on his artisan and their shoddy craftsmanship, and beat them to death? And apparently, this orc she's employed is a total blockhead. And he's got a fairy with him who's a pathological liar. Oh, dear me, whatever is going to happen...?"



The orc had a fairy with him.

This information made Barabaradobanga pause mid-swing.

“Wait. So it’s not a slave orc she’s roped into this?”

“What? No, he said he was some sort of traveler. He showed up while I was preventing Primera from fleeing. I was able to make conversation with him, and he didn’t seem like one of those rogue orcs.”

“An orc traveler? And he had a fairy with him...?”

Barabaradobanga had been in the war.

He had fought against orcs on many occasions.

Orcs were a stupid race, but they weren’t like the insentient magical beasts. When they teamed up with the fairy race, they had proven themselves capable of elaborate battle tactics.

Yes, they were stupid, but not *that* stupid. They were capable of strategizing. And they could be cunning.

“What did the pair of them say? What was the purpose of their travel?”

“I dunno. I didn’t ask. He said he was looking for something, though. Huh, must be something pretty important. They were coming from out of the Shiwanashi Forest.”

“...”

He smelled a rat.

Barabaradobanga was sure of it. He had never heard of an orc going traveling. Much less with a fairy in tow. They must have some sort of objective.

And Barabaradobanga thought he might know what that was.

“What was the orc’s name?”

“His name? Uh...what was it again...? According to a group of drinkers I spoke to... Cowards, the lot of them...always bragging about their war successes, but then they piss their pants over the prospect of a fight with one measly orc... Pathetic... Oh, right, Bash, that was his name. He’s supposed to be some sort of

notorious war warrior."

The hairs on Barabaradobanga's arms prickled.

"Did you just say...Bash?!"

Barabaradobanga whirled around, seizing Calmera by the shoulders.

"Wh-what's wrong with you? Do you know him or something?"

Bash.

The Orc Hero.

The disaster who smashed his way through the dwarven defenses. The Destroyer himself.

All who had served on the front lines against the orcs knew that name.

But few knew his face. After all, more than half of those who had set foot on the battlefield had never returned.

All of the soldiers were loyal to the Dobanga Dynasty, and they complied with all of Barabaradobanga's and Calmera's requests.

They were mighty warriors. They held firm on the front lines of battle, against whatever foe came along. They danced on the brink of death. They were all seasoned fighters, prepared to fight for the glory of the dwarf race. Prepared to vanquish anyone who tested them.

But at the same time, they were aware.

They knew where the line between life and death was drawn. They knew when they were outmatched. Through the long years of war, they had learned all this.

They knew that beyond that thin line lay the bodies of their comrades.

And so, they understood very well.

They understood that, in war, there are some opponents you simply cannot win against.

Bash was one such opponent.

And this unbeatable foe was now among them. He had come to Dobanga Pit.

Hearing that, Barabaradobanga could not prevent himself from trembling.

“At any rate, Brother, please do something. I feel so badly for the wretched girl. Born as a half-human, looked down upon by everyone, going through so much suffering, ending up desperate enough to take up with an orc... What if she ends up pregnant by him? How terrible would that be?”

“Hmm...”

Barabaradobanga crossed his arms and murmured.

He wasn’t even thinking about Primera anymore.

He was thinking about the wrongdoings being committed by all of the dwarves right here in Dobanga Pit... Dwarves who were doing exactly as they pleased.

Money-grubbers, they were, capitalizing on the postwar confusion, indulging in a specific selfish deed of theirs on an ongoing basis...

Few knew the truth about what was going on. Barabara was one of the few.

He had stayed out of it at first, feeling a sense of reservation, but perhaps the Orc King had decided to take action instead and had dispatched Bash to handle the matter...

Depending on how this all went down, Dobanga Pit could end up awash with blood.

“What is this orc up to now?”

“He’s going to enter the God of War tournament in a team with Primera, it seems... No doubt he’s having his way with her in exchange for helping her. He is an orc, after all...”

Barabaradobanga breathed a sigh of relief, hearing this.

Entering the God of War tournament.

So the orc planned to handle those aforementioned rascallions in a way that would be most fair and public, in a way that would not lay waste to Dobanga Pit.

Barabara had reservations about this, of course.

However, it would still be a far better outcome this way, rather than seeing Dobanga Pit overflowing with corpses.

“...Then let him enter.”

“What?! How can you be so callous? Don’t you care about what happens to our poor sister?!”

Barabaradobanga resumed his practice swings.

It was not that he did not feel concern for his sister.

However, she had Bash in her corner.

The Orc Hero, who was no doubt sent here by the Orc King himself.

If his plan was to handle this matter peacefully, then surely the results wouldn’t be too disastrous.

By taking the path of entering the God of War tournament, it showed that the orcs had peaceful intentions toward the dwarves.

“As for Primera, I’m sure she’ll be fine. You’re far too overprotective, and that’s all there is to it.”

Even if something bad did happen to Primera, Barbara knew that she was always running her mouth and bragging, with nothing to back up her claims.

Perhaps it would be good for her to get a taste of reality for once.

Let her be defeated, let her realize how powerless she truly is. Let her fight her way back from such a setback using her own efforts.

Let her be tested.

Otherwise, she would continue on exactly as she always had.

In other words, it was Primera’s personal growth he was thinking of here.

But Calmera refused to accept this.

“Oh, is that the stance you’re taking? All right, then! I won’t come to you for help anymore! I feel like such an idiot for even talking to you in the first place! You see that girl as just the black sheep of the family, don’t you? You don’t even care if she gets hurt, do you?!”

“I didn’t say that...”

Barabaradobanga turned around, but Calmera was no longer there.

“Good grief... But that aside, it seems the orcs have made their move.”

It had been three years since the war ended, and things hadn’t improved since then.

But there were those who resisted.

“...”

Barabaradobanga liked to think of himself as true warrior, just as Doradoradobanga had been.

And thus, he always tried to live up to that image.

But he was not alone. There was another, a fellow warrior who also followed the same path.

Even now, that warrior was facing a terrible situation, but he was doing his best to fight.

“I can only hope that his efforts do not fail...”

All Barabaradobanga could do was pray for the warrior’s good fortune in the fight to come.

5

THE GOD OF WAR FESTIVAL TOURNAMENT PRELIMS: THE OPENING CEREMONY

The God of War tournament's battle primary was progressing smoothly, and with dwarflike efficiency.

Each participating team was assigned a number, and their warriors would engage in a duel with whomever also held that number. The winner of the first round would go on to the next. Your basic tournament setup.

Each fighting contestant would face two bouts per day, and this would continue until there was only one person left standing as the victor.

New contestants could register to enter right up until the top sixty-four had been decided.

And in some cases, the number of contestants would keep increasing, and the tournament could go for months.

This year's festival had already amassed a record-breaking number of participants.

And so, the festival just kept running, day after day after day.



“Winner, number 566!”

Bash had done well during the preliminaries.

In five days of fighting, he had won all ten of his bouts.

None were particularly grueling battles, but he did break the occasional sweat here and there.

And that was because of the God of War tournament's rules.

The tournament had two conditions under which a bout could be decided. The first condition that would automatically end a match was the loss of

consciousness—or death—of either participant.

The second loss condition was if either participant's gear was broken.

In other words, if the armor they wore or the weapon they wielded became so damaged as to become unusable, it would lead to an instant disqualification.

The gear Primera made was prone to breaking.

Ah, but perhaps we cannot write her off so easily as that.

The plate armor she had crafted was sturdy, a good match for Bash's physique. And his sword was like a lump of raw iron. Clearly, it was most durable.

Of the two, the plate metal fared better.

In five days of fighting, it hadn't gotten a single scratch on it.

But the sword was a different beast altogether.

After only a bout or two, it would end up getting either bent or twisted.

Up until now, each of Bash's preliminary fights had ended in a single hit, but if a protracted bout were to occur, there was a high chance Bash would end up losing on account of an unusable sword.

“...”

Bash looked around, holding his sword. It could no longer fit its scabbard.

Out on the battlefield, another bout was underway.

The audience was sparse.

Most of the dwarves who lived in Dobanga Pit would either enter the tournament as warriors or craft armor for it.

They rarely went to the coliseum except for when their number was called.

The spectators were made up of tourists and the other fighters who had already lost.

The successful fighters were lingering on the arena floor, roaring and brandishing their weapons, as if to show off.

Yelling at the top of one's lungs, making sure everyone around was aware of

their battle prowess.

Even in orc society, taking a post-battle victory lap was considered part of the appeal of winning.

But only when one's opponent had been somewhat of an equal match.

Crowing about one's victory over a weak opponent... Such a thing would be considered gauche.

That was part of the unwritten code of the orcs.

Accordingly, Bash had no intention of gloating over the victories he'd achieved so far.

Besides, his objective in entering this tournament had not been to earn glory.

He wanted to win and acquire himself a bride. He would do no more than was necessary to achieve that.

Still, Bash raised his sword arm high.

Primera was seated in the stands, you see.

It was not a form of boasting.

Primera had insisted that he show her the condition of his gear after every battle.

Seeing the twisted sword, she gnashed her teeth in anguish.

The desired result had eluded them again this time.

Well, of course it had eluded them. Yet again, the darned sword she'd smithed had gotten knocked crooked.

Still, Bash had fought the requisite two battles for that day, so he left the arena and returned to the backstage area.

"So then I said, get your filthy hands off me, if you don't want to get blown away! But I was up against five giant ogres. I may be strong, but I'd break a bone trying to blast them all! I'd end up snapping both arms! Still, I had to try, for the pride of the fairy race! But just then...one of the ogres went flying! Who here has ever seen an ogre go flying through the air? Well, I have! Seen an ogre go flying, I mean. And I saw who flung him, too. That's right! It was that man

there! My boss, the one I respect more than anyone else in the world... Bash himself!"

"Wow!"

Bash entered the backstage area to find Zell boasting again.

"Aha! And here he is, the boss man himself! Welcome back, Boss! How did your match go?! Ah, but you don't even need to tell me! This is the boss we're talking about, after all! You squashed your enemy like a bug and have returned victorious, of course! Good job, Boss! Ah, I've got us some drinks! Take one, take one! And how about a shoulder massage, hmm?"

"Hmm."

Bash looked over at the seat he'd occupied up until his number had been called. There was a soft cushion there, and the table was laden with drinks.

Bash sat down as suggested, picked up a drink, and gulped it down with an audible glugging noise.

Zell zoomed over to his shoulders and began squeezing.

Apparently, this was the fairy's idea of a shoulder massage.

But even with Zell leaning all their fairy weight onto him, Bash's shoulders were too meaty to feel any benefit.

However, the fairy dust that fell from Zell's body down onto Bash's shoulders did help a little to relieve some of the stiffness.

"E-excuse me, Mr. Bash?"

It was one of the warriors who had been listening to Zell boast.

A lone man, clad in metal armor and carrying a broadsword. There was nothing to distinguish him from any of the other men in the backstage area.

The only thing that stood out was his reptilian face.

He was a lizardman.

"...What?"

"It is an honor to meet you! I am Tydonile, a warrior from the Pyles River

Gecko tribe!"

"Ah."

He could not place the lizardman's face nor his name.

Based on the lizardman's build and demeanor, Bash doubted if he had seen much military service...

"Have we met?"

Still, Bash thought it best to be polite, in case this was actually someone he did know. Tydonile nodded, clearly pleased.

"Indeed, we have! I was still tiny at the time. You saved my life at the battle of the Pyles River."

"The battle of the Pyles River, eh? I remember it well."

The battle of the Pyles River.

It was another battle that had stayed with Bash after the war.

It had begun when the tactics employed by the elf forces led to a company of succubi being isolated from their fellows.

The elf forces had narrowed in on the succubi, cooperating with the dwarves in what would be a devastating attack.

Naturally, the company of succubi attempted to retreat.

But for a certain reason, they ended up standing their ground instead.

They had had no other choice.

Because while fleeing, they had run up against a single village.

A village of lizardmen.

The small village, which consisted of huts built along the banks of the river, was still populated by the civilians who had stayed behind.

The company of succubi were not able to turn their backs on the civilian village, and so they stopped here.

By the time Bash received a request for assistance and arrived at the village, the company of succubi were all but annihilated, and the village was a smoking

ruin.

Half the succubi warriors lay soaked in blood, and the lizardman civilians were completely subdued, collars around their necks, about to be taken away.

Then Bash arrived on the scene and rushed the enemy forces, saving what remained of the succubus company and rescuing the POWs.

He did recall there being tiny lizardman children among the surrounded POWs.

This man must have been one of them.

“Yes. If it wasn’t for you showing up when you did, Mr. Bash, then I’m certain I’d be a dwarf POW by now, forced to fight in this arena... If I had even survived that long, that is.”

“Right.”

The battle was lodged in Bash’s memory, all right. Lodged firmly.

Ah yes, the bare skin and jiggling bosoms of the succubi warriors.

“So anyway, I heard that an eminent orc warrior was here, and I was just wondering who it could possibly be when I heard that he had a fairy with him. I was like, it’s got to be the Orc Hero Bash! I was finally going to be able to meet my savior!”

Just then, a voice rang out, calling: “Next up, number 409!”

“Oh, that’s me,” said Tydonile, raising his hand and beginning to trot over to the entrance to the arena. He paused after a mere step, though, turning back toward Bash.

“Um... I was wondering if I could maybe shake your hand?”

“Sure.”

“Oh my! What a big hand! And so powerful... I’m going to do my best so I can be a great warrior like you!”

Then with that, Tydonile turned and hurried off into the arena with a spring in his step.

“Looks like a young hopeful on a journey of self-actualization, eh? Wants to

be just like the boss, does he? A young man of taste!"

Zell nodded beside Bash, their fairy face filled with satisfaction.

"So then, what's next, Boss? You've done your two fights, but how about one more?"

"Not with this weapon. I'll call it quits for today..."

But before Bash could finish speaking...

He found himself surrounded by a group of brawny men.

All of them had tightly drawn lips and stern eyes.

Here was a human, then there was a beastkin, and a dwarf...all heavily battle-scarred, rough types.

"What do you want?"

Bash had a reason for suspecting that they had come to pick a fight.

He had been faced with just such a situation many times since coming to Dobanga Pit.

It happened every time he went to a tavern. He would be approached by tough-looking dwarves, yelling all manner of abusive things, everything from "*Hands off, you!*" to "*You'll slobber over anything in a skirt, you will!*" before they suddenly fled.

No one dared try to land a blow. Instead, they just hurled verbal abuse at him before running away. A disgrace to warriors everywhere.

Even a coolheaded guy like Bash was beginning to get frustrated with the situation.

But this was the backstage area of the arena. Fighting between participants was strictly forbidden.

They would need to take this outside, and...

"Uh... Please, shake my hand as well!"

"Is it true you felled a dragon at the decisive battle of the Remium Plateau? Please, won't you tell us the story?!"

“Could you hold this sword I forged? Just for a second? And if possible, could you tell me what you think of it...?”

The men clamored around him, gushing about this and that.

“All right now, simmer down! Form an orderly line! The boss doesn’t have all day, you know!”

Zell’s high, clear voice rang out, and the motley crew of men, who would normally prefer to fight it out for the top place, simply fell into line.

Yes, they lined up very nicely indeed, in two neat rows.



Meanwhile, Primera was waiting by the arena’s entrance for Bash.

Back resting against a pole, arms crossed, fidgeting with annoyance, and listening closely to what the people leaving the arena were saying.

“What do you think of Number 566...the orc?”

“Amazing.”

“There’s quite the gap between his number and ours...but what’ll we do if we face him in the finals?”

“I’d withdraw from the tournament... We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“But think about it seriously. If you did win against him, your name would go down in the history books...!”

“...Hmm, in that case...I’d probably go after his armor. Bash is said to be so tough he could take on ten ogres without even breaking a sweat. But his armor looks mediocre. And his sword seems to end up getting bent each bout of his. If I went for the armor, I might have a chance against him.”

“Right. We should show everyone that the God of War tournament ain’t just about killin’ each other, you know?”

Bash’s armor was *mediocre*?

Hearing that made Primera angrier than ever.

Over the past few days, it had become clear to Primera that Bash was no

ordinary warrior.

He had made it through ten bouts of the preliminaries without even needing to exert much effort.

Among the opponents, many seemed to know Bash. At any rate, they all seemed determined to fight to the death against him.

But some among them broke down in tears right before their bouts against him began, wetting their pants in terror.

The favorites to win the competition would show up to observe Bash's bouts, and each time Bash took to the arena floor, the crowd seemed to be bigger.

Even today, when the stands were still mostly empty, there was a moderate-size crowd here to watch, even though it was still just the preliminaries.

"I thought it was just a rumor, but it seems to be true."

"He's something else, that's for sure. Did you see his face after he won? He just walked out of the arena like it was no big deal!"

"It gave me the chills!"

The returning spectators were all praising Bash as they left. But at the same time...

"His gear wasn't up to snuff, though."

"Yeah, did you see his sword? It got all mangled again today."

"Won't get to the final like that."

"Yeah, it's only a matter of time until he gets knocked out of the competition..."

They were all disparaging Primera's weaponry.

If only the big oaf could handle my gear with more finesse...

Primera gnashed her teeth again.

Apparently, Bash was a famous warrior. During the war, he had clearly left his mark.

Well, in that case, she wished he would wield her weapons less brutally.

He swung her sword around like it was a club.

A sword should be used to slice one's opponent cleanly with the blade for maximum damage.

It shouldn't be hefted and swung carelessly about. No wonder the blade ended up bending and warping.

Even a mere blacksmith like Primera understood that much.

Hit your opponent with the sharp side of the blade. Bash couldn't even manage that much? Some famous warrior.

"Thanks for waiting."

Hearing the voice, Primera lifted her head.

There he stood, with his usual empty-headed expression. Bash.

Holding her sword, bent and warped beyond recognition.

She had seen it from the stands, but up close, it was a real mess.

"Give me that!"

Primera snatched away the sword and scrutinized the bent part.

Then she gnashed her teeth once more.

The blade was completely crooked.

Again.

And the way it was bent...not sideways, but up. It had not snapped, only bent. Just what had he been doing to disfigure the sword so?

Primera could not imagine. She simply could not imagine.

She had tried all kinds of methods to keep the metal from warping. But it was no use. And she was fresh out of ideas now.

That was why she blew up at Bash.

"You absolute oaf! You did it again! How many times do I have to tell you to slash with the *sharp* side?!"

"I thought I did."

“What?! You clearly did not!”

Bash looked deeply apologetic.

Seeing this, Primera backed down.

At first, she thought she would be fine with any warrior at all. Thinking even a weakling could win if they donned her amazing armor.

So it was not fair of her to blame her warrior’s lack of skill.

Still, she could not help being annoyed. He lacked so much more polish than she had thought, after all.

“I’m going home! It’s almost time for the finals to begin, but now I have to go and forge a new sword!”

Primera stomped off.

Bash followed nervously behind her.

The fairy fluttered close to his ear, muttering.

Primera could not hear what the fairy was saying, but she was sure it was criticizing her.

“Pah!” she spat, unable to hide her vexation.



Three days later, the God of War tournament’s finals began with an opening ceremony.

The event was cloaked with a strange atmosphere.

The excitement of the audience was cranked up to the max. The stands were packed, heating up Dobanga Pit like an active volcano.

In contrast, the warriors lined up in the arena were stoic and silent.

Usually the warriors would be waving their weapons and yelling at the crowd as they only half listened to the speeches held by the dwarf organizers in charge of the event.

Others would be quieter. Trembling with fear, and yet at the same time burning with an inner desire to prove themselves.

I will be the one to win every fight and emerge the victor.

With such a feeling in their chests, they would regard their opponents with shrewd and challenging eyes.

But this year was different.

More than half were in a state of high anxiety. They stood silent, like trembling sheep.

Many had pale faces and were shaking so hard that their bones rattled. Others were openly weeping.

The others stood stock-still.

Chests puffed out; corners of mouths turned up into grins.

As if they were just proud to be standing out there.

As if they were announcing themselves honored not only to be here in the finals, but to share the same arena with *him*.

A few of that number even wept tears of deep emotion.

They were all focused on one thing.

The man who stood at the very back of the line.

A solitary orc, his green skin stretched tight over a muscular frame.

The God of War tournament was a test of physical strength.

Many races had representatives taking part, but the only ones who had made it this far were the ones who had a long history of success during the war.

And every single representative knew his name.

Even if there was one among them who did not know him, they would have to be someone who had only distinguished themselves in the three years after the war. Either that or it would have to be someone who had never encountered Bash on the battlefield.

Ah, but no. They would have heard of him anyway, by reputation alone.

The Mad Warrior. The Annihilator. The Raging Bull. Steel Arm. The Green Disaster. The Dragon Decapitator. The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest.

All knew at least one of his monikers.

Even if they could not tell one orc from another, they would know him.

They would know of Bash, the Orc Hero...

The opening ceremony continued, amid a tense atmosphere, finally drawing to its conclusion.

All the fighters returned to the backstage area, not a one of them having roared out.

The arena was abuzz with an atmosphere that had never been present in other years.

“The fighters have been so stoic this year. Did they change the rules or something?”

“Ya mean ya don’t know? That orc, standing at the back of the line... He’s this famous warrior who slayed a hundred thousand men during the war, single-handed...”

“Don’t talk so foolish. There’s no way that’s true.”

“Oi! I heard somethin’ different. The real truth about that orc is...”

Rumors were flying every which way.

Even the select few who did not initially know of Bash heard the rumors and struggled to believe them at first.

Why would such a man have come here?

“It must be because of what’s been going on...”

“Hmm, possibly. There’s no way the orcs would just quietly stand for that.”

“But to go so far as to send a Hero here... The merchants have seriously crossed the line.”

“I’ve got a feelin’ this year’s tournament is gonna be a gruesome one...”

A few seemed to have figured out what was ostensibly going on.

But there was nothing that could be done about it.

They simply nodded, with knowing looks on their faces, and waited in anxious

anticipation for the first bout to begin.

Of course, none of them knew the real story.

6

THE GOD OF WAR FESTIVAL TOURNAMENT: DAY ONE

The backstage area, before the finals began.

Primera was having a conversation with Bash, her face twisted with irritation.

“Now listen. I put in extra effort for the gear you’ll be using in the finals. However, it won’t last long with your brutish way of fighting. I won’t waste any more breath telling you to improve your sword work. But try to use your brain and think for yourself how you can extend the life of that gear.”

“All right.”

For the finals, warrior-artisan teams had their own rooms in the backstage area.

Each was equipped with a forge and anvil, so that simple smithing work could be done at any time. Basic repair work was permitted for any gear that had become damaged during a bout.

However, there was not much time allocated for repair work.

As soon as one bout ended, the next would begin immediately.

The first round would be comprised of thirty-two bouts, but the number of participants would quickly decrease, as only the winners continued. This would mean that time for repair work would also decrease.

Naturally, there would be no time for gear overhauls or for new parts to be forged.

Of course, not all the fights would take place over a single day.

On the first day, there would be three rounds, during which the top eight would be decided, and then the following set of three rounds would decide the overall winner.

Only three rounds. But these were the real deal, where genuine war heroes would fight with all they had. Their gear would be sure to take a pounding.

There would only be time for the simplest of repairs.

That was considered the true test of the blacksmiths.

"At any rate, if you can't make it past today's three rounds, then our chances of winning will be slim to none."

Primera was not exactly filled with confidence.

The sword she had forged was the culmination of her life's work.

She had spent the few days leading up to the final working tirelessly on it. And she felt confident that it was several magnitudes more durable than the one Bash had used during the preliminaries.

But the baseless confidence she had been filled with before entering the tourney... It seemed to have deserted her.

Well, how could it not? She still had not figured out the exact causes behind the repeated warping of Bash's blade.

"I'll do what I can."

Bash took the sword in hand and gave it a few practice swings as he spoke.

Beside him, Zell nodded with pride. As if to say, *I've watched over this man's swordsmanship ever since the early days.*

Primera looked at Zell.

"Zell, what are you still doing here?"

"What? Why are you picking on me? Am I not allowed to be here or something?"

"No, you're not."

"What?! I'm being kicked out of the dream team now?! I won't stand for this! The three of us made it this far *together*, didn't we? Besides, I'm not even doing anything! I'm just hovering here! Oh, but... Wait... What's wrong with your hands? Ah, you worked too hard last night and ended up burning your fingers, didn't you? Smashed them with the hammer, too, huh? Wasn't paying

attention, were you? Oh, but what's that? No, no, no, your hands are perfectly fine...now. Yes, as strong and healthy as ever! And why's that, you ask? Is it because a certain *fairy* healed them for you? Isn't that right?!"

"Uh...yeah. Thank you for that. I do appreciate it. It's just that this room is off-limits to everyone but the artisans and their warriors."

"Oh, is it, now?!"

It was true. The backstage rooms were exclusively for artisan and warrior use.

Zell had zoomed in after Bash, no doubt assuming that the air in the room was surely an exception to the rule, but no. Off-limits meant off-limits.

Especially to fairies, who had the advantage of producing healing fairy dust.

If Zell was caught here, Bash and Primera would both be disqualified.

"Hmph! All right, all right. I'll go and watch from the stands and make sure someone's got eyes on Bash while he performs his heroics! Give it all ya got, Boss!"

"Mm-hm."

Zell zoomed out of the room.

Now it was just Bash and Primera in there.

Bash's eyes drifted toward Primera, as if pulled to her magnetically.

Primera was dressed lightly for smithing work.

Bash felt his virgin's heart burn with longing as he stared at the ample cleavage on display.

"Wh-what? What are you staring at?"

"Do not be concerned. I am merely looking. The Orc King has outlawed nonconsensual mating with other species."

"Uhhh... Okay. Well, I suppose it's fine if you're just looking. I'm not exactly easy on the eyes, though..."

"I disagree."

"R-right... Y-you've got some odd tastes, you know that?"

Primera didn't feel threatened by Bash's gaze or anything.

In truth, she had come to an unfortunate realization back when she was a teenager.

As a half-human, she existed well outside of dwarven beauty standards.

No man had ever shown any interest in her...until Bash had come along.

"Um... At any rate, as I said before, we need to focus on the first bout. I got a look at the tournament sheet earlier, and your first opponent is a real tough guy: Golgol the ogre. Do you know him?"

"Of course. We fought side by side in the war."

"So then you know of his strength."

"He's a capable warrior."

"Well, you need to take him down, first of all..."

"Hm."

Bash nodded.

He wore his usual expression, the one that Primera could never read. His face didn't betray nervousness, or anything else for that matter.

"Do you think this will be a tough fight for you?"

"No, I don't. I plan to win this tournament."

Primera's eyes widened as she scrutinized Bash once more.

He still had his eyes on her, as he always did.

His gaze was completely steady. Those eyes seemed to say, *I'll win. Have faith in me.*

Even though he was holding a sword in his hand that had bent from only one or two swings.

"...You plan to win the tournament, huh?"

Primera thought that winning the tournament sounded extremely difficult.

At first, yes, she had aimed to win.

But now, the difficulty of the tournament had finally sunk in for her.

And the reason for that was Bash.

It was all because of his ridiculous brute strength. If only he was a better fighter, if only he could wield her sword with some finesse, instead of slamming it about like a club... Maybe then, they would have a chance at winning...

Yes, this time around, victory seemed remote.

It was her fault, really. Her own poor choice of warrior.

Yes, overall victory was unlikely, but there was at least one fighter who Primera desperately wanted to defeat.

"Well, at any rate, today's the day! The first three bouts of day one. You at least need to get past those. All right?!"

"Of course."

The first day. Three rounds.

Then they would encounter a beastkin warrior by the name of Koro. He was a problematic type, and no one had anything good to say about him personally, but he was a fine warrior.

He wasn't a big deal, though.

The real issue was the person who would be outfitting Koro for the fight.

The individual in question was the one Primera wanted so badly to beat.

One who had looked down on her for years.

Bash may have been a ham-fisted oaf of a warrior, but what she wanted most of all was for him to get her a victory against Koro. She needed that victory.

And that feeling had only intensified.

"Mr. Bash! Your match is about to begin!"

A member of the staff had come to summon Bash to the arena.

"All right. Off you go, then!"

Primera slapped Bash on his bare, meaty shoulder.

For a few moments, Bash was stunned by the feel of her soft hand on his skin. It wasn't as delicate as the hand of your typical elf or human woman, but to Bash, it felt like heaven all the same.

"...Right!"

And with that enthusiastic grunt, Bash exited the backstage room.



The First Round: Bash vs. Golgom

Two men stood in the arena.

One had reddish-brown skin.

He stood well over ten feet in height, a member of a race known for thick shoulders and square jaws.

He was an ogre.

He carried a huge sword, almost as large as he was. It was a broadsword. He was clad in iron armor.

Golgol the ogre.

During the war, he was known as the Iron Titan. A man capable of making any member of the Alliance of Four quake in their boots. Every dwarf knew his name.

His impetus for participating in this tournament was a friend he had made by chance during the war.

His friend was a dwarf who had been captured as a prisoner of war.

The two had gotten acquainted during those dark days as POWs, and after the war their friendship had only deepened. Now they entered the tournament together each year, as a warrior-artisan team.

In the tournament that was held two years prior, they placed sixteenth. In last year's tournament, they placed eighth. As far as results go, it was not that impressive. But it was because his dwarf friend had not been able to craft suitable armor and weaponry to outfit the ogre.

In terms of raw battle prowess, the ogre should have been right at the top in

the tourney ranking. He was certainly one of the favorites to win.

His opponent stood around six and a half feet tall.

He had green skin. An average sort of orc warrior.

But despite his unremarkable appearance, he was an extremely famous man.

The Orc Hero Bash.

The strongest of all orcs.

Even those who did not know him would certainly recognize the name. At least, they would know his nickname... The Destroyer.

“Oi, oi, take a look at this matchup! Starting things off with a bang, eh?”

“Golgol’s skills put him in the top class of contestants. Even an orc’s got to put forth his best effort if he wants to have any hope of beating him.”

“Bash needs to get in close to Golgol in order to land a hit. That’s really going to be the key to beating him here.”

The spectators were excited. To think, such a duel against greats, taking place so early into the finals.

But some of the spectators trembled instead.

“...Did you hear that?”

“I almost envy them. They don’t know how terrifying he really is...”

“This isn’t going to be a bout. It’s gonna be an execution.”

They were gazing at the war-hardened ogre with sadness in their eyes.

They knew that Golgol’s fate was to become mincemeat.

During the war, these individuals were the ones who had barely escaped such a fate at the hands of Bash.

Armor would not save him.

It didn’t matter how talented the blacksmith was who had crafted that armor. One strike from the orc would pulverize it.

The Destroyer had not only laid waste to the city. He had laid waste to

everything.

They could only pray that Golgol himself would manage to make it out alive.

That was the best they could hope for the ogre. For they knew Bash too well.

“Bash.”

“Golgol. Long time.”

Golgol seemed oblivious to the fear of the crowd. He met Bash with a grin on his face.

Bash, too, kept his composure.

They both knew each other.

“It’s been since the decisive battle at the Remium Plateau, hasn’t it? Been well?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So the Orc King gave you permission to leave orc country, did he?”

“In his infinite wisdom and boundless compassion.”

“Pfft.”

Golgol snorted with laughter.

The Orc King, Nemesis, was rage and murder personified. You could scour the world and never find another person who would regard him as wise or compassionate. Bash was surely the only one.

“Well, then...”

After that short back and forth, Golgol readied his sword.

He raised its tip to the heavens, casting a shadow over Bash.

His face was twisted, lips drawn tight, teeth grinding.

The face of an ogre warrior.

It was the face of a man who had to face an opponent against whom he had no hope of victory.

“Shall we?”

“Yeah.”

Bash readied his sword, and a silence fell over the arena.

All he had done was brandish his weapon.

He adjusted his stance a little to prepare for his swing. But Golgol knew, and the audience knew, that Bash would not leave himself open to attack. Not for a moment.

All understood that this bout would be decided within a split second.

The dwarves forgot about the mugs of ale clenched in their fists.

Crying babes in their mothers’ arms fell silent.

Bash’s simple adoption of battle stance had been so impactful upon the audience, they were rendered spellbound.

In contrast, Golgol seemed puny, pathetic.

“Hnng!”

Golgol sprang into action.

He swung down with his sword, an uncomplicated attack. It was a telegraphed swing, to be sure, but the force of it alone should have been enough to obliterate his opponent completely.

Crash. A storm of sand exploded up into the air. Wet clumps of earth scattered all around.

He had obscured Bash’s field of vision.

Several in the audience assumed that was what had happened. But then something came flying out of the dust cloud.

The audience assumed that it was a piece of Golgol’s flesh.

At least, those seasoned in war thought that was what it must have been.

Because, of course, all who had challenged Bash in war had ended up that way.

Those who had tangled with Bash on the battlefield had that mental image seared into their memories.

But they were mistaken.

It was neither chunk of flesh nor freshet of blood.

The object flew lightly through the air and then made contact with the ground, causing another crashing sound and causing another, smaller dust cloud.

Now they could identify the object.

It was a clump of iron.

Every dwarf recognized it at once.

All eyes turned to Golgol. The sword he still held was now missing its tip.

The referee bellowed:

“Winner, Bash!”

It was all over in a matter of seconds.

They could only guess that Bash must have also swung and deflected Golgol’s sword by its tip.

It was also possible that Golgol had missed Bash and damaged his own sword by slamming it into the arena floor. But the sword of a tournament finalist should not have been so easily undone by simply being slammed against the ground.

There were no cheers.

Nobody was quite sure what had just happened, you see.

Could it be possible that Bash, the Destroyer himself, had gone easy on Golgol?

Bash returned his sword to its scabbard and headed back to the backstage area.

Golgol watched him go in disbelief.

The audience wondered if Golgol would pitch another fit.

During last year’s tourney, Golgol’s gear had failed him and he had been unable to accept his defeat. He had gone on quite the rampage that day.

They expected the same thing to happen this year.

But he simply shut his eyes in resignation, knelt down, and placed both fists on the ground.

It was a traditional ogre gesture, an expression of defeat.

And a show of respect toward a warrior whom they considered to be outstanding.

No one knew exactly what had transpired.

But it was very clear that Golgol the ogre had accepted defeat.

Last year, things had gotten very bloody indeed, and despite several other warriors rushing in to help subdue Golgol, he had continued to scream and thrash, refusing to accept defeat. That same Golgol now knelt, all fighting spirit gone, as a result of a single blow that hadn't left a scratch on him.

This realization began to sink in with the crowd. And then, as one, they erupted into cheers.



The Second Round: Bash vs. Geddon

Bash was standing out in the arena, but his opponent had not yet arrived.

Bash simply stood and waited, holding his sword.

But despite waiting and waiting, his opponent had not shown up. The audience began booing, and their anger sizzled throughout the arena.

Finally, a lone dwarf appeared out in the middle of the ring.

It was the same dwarf who had come to summon Bash for the first round.

Was he to be Bash's opponent, then? Bash brandished his weapon, immediately coming to that assumption, but no, the dwarf was unarmed.

The dwarf untucked a small red flag from his belt and waved it in the air for everyone to see.

The booing increased in intensity.

"Winner, Bash!

Bash's victory was announced.

Geddon had forfeited.



The Third Round: Bash vs. Koro

Finally, the time had come for Bash's third round.

Bash went out into the arena, but his opponent was, once again, nowhere to be seen.

Closing his eyes, Bash recalled the conversation he had had with Primera backstage.

Primera had been delighted about the no-show in the second round. "The next one is the important one. *Really* important..." It was like she was talking to herself. As if she was trying to give herself a pep talk, and not Bash.

Seeing her in her thin leather jerkin, Bash's motivation had gone into overdrive.

Yes, Primera had been delighted, but Bash had been disappointed by his second opponent's cowardice.

After the first round, Primera had fixed Bash's gear at the forge. He was entranced by the sight of her hard at work on her smithing.

Every time she swung her hammer, her breasts jiggled, and whenever she wiped her sweat, he could see her exposed armpit. With her arm raised that way, Bash even got a glimpse at some side boob—a rare treat, indeed.

It had taken every inch of Bash's self-control not to throw himself on her.

"And now, entering through the Tiger Gate... The warrior Koro!"

A man entered the arena through the gate opposite to the one Bash had used.

He had black fur, and a snout like a beast.

He was still fairly young.

Probably a few years younger than Bash.

Koro. Bash knew that name. As a young man, he had been an eminent captain in the beastkin army.

Yes, a notable captain in the beastkin army's special attack unit, famous for conducting kamikaze attacks upon the enemy.

It was a suicidal battle tactic. But this man had survived to the end of the war. His ability was without question.

So much so, in fact, that during the war he had received the Wolf Fang Medal of Honor.

A medal given to only those warriors considered the most heroic and triumphant.

Hmm.

What had happened after that, Bash had no idea.

A special unit captain with a medal of honor.

In orc country, receiving such an accolade would have meant living out one's days in a position of extreme privilege, wanting for nothing.

What was such a man doing here?

It was the man's attitude that was the cause of all his troubles.

After the war, Koro had committed several violent and senseless acts. As a result, he lost his position in society and was cast out of beastkin country. After wandering across the land, he had finally washed up here, at Dobanga Pit.

Naturally, his terrible behavior had only continued at the Pit.

However, Dobanga Pit was different from other places in one aspect.

Right. Dobanga Pit had a coliseum.

This man, who had always believed a show of strength was the way to succeed, had finally found a place for himself in this confusing age of peace.

However, during last year's tourney, he had encountered a terrible setback.

He had been knocked out in the second round.

It was his first entrance into the tournament, and he had indeed fought hard.

The defeat burned him up inside.

Accepting defeat, however, he had dedicated himself to his training.

Unfortunately for him, his terrible attitude had led to an inability to obtain something vital to participating in the tournament.

That's right. Gear.

Then a lone dwarf had appeared before him.

This dwarf had chastised Koro for his antics with a teasing tongue.

"Quit barking at everyone like a rabid dog and try fighting fair for once."

Koro had knocked the dwarf flying, incensed over being spoken to this way. But the dwarf had returned the very next day, nonchalant, and lectured Koro again about his violent ways.

"Why don't you try listening to me for once, hmm?"

The dwarf had been relentless, returning again, and again Koro had scoffed. Never would he listen to a dwarf. But one day, on a whim, he decided to indulge the dwarf and follow their advice.

It happened in the arena, after defeating his opponent.

Usually he would kick his enemy, or insult him, or even spit on him. But this time, he actually helped him to his feet.

It had been a particularly tough fight. Koro was tired, and at first, the people assumed that he merely lacked the energy to finish off his opponent. Either that or their eyes were deceiving them.

The next moment, though, Koro found himself being cheered by the crowd.

Every spectator in the arena was screaming with admiration for him.

He had not received such praise since the war had ended.

After that day, Koro changed.

His aggressive nature stayed, though.

He threw his weight around, spat on the street, and berated and disparaged his opponent before bouts.

But he stopped stomping on the warriors he downed altogether.

The dwarf who had chastised Koro was pleased to see this.

See, you can do it when you try, they praised Koro.

Koro felt good about himself. And he decided to ask the dwarf artisan to outfit him with gear for the tournament.

The dwarf was much taken aback but still agreed readily.

A few months had passed. The dwarf worked tirelessly, iterating on their weapon and armor designs to make gear that suited Koro perfectly.

Now he had an artisan, and he had gear.

He was all set for success in the tournament this year.

And the dwarf artisan who teamed up with Koro?

Her name was Calmeradobanga.

“...”

The audience all expected Koro to confront Bash and hurl insults at him.

For up until now, Koro had always done so. Before every bout, he would brutally dress down his opponent with his venomous tongue.

So they were sure that he would belittle his opponent this time as well.

But they were wrong.

As the two warriors squared off before the start of battle, Koro bowed low, tail curling in.

This had never happened before.

Never had Koro bowed to an opponent. He had only menaced them.

For a beastkin warrior to bow...

Such a thing would only happen when receiving the honor of testing one's mettle against a warrior they considered their superior.

Koro regarded Bash highly. As an opponent he believed outmatched him.

And what he did after that was again very different from the mocking stance

he took toward his usual opponents.

He girded his loins and held his sword down low to one side of his body, a beastkin army battle formality.

He had mastered the beastkin army's battle tactics.

"It is...an honor to be able to fight against you."

Koro surprised himself by his own respectful attitude.

Were he up against the hero warrior Reto himself, he would boast and brag, claiming confidence in his imminent victory.

But he bowed almost as if by reflex, and his words were unrehearsed.

Koro himself was not sure why.

But this was the third round of the tournament.

The stage he had failed to reach last year. The stage he could never have reached alone.

And now his opponent was the Orc Hero Bash. The famed warrior, known by all who had survived the battlefields of the war.

And so, Koro felt he should act with respect.

And he never doubted his decision.

"Hmm."

Bash nodded, readying his sword.

The battle began in silence.

Koro charged soundlessly at Bash, circling around him on the right.

Then he hit the brakes. Dodging from Bash's right to his left, Koro swung his sword.

There was a flash.

Bash's arm shot out, sending Koro flying like a limp puppy.

His body flew several feet in the air, easily sailing over the coliseum wall and crashing down on the spectator seats.

Luckily, the audience managed to scatter out of harm's way.

But it wasn't so lucky for Koro. There was no one to cushion his fall.

Koro did not rise again.

"Winner, Bash!"

The bout was over as soon as it had begun.

And Bash was the victor.

Koro had suffered an embarrassing loss, as part of the audience had well expected.

But no one laughed at his fate. There was actually a smattering of applause directed his way.

And so, Bash's entry into the final round was secured.

7

THE NOVICE AND THE SLAVE

Reaching the third round of the God of War tournament.

That was a huge achievement.

It was proof that warriors had shown their strength, and that artisans had demonstrated their skills.

Such a feat would bestow bragging rights, at least in Dobanga Pit, for years to come.

“...”

However, Primera's heart weighed heavy.

She had achieved her objective, to be sure.

A warrior, clad in gear she had crafted, had knocked out a warrior outfitted by her sister in the third round.

So how did you like that? See? I'm better than you.

Never again would her sister be able to dismiss her as a failure.

Primera had expected to feel elated.

...

But when she returned to her workshop after the first day was done, she was frowning.

In her hand, she held the sword Bash had used during his bouts.

This sword had made it through three fights.

It was as straight as an arrow, the tip glinting in the light.

It had not bent, as previous versions had. The blade wasn't even scratched.

Had her skills improved? Had her efforts finally paid off?

No.

Primera gazed at the gauntlets that lay atop her workbench.

They were bashed and shredded.

Gauntlets, to protect a warrior's hands and wrists.

She had made them to fit Bash's hands, made them as firm and durable as she could. During the preliminaries, the iron banding around them had loosened somewhat, but they hadn't even been scratched.

But now, the iron banding around the gauntlets had cracked and come apart.

As if something had hit them at great speed.

He punched his opponent... Using these...

Bash hadn't even used the sword she had forged.

It was these gauntlets she had fixed up after the first bout, not the sword.

Bash had smashed Golgo's giant broadsword with his fists and defeated him.

I told him to think of something, but this...

He had punched his opponent, using armor designed to protect his hands.

As far as the rules went, it was a real gray area.

During the current tournament, only swords were allowed for one's weapon. This was to make sure that everyone had the same advantage, to preserve equality.

Whipping out a different weapon during a bout was strictly against the rules. Accordingly, using a piece of armor as a weapon would also be against the rules.

That said, not every fight ended in a blow from a sword.

Warriors were also permitted to employ elbow strikes, knee hits, and headbutts against their opponent.

Those were all aboveboard. Dwarf tournaments aren't all that concerned with the rules after all.

So punching an opponent while wearing a gauntlet was probably okay.

Of course, the use of any armor that was specifically designed with weapon-like properties was forbidden.

The armor Primera had forged was all the standard type, so there was nothing to worry about there.

But armor was armor.

She had not expected Bash to use it this way. She could repair gauntlets up to a point, but she could not restore them to what they had been.

And these were clearly destroyed well beyond repair.

Bash had not used her sword. He had used the armor in ways it was not designed for.

As an artisan, there could be no greater humiliation.

How could Primera hold her head up in pride if her warrior had to resort to such tactics in order to win?

“I guess I’d better start repairing the armor, then...”

Muttering to herself, Primera looked over at her box of iron ingots, frowning deeply.

The iron ingots inside were just normal iron.

All of them had been carefully selected for their properties by Primera, but her supply was dwindling.

Under most circumstances, this amount would be more than enough to get her through the tournament...

“But if the armor keeps getting bashed up like this, it won’t be anywhere near enough...”

Primera fell silent then.

Despite the mess Bash had been making of his sword, his armor had, until now, come back pristine each time.

He had made it through easily with damage only to the sword.

“...”

Primera felt a twinge of pain deep within her.

But before she could put it into words, her feet started moving.

She went to confront Bash, who was discussing something with the fairy in the next room.

“Hey, you! Now that you’ve decided to start wrecking your armor as well, I don’t have enough material left! So I’m off to buy some more! Got that?”

“Hmm. I see.”

Bash didn’t even look tired despite the three bouts he had fought. He got to his feet and made to follow Primera.

They arrived at the ore marketplace.

For as long as she could remember, Primera had been coming here, and it was here that she learned to appraise ore.

She knew everything about the marketplace. Which shops sold which kind of ore. How to tell quality raw materials from subpar ones. And what a fair price should be.

It did not take long to get an eye for this stuff.

She could spot quality ore right away, and she believed that, with enough skill, she could craft quality gear, even if it wasn’t the best the world had ever seen. She believed she had what it took.

So she always identified what she needed quickly, made her purchases, and then headed home.

Without a single moment of hesitation.

“Hmm...”

But Primera was torn.

In front of a mound of raw ore, she picked up chunk after chunk, scrutinizing it with a frown, before tossing it back down.

She shook her head in front of the mound of dull-colored ore and headed

over to a pile that glowed red. There she frowned even deeper, gnashed her teeth, and shook her head again.

“Hey! How much time do you need just to buy some ore, huh?!”

The fairy was the one who had chastised Primera, impatiently.

But when was this fairy ever *not* impatient?

“...The next round is the finals. You can never take too much time in preparation.”

“Uh, can I be real here? Sure, it’s good to be an informed shopper, but takin’ all this time sweating it out over what’s the best option just isn’t it! The marketplace is a battlefield, you know?! You’ve got to go in hard and fast with your strategy! It’s the same with shopping! You need to make a list before you leave the house, or you’ll get confused! And don’t get distracted by impulse buys! You need to check off your list items first! Then you can spend whatever’s left on trinkets... Right, Boss?”

“You’re right. Hesitation on the battlefield only leads to death. I have seen many meet such a fate. And many of them I witnessed hesitating the day before a big battle.”

“In that case...!”

Primera whirled around.

She wore her usual expression.

Eyebrows down in the middle and pointing up at the ends. Teeth gnashed together. Her look of pure irritation. But her fists trembled, and her eyes were cloudy with indecision.

“In that case...what?”

“...”

But Primera couldn’t find the words to continue.

She had the feeling she’d better not say what was on her mind.

If she did, she felt that all she had ever held dear to her would begin to crumble.

“Wh-what do you think about these materials?”

“I don’t know anything about ore.”

“But you must have some preferences as to armor, no? What kind of armor would feel most reassuring for you to wear in tomorrow’s finals?”

She didn’t expect much from asking this.

This orc had never made a single request of her as an artisan so far.

Ah, but maybe that was only because Primera had never thought to ask him. All she had ever done was criticize his abilities and tell him to handle matters himself.

That said, she still didn’t expect much of a smart answer from dull-headed Bash.

If he did have an opinion, it would probably be something dumb like “sturdy armor, please,” or something like that.

“I’d prefer the armor I’ve grown used to. It’s the finals tomorrow, but I’m already accustomed to the armor I’ve been using so far. Extra durability is always welcomed, but if possible, I’d prefer it if no major changes were made.”

“What...?”

“Ah... You would prefer it if I was more specific? In that case, could you whip up something protective for the ankle region?”

“...”

Bash’s response was, as she expected, fairly vague and nonspecific. But Primera still felt as though she’d been hit in the head by a rock.

After that, Primera parted ways with Bash.

She chased Bash off to the taverns, saying that he would only distract her if he hung around the workshop.

Her tone was still heavy as she sent Bash away.

She had not bought any ore in the end.

If Bash did not want her to change up the type of armor, then she would be

able to make do with what she currently had.

She stood before her forge, staring blankly at it.

It was the finals next. She knew she had some improvements to make, some refinements, and some things she needed to craft from scratch. But she remained motionless.

She didn't know where to start.

"?"

Just then, someone rapped on the door to her workshop.

It was a hesitant sort of rap.

It was still too early for Bash to be back yet.

And most dwarves, who loved booze as much as orcs, would be in the taverns until the clock struck midnight.

Primera stiffened up.

The top eight fighters would be going into the finals tomorrow.

Among them, one name stood out...Barabaradobanga, the eldest son of the Dobanga Dynasty.

Had the Dobanga Dynasty dispatched assassins to ensure his victory...?

But Primera shook her head a moment after thinking this.

No, they wouldn't knock if that was the case.

If they wanted to block her from the tournament, they would be more aggressive about it. They would kick her door down, smash her workshop, and then leave triumphant.

Yes, that was probably what they'd do.

Primera opened the door, very carefully.

"...!"

An unexpected guest stood outside.

Ah, but then again, she'd be lying if she said she hadn't somewhat expected

this.

She had dreamed of this, you see.

Enter the God of War tournament. Show off her skills. Make the one who had mocked her weep and beg on her knees for forgiveness.

“Sister...”

“Hey...”

It was Calmeradobanga.

Her sister.

But she was not on her knees. She was standing there, arms crossed, looking uncomfortable.

“What do you want?”

“I... Well. I wanted to tell you something...now that things have played out the way they have.”

Bash’s opponent in the third round.

The beastkin, Koro.

The opponent Bash had felled with a single punch.

Calmera had failed to make it to the second day of the tournament, while Primera was still in the game. *That* was how things had played out.

“I’m sorry for, well, everything. I underestimated you.”

Calmera took the hip flask from her belt and offered it to Primera.

An apology was always served with alcohol. A dwarven custom.

If Primera accepted the flask, it would be taken as a sign of her having accepted the apology.

“...”

But Primera did not reach for the flask.

“So you’re not going to forgive me after all?”

Smiling wryly, Calmera withdrew the hip flask.

“...”

Primera felt torn up inside.

True, she had wished for this moment.

She had dreamed of snatching the hip flask from her sister and barking: *Never again will you speak ill of my mother.*

But Primera did not reach for it.

“Well, congratulations on making the top eight.”

“Thanks...”

“What’s wrong? I thought you would have been happier about it. You look terrible.”

True, Bash had beaten Koro...her sister’s warrior.

But did that make it Primera’s victory?

Not quite.

Her swords had bent. Her armor had been shattered.

Seeing how Bash had progressed through the tournament, it was obvious.

Bash was holding back. He wanted to win, so he was doing his best not to damage his gear. He was felling his opponents as carefully as he could. Even though armor was supposed to be something worn to protect the warrior.

Primera felt nothing but shame.

An artisan who crafts gear a warrior has to take special care not to break... What kind of artisan is that?

“Just leave, will you?”

“...Huh. You’re still planning on sulking, are you? That’s why you’ll always remain a novice. Making gear for an exceptional warrior is no easy feat. Now, I don’t know much about this Bash fellow, but even I could tell from watching his bouts that he’s top-class. Father never was satisfied with gear made by other dwarves, just like how an exceptional warrior like Bash would never be satisfied with mediocre gear like yours...”

“Just go!”

Calmera took several steps backward in shock.

“Now listen here! You know what your problem is...?!”

But Calmera bit her tongue midway through scolding her sister for her outburst.

Tears were beginning to roll down Primera’s cheeks.

Primera was never one to cry.

She always reacted with silent rage, teeth gritted, whenever anyone said something hurtful to her. She was the type to tough it out, not shed tears.

“...All right, all right, I’m going.”

And with that Calmera turned on her heel.

But after a few steps, she came to a stop.

“But know this, Primera. You need to face reality before it’s too late...”

And with those parting words, her sister left.

Primera went back into her workshop without even watching her go. She stood still in the center of the room.

In front of her lay the mangled right gauntlet and the left gauntlet that was still in the midst of repairs.

And the broadsword, that would no doubt bend again the moment Bash used it.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

So mumbled Primera, snot bubbling in her nose.



Around that time, Bash was in the tavern.

He was enjoying a celebratory pint with Zell, having made it through the first day of the main tournament.

No warrior would think to skip the post-battle victory drinking party.

Victory was a thing worth celebrating, and celebration was a must.

In the case of orcs, the celebrations usually involved indulging in the pleasures of the flesh with women they'd captured from the battlefield.

But Bash could postpone that until his eventual victory on day two of the main tournament.

Because if Bash won tomorrow, he would have a bride for sure, and then he, too, could drown in a world of physical pleasure.

“Then the boss took the stage! Instantly, he surveyed the area... He could see the bodies of his fallen comrades, the corpses of enemy soldiers. He simply couldn’t stay silent! The boss threw his head back and roared! Enemy bodies went flying every which way! The boss’s fire had been lit, and it would burn until he was satisfied!”

“Wow!”

At Bash’s table, Zell was putting on quite the performance.

Clutching a table knife in each hand, Zell lunged right, stabbing a lump of beefsteak. Then left, skewering a smoked ham.

The watching audience of men all cheered in approval.

But while the men were listening to Zell speak, they were not looking at the fairy. Their eyes were fixed on Bash.

War heroes may have been plentiful, but Bash was of a different breed altogether. It would not be hyperbole to say that he was a living legend.

It wasn’t every day you got to share a drink with a man of Bash’s caliber.

Bash was surrounded by men of various races.

Dwarves, yes, of course. But also, humans and beastkin could be identified.

Here was the ogre Golgol and the beastkin Koro, who had been bested by Bash in the tournament. They, too, listened intently to Zell’s stories.

The soldiers who featured in Bash’s war tales may have been relatives of theirs for all they knew. But none of the men present paid this thought any heed.

In tales of war, the enemies mentioned were only ever referred to as “enemy soldiers,” after all.

Any individual who could not accept this would not think to approach Bash in the first place.

“...”

Bash silently chugged his booze.

He was not angry.

Mentally, he was in a cold sweat. He lived in fear that at any moment, he may be questioned about his past with women.

It was a subject that inevitably came up during every orc celebration.

But it seemed that other races weren’t as focused on that topic.

Some were, of course. But they were not succubi. None would think to bring up such a tawdry subject during a gathering as rare as this.

And so, to the assembled party, Bash’s stoic attitude seemed a sign of his manliness.

War heroes often loved to boast, especially the ones who hadn’t done much worth boasting about.

Of course, among them were some prominent warriors. But most of the men gathered here had long since grown tired of that kind of talk.

For they themselves had seen much success in battle.

Now, they were faced with an individual undeniably far greater than themselves.

Today’s battles had shown that he was no fake.

And yet, he did not boast.

Occasionally, Zell would turn to him and ask: “Say, which battle was that one, again?” Or: “I believe it was one against five hundred enemies at the time, was it not?” And Bash would respond by saying: “It was the battle of the Arlogen Wetlands.” And: “There weren’t that many. I’d say around fifty, max.”

He was stoic indeed.

But the stories held weight. Now and then, members of the party would chime in to corroborate things, saying: "Ah yes, I was present at that battle, too." Or: "I heard the same thing before."

Their faith in Bash's legendary status was unshakable.

They knew that they were drinking in the presence of an incredible man.

"Goodness, look at the time. Boss, we'd better be getting back. You may only need to sleep once a year, but don't forget, you've got further bouts tomorrow. You need to make sure you're well-rested."

"Right," Bash responded to Zell as he rose to his feet.

He didn't mind all this fuss, but he wanted to keep his mind on his objective.

If there had been a beautiful woman or two in the bar, things might have been different. But right now, Bash wanted to concentrate on the tournament.

Winning or losing. That was the difference between heaven and hell.

Until now, he had never lost a battle from lack of sleep. But he wanted to remove any potential impediments to his victory.

"Hey! Mr. Bash is leaving!"

"I'll handle the bill!"

"Fool! I'm treating Mr. Bash!"

"No, me...!"

Bash left the tavern, one eye watching the men argue over who got to treat the Hero.

The night had already grown late.

And yet, because of the festival, the streets were still lousy with people.

Bash joined the crowd and began walking back to Primera's workshop.

He was in high spirits. The celebratory drinks had given him a buzz, and his step was light.

But the real victory was not now. That would come tomorrow.

If he won, he would be able to claim his bride. Thinking about what he would be doing this time tomorrow put an extra spring in Bash's step.

But even so, he could not let down his guard.

Bash pulled himself together and began hurrying down the street...

Someone grabbed his arm.

"?!"

In the space of a moment, he was dragged down an alleyway.

But let's not forget, this is Bash.

Despite being taken by surprise and dragged, he did not lose his balance. Instead, he turned steadily to face his assailant.

"Who's there?!"

The man who had grabbed Bash's arm wore a hood that concealed his eyes.

Based on the man's stance, Bash knew he was up against a seasoned warrior.

The man had arms as thick as Bash's, or perhaps thicker. His center of gravity was low. He would not be felled so easily.

But that was not all Bash noticed. The man wore manacles around his ankles, attached to a chain with an iron ball the size of a human head.

This man was a slave.

"When I saw you during the tournament, I could hardly believe my eyes, but it really is you, Bash!"

The hooded man raised his hood as he spoke.

The face that appeared beneath it greatly resembled Bash's own.

Green skin. Protruding tusks.

An orc.

An ordinary green orc.

His coloring was a touch darker than Bash's, and a large burn mark stood out on his face.

Looking closer, the left hand that clutched Bash's arm was missing its ring finger and pinky.

That face, that hand... Ah, but in truth, Bash knew it earlier, the moment he heard that familiar voice. He knew he was not mistaken.

"Is that you, Donzoi?"

"It is I! Donzoi!"

"But I thought you were dead!"

"Too bad! I live! And I've been alive this entire time!"

It was during the battle of Dobanga Pit that Bash believed Donzoi to have perished.

But they were never able to find the body.

At the time, the Coalition of Seven had suffered a succession of defeats, and that extended to Bash and his men, too.

At the time, good friends had been dropping left and right.

It was around then that Donzoi had disappeared.

When a friend went missing on the battlefield, that essentially meant they were dead.

For the orcs were a heroic race, and none ever fled the battlefield.

"Is that you, Donzoi, you old rogue?! Wow, it's been ages!"

"Ha-ha, Zell, you're here, too!"

But orcs are a chaotic bunch.

When separated from their platoon, they would join another clan's troop if they could.

So sometimes, after a battle, such an orc might encounter one of his original troop buddies and be met with cries of, "Thought you were dead, old friend!"

"And you're looking well yourself, Bash! I heard they call you the Orc Hero now! Suits you!"

"Ah well, hmm."

Bash glanced down at the manacle around Donzoi's ankle.

Looking more closely, he could see that Donzoi also wore a thick iron collar around his neck.

A slave collar.

When orcs slip away and are caught conducting themselves without honor in foreign lands, they become slaves.

Just like the orcs who were fighting in the arena the other day... Ah, come to think of it, Donzoi must have been one of them.

Seeing Donzoi fighting in the arena, he had made up his mind that such a fate was a fitting one for an orc who had broken the rules.

He still felt that way, even now.

However, he knew that Donzoi was not that sort of orc.

He was a well-prepared, innovative sort of man. A brave warrior, a man prepared to give up his life for battle.

He was not the sort of man to defy the decrees of the Orc King.

"...Why are you chained?"

"Ah, this... It's embarrassing to talk about, but it's a result of our... I mean, my...lack of strength."

Donzoi's face showed regret and deep anguish as he responded to Bash's question.

But the look on his face soon disappeared.

"But something's going to happen this year. Don't worry. I will besmirch the orc name no longer. I swear it on the name of the Orc King himself."

"..."

Bash wasn't sure what Donzoi meant by that.

However, he had name-dropped the Orc King.

No doubt Donzoi had reflected and now deeply regretted going rogue, becoming a slave, and being forced to participate in those embarrassing

mockeries of battle.

In that case, Bash was prepared to forgive all.

For Donzoi had laid his life on the line in battle together with Bash.

And so, Bash could return to the homeland and plead his friend's case to the Orc King.

"But what are you doing here? Ah, perhaps I have no right to ask. My apologies. I hate to trouble you..."

"No, it's no trouble..."

"I knew you'd say that! You really are the pride of Budarth platoon, aren't you?"

Donzoi let go of Bash, praising his old friend, and then his face fell in regret once more.

"But listen, Bash. I do hate to trouble you, since you came all the way here and all... But about tomorrow's battles. If you continue at this rate, you and I will meet in the final."

"I see. Then what of it?"

"It pains me to ask, but..."

Donzoi hesitated, his expression conflicted.

But then finally he seemed to make up his mind and looked Bash in the eye.

"Would you consider losing tomorrow's bout?"

"What?"

"Ah, actually, no one would buy the Orc Hero Bash losing to someone like me. If possible, could you refrain from showing up to the arena at all?"

"...Why? I'm not sure why you would ask such a thing of me."

"Come on. Don't make me say it. Give me a break here. I've still got my pride, you know. Not as much as you, of course, but it's not *completely* gone."

Donzoi wore a half smile as he spoke. It didn't seem like he was willing to answer.

Lose on purpose?

Pull a no-show on the bout on purpose?

Bash could do no such thing.

He could not bear to be considered a coward. It would damage his good name.

And yet, this was a request from an old war buddy. Bash could afford to be magnanimous.

“But I came here with a purpose of my own.”

“Ah, I know, I know. That much is obvious. But I won’t let anyone call you a coward. We’ll all stick up for your good name. And I plan to repay your kindness afterward. Ah, I know. How about I give you my woman?”

“...Wait. How does a slave get a woman?”

“Ah, well, she’s a slave wench, you see. Her name’s Elindy. She’s a peach, really. Healthy enough. She’s already birthed me three babes. I was planning on making her my wife if I made it back safe, but... I don’t mind giving her to you instead.”

Bash’s expression went surly.

Bash was an orc.

Even a hero gets jealous like any other man.

Donzoi was repentant, yes, but he had still defied the Orc King and gotten himself enslaved. Yet in spite of all that, he still had a woman. And Bash still had no one.

“...Hmm.”

Still, it wasn’t a bad proposal.

Orcs didn’t lie.

If Donzoi said she was attractive, then she truly must have been easy on the eyes.

He wouldn’t have to go to the trouble of winning the tournament. A pretty

woman guaranteed just for him, that was a prospect too good to pass up.

Donzoi would fulfill his own objective, and Bash would have himself a mate.

A win-win situation, if ever there was one.

Bash didn't have a clue as to what Donzoi might have been planning, but from what he'd heard, there would be no repercussions for Bash himself.

Primera, too, seemed to have already fulfilled her heart's objective. So there would be no problem if Bash withdrew.

And yet...

"I know it's extremely rude of me to ask you this... But... Please. I want to finish this in the end, with my own hands..."

Then Donzoi disappeared down a back alley, his lamenting tone melting away on the air.

The only sound that remained was the dragging noise of the iron ball, echoing through the streets.

"Boss, what are you gonna do?"

"..."

Bash could make no reply.

He simply stood there, frowning, gazing in the direction in which Donzoi had disappeared.



It was deep into the night.

Even after Bash returned and fell asleep, Primera was in the workshop.

Dwarves need the least amount of sleep of all races.

Especially when smithing, they draw power from the spirits of fire and earth and can get so focused on their craft that they can go up to seven days and nights without sleep.

Primera was half-human, and yet staying up all night working was no problem for her.

Before her sat the gauntlets and the sword she had finished repairing.

She had been convinced that the sword was no good as it was, and so she had spent hours reworking it.

“Darn it. It’s no good like this. At this rate...”

Another. Primera flung aside the sword, which resembled a huge lump of iron ore.

It went clattering into the corner of the workshop.

Up to this point, she would have been well satisfied with a sword like that.

There was nothing particularly wrong with it. It was sharp, and more than durable enough.

Or at least, Primera thought so.

However, that sword would not be good enough for Bash to wield, if he was to make it to the end of the tournament and emerge the victor.

It would only bend, as all the previous swords had done, or else snap entirely during the course of the bout.

It would be too easy to blame everything on Bash if it came to that, but blaming him wouldn’t bring back the lost chance of victory.

This was the finals after all. Bash would be facing opponents who were levels above the ones he had previously faced.

The remaining warriors were tournament regulars, those who knew what it took to battle through to the finals.

If word got around that Bash had been outfitted with subpar gear, then his opponents might make aim for it. Drag Bash into a prolonged battle, wear down his armor until it broke, seek to knock him out of the running that way.

Defeat, on the grounds of failed weaponry.

It would not be Bash’s defeat.

It would be Primera’s.

“...Hah.”

Primera sighed, filled with vexation.

How was she to make a sword that would not bend when Bash used it? She had no clue.

Like most dwarves, Primera had been smithing since she was small. She had all the basics down. And she had been praised for her skill on more than one occasion.

Why, she had even pioneered several unique smithing techniques.

She had crafted armor utilizing new types of materials, ones most dwarves wouldn't bother to take a second look at.

When it came to smithing, she was prepared to lose to no one.

But for all that, she was still lost. How to forge a sword that Bash could wield?

Primera stopped working for a moment, gazing at the flames.

She could hear the crackling of the fire, the sound of Bash's snoring from the storehouse.

What was it I used to do at times like this...?

Primera desperately tried to remember.

That's right. In the past, she had worked from an example and used it as a template.

She had been born into the Dobanga clan, and her ancestor Doradoradobanga himself had left behind many study pieces.

“Oh...”

That was when Primera realized something.

How had she never noticed something so simple before?

Yes. There was one there, was there not?

A template.

She got to her feet and made for her objective on unsteady feet, as if in a dream.

The storehouse.

That was where Bash and Zell were currently sleeping.

Opening the door quietly, clutching a candle in one hand, she could see the orc lying cramped on his side in the small storeroom.

He was no longer snoring. All was still.

Primera checked that what she sought was really there, just by Bash's arm. Then walking on tiptoes and making no sound, she lifted the item into the air.

It was quite heavy indeed.

Still tiptoeing, Primera moved away from Bash and returned to the workshop.

In the flickering light of the forge, she gazed at the item.

A sword.

A simple sword, unembellished, made of reddish-blue metal. The kind of sword you could find anywhere.

The handle was very thick. Clearly it had been made with bulky races, like the orcs, in mind. Primera could hardly grip it.

It was much heavier than any of the swords Primera had forged. And yet, it was surprisingly easy to lift and wield. It was perfectly balanced, in a way that seemed almost impossible.

Primera held the sword up to the light, examining the blade closely.

She swallowed.

“Beautiful...”

What a stunning sword, Primera thought.

It had no outstanding features. It did not sparkle in the light.

To the casual observer, it looked like any ordinary sword, forged in the usual manner.

But it was quite different.

This blade had been carefully forged and then reforged, over and over.

Staying faithful to the fundamentals of smithing, it had nonetheless been forged with absolute simplicity, with true dedication to accuracy.

That said, its bite would be nothing to write home about.

But the iron it was made of was strong and true.

I will not break, the sword seemed to promise.

It was as if the blade had been enchanted to be indestructible, but even that was a mere addition.

The blade itself would not bend.

Perhaps, after hundreds of battles, at the very end of its usefulness, it would. But for one or two more bouts, it would hold strong.

Even were it to be wielded by the clumsiest of fighters, even were it to be wielded by one with immense strength...

“...”

Primera returned the sword to its sheath.

Then she picked up the sword she herself had just forged and compared it visually with Bash's.

It was easy to see which was the better sword.

Then Primera grabbed the sword Bash had bent a few days before.

She examined the bend in it more closely.

It was so curved, it looked like a scimitar.

It began to bend quite near the hilt, with the tip ending up pointing backward.

It resembled a crescent moon, curving all the way back toward the handle.

It was a beautiful curve. She had never seen a sword do this without breaking before.

If the sword could bend like this, then...

Primera frowned.

All of a sudden, her expression grew resolute. Her eyes seemed to blaze with determination.

For some time now, she had felt that if the swords she forged were destined

to bend, that could only be chalked up to the inexperience of the one who wielded it.

But...she was wrong.

Completely wrong.

This way of bending... It did not mean the sword had been stretched to its limits.

It meant that the sword itself had taken the blow uniformly, along its blade. The edge still held its sharpness. And the flat of the sword held its strength, too. It had not warped or twisted from its center point in any way. Despite the extreme bending it had undergone, it had not snapped.

A master swordsman would not treat a blade like this.

At the very least, the blade should have been rendered dull.

In other words, this sword's master had a deep appreciation for swords. And the strength to fell an enemy without breaking it or bending it.

Cutting one's opponent down cleanly.

"I thought I did."

She could hear the voice of the man who had bent the sword in her mind.

Using the blade respectfully, slashing with the sharp side, and yet, it had still bent.

Which could only mean...

"..."

...she understood.

In fact, she had really understood all along.

Her brother and sister had told her she was too young, too inexperienced, and despite her protesting, she realized it on some level herself.

She had been fooling herself.

Telling herself what she wanted to hear.

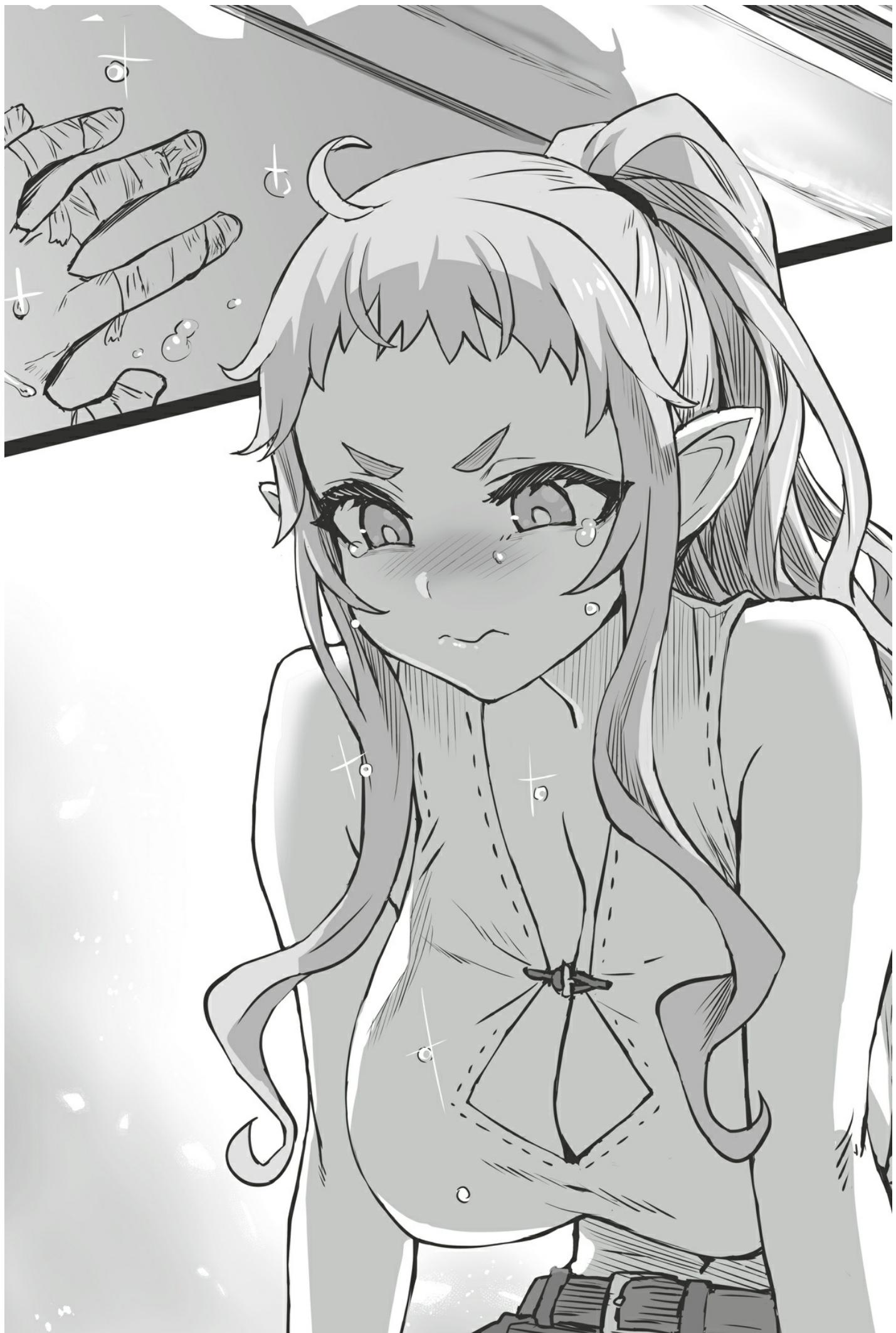
But now, she had no choice but to face up to it.

Holding the famous sword in one hand, comparing it with the one she had forged...

Reality came crashing in.

"I am inexperienced."

A single tear rolled down Primera's cheek.



THE GOD OF WAR FESTIVAL TOURNAMENT: DAY TWO SEMIFINALS

Primera was backstage in the waiting room, her face drawn with tension, having a discussion with Bash.

Bash was wearing his newly reforged armor and holding the sword she'd handed to him, looking down at Primera.

Primera couldn't even begin to interpret the feeling behind the look he was giving her.

"...Sorry. I wasn't able to make you any decent gear in the end."

Primera had no confidence.

Even less than she had yesterday, after that first bout began.

When she thought about it, these past few days had served only to highlight her own incompetence.

Last night, she had worked on forging a decent sword without ever sleeping. But she could not create anything to match Bash's own faithful sword.

Compared to that one, the swords she could make were all pathetic.

All would bend in one strike if swung by Bash.

"I disagree. This one feels easier to wield than yesterday's."

Bash swung the sword lightly as he spoke.

"D-does it?!"

"Indeed."

Primera allowed herself a small fist pump.

But then she shook her head quickly, hiding her hands behind her back.

The sword might have been easier to wield, but it was still as blunt and

useless as the rest.

“...”

Bash was distracted by the way Primera’s chest protruded when she hid her fists behind her back.

Primera noticed where his gaze was directed.

She wasn’t sure what was so interesting as to make the orc stare that way, but at any rate, she didn’t really mind it so much.

...Even so...

Primera looked at Bash again.

When they first met, she hadn’t been sure what to make of this man called Bash.

She had turned him down when he asked her to have his kids out of nowhere.

She’d thought he was insane.

But now, her impression of him had changed somewhat.

He may be an orc, but he’s actually a pretty decent man.

He was honest, strong, masculine.

He had used Primera’s swords, put up with her foul tongue, all without one word of complaint. Instead, he had focused on his role.

Then, finally, he had helped Primera realize what an amateur she truly was.

He was an orc, so his way of thinking about things was different.

For example, orcs tended to just grab ahold of women.

But even though he was, at this very moment, staring at her cleavage, he had not laid a hand on her. Although his interest in Primera seemed as strong as ever, he had sworn not to break the Orc King’s decree.

He was loyal, patient, and strong.

And such a man had expressed interest in her.

Realizing this all over again in the moment, Primera felt her cheeks begin to

burn.

Then she found herself speaking without thinking.

“Ah, what the hell... If you win, I might even consider it!”

“Consider what?”

“You idiot! Don’t make me spell it out! You know what I mean!”

“...”

Bash was inwardly panicking.

He did not understand what she was saying. What was she referring to? He had no idea. What was she thinking right now?

He wished he could ask someone, but his reliable fairy was not there.

Bash’s intuitions, though, led him to develop a sort of hunch.

He was not sure if it was a bad hunch or a good hunch.

The last time he had a feeling like this, it was during the decisive battle of the Remium Plateau.

That had been a bad hunch.

Bash hadn’t trusted that hunch enough, and while he fought valiantly on the battlefield, by the time he had gotten the Orc King’s orders and hustled his way over, it had already been too late.

The Demon Lord Geddiggs was slain.

So which one was it this time?

“Mr. Bash. It’s almost time for the semifinal bout!”

A knock came at the door.

“Ack! Hear that? All right then, off you go!”

“...Right.”

Bash did not know what kind of hunch he had.

He did not know what he should do.

Still not knowing, he hurried off to face his first bout.



Quarterfinal Round: Bash vs. Amonde

"Winner, Bash!"

Bash won the next bout in a single strike.

His opponent had not been weak. He was a dwarf soldier and had served as captain of the third battalion.

One of the top five finest soldiers to be found in all of Dobanga Pit.

He had fought bravely.

He had come at Bash dead-on and taken the hit like a man.

It must have looked foolish to the audience.

Some may have wondered if this reckless warrior had even been watching what Bash had done the day before.

But he was a dwarf.

He trusted his weaponry. And had relied upon it.

Taking evasive action was considered weak, undwarflike.

Even though the dwarf was defeated, he received a round of applause.

And Bash proceeded to the next round.



Bash returned to the waiting room, where Primera was trembling with nerves.

Next up was the semifinal round.

Bash's opponent would be last year's winner, Barabaradobanga.

He was the eldest son of the Dwarf Hero, Doradoradobanga.

"..."

Barabaradobanga.

Of all members of the Dobanga clan, he was the strongest and the best at blacksmithing.

After Doradoradobanga passed, his eldest son became the figurehead of the

entire clan. All looked up to him and held high hopes for him.

He had begun participating in the tournament, wearing his own forged gear, when he was young. To date, he had won three times.

Last year's victory had really been something. He was the firm favorite to win this year as well. The people said that he was a shoo-in for a win two years in a row.

Up until yesterday, Primera had believed that, if she really put her back into it, she was far superior to Barabaradobanga.

But not any longer.

Now she understood how great a blacksmith her stubborn brother was, how talented he was.

No doubt he fell far short of his father's greatness, but in Primera's eyes, now he was formidable.

Could she really compete against such a person now?

She had only won this far thanks to Bash's strength.

"Don't worry. I will not lose."

Bash's words. She felt she could rely on them.

Who in the land could fail to believe in what Bash said? No doubt those words from him had soothed many a trepidatious soldier on the battlefield.

But Primera wasn't sure.

She wasn't sure they had the right to win.

"Okay."

All right. If Bash won, she simply wouldn't count it as her own victory.

Primera made up her mind about that.



The semifinal.

Barabaradobanga was standing in the center of the arena, awaiting his opponent.

He had won last year.

Before the tournament even began, he was prepared to win, no matter the opponent.

Even if the fighter he bested last year might have what it took to easily beat him this time around. Barabara was prepared for even that eventuality and had spent a full year honing his blacksmithing skills until the gear he wore was perfect.

His opponent was to be the Orc Hero Bash.

Barabara knew that name.

Because, after all, Barabaradobanga had fought during the wars as a dwarf warrior.

He credited his survival to the fact that he had not encountered...*them*.

The strongest fighters who had ever set foot on a battlefield.

Men like Bash. Men like his father, Doradoradobanga.

He had been lucky not to come up against such preeminent fighters. And that was why he had survived.

After the war, they had received sufficient land in their own countries and, even now, were working for the prosperity of their homelands.

The human prince, Nazar. The elf archmage, Thunder Sonia. Surely, even the Beastkin Hero, Reto, who had fought with his father and been called a demon of war, would be living a comfortable life now, if he had survived.

Heroes like them...they would not take part in a tournament like this.

Perhaps they might observe from the special seats reserved for the aristocracy. But they would not take the arena like this.

Their chances of battle were lost now forevermore.

Yes...battle.

Barabaradobanga was the lord of this arena.

But in this moment, he was once again a mere challenger.

He wanted to be grateful to the gods.

For giving him this chance to battle.

And yet, I must think more deeply on what could have brought that man here...

It was clear why the Orc Hero Bash would have come to this country, why he would have come to Dobanga Pit.

Slavery.

This country had orc slaves.

And quite a lot of them, too.

They were rogue orcs, who had been caught causing trouble near Dobanga Pit.

That was what was said. But that was not true.

Most of them had been prisoners of war.

After the war, when the races declared peace, all the war prisoners across the various countries were let free.

That was one of the conditions of peace.

All the women imprisoned in the orc country were freed as well. And the men held captive by the succubi, they were also released.

The fairies captured by the humans, the ogres being held prisoner by the beastkin... All likewise.

And yet, the captivity of the orcs in Dobanga Pit continued unabated.

Why were they not released with the rest of the war prisoners when the war ended...?

It would take a long time to tell the full story.

The merchants of Dobanga Pit. After Doradoradobanga passed, they took hold in the Pit.

After the war ceased, they concealed the existence of the slaves.

Dwarves are stubborn and take true pride in their craftsmanship.

And they are not all virtuous.

Many among them love to fatten their pockets with coin.

Using low-cost slaves was a huge boon in making the coliseum turn a big profit. The merchants hated to think of releasing their moneymakers. So they hid the existence of the orcs they enslaved.

The first year, the fights took place in a secret subterranean fighting ring. But from the second year onward, the merchants decided to bring the slaves out into the open and tell everyone they were rogue orcs caught causing trouble. Now the fights could take place in the open air.

The vast majority of the dwarves swallowed this ruse.

Barabaradobanga himself had only learned the truth about it quite recently.

He carried the pride of Doradoradobanga. Naturally, his first thought had been to free the orc slaves.

Then he met Donzoi, the leader of the enslaved orcs.

Donzoi was a prideful man.

Ever since his capture, he had vowed to break apart the current system by himself.

And finally, he had found a way to do it.

He would win the God of War Festival's tournament and use his wish to free the slaves. A foolproof method.

When Barabaradobanga learned of this, this is what he thought: *I should stand against him, as his opponent.*

That way, they could both keep their pride.

In secret, Barabara began crafting his own fine gear and passing it to the orc slaves. Above that, he did nothing further.

During last year's tournament, Barabara had been the winner, and Donzoi had been the runner-up.

It was a hollow victory for Barabara. But Donzoi had not given up.

This year, too, Barabara had sent armor to Donzoi, along with an artisan who could craft weapons and gear in Barabara's own style.

Those who caught wind of what Barabara was doing could make no sense of it.

Barabara knew that if he lost on purpose, or forfeited, it would only lead to the wounding of the orc's pride.

He must fight seriously. If he did so and still lost, then the orc, who had been enslaved and abused for over three years, could regain his pride, and all his efforts until now would finally come to fruition.

But this year, Bash had come.

The man they called the Orc Hero.

To save his enslaved brethren.

He had come alone, save for one small fairy.

For him to appear now... Perhaps he was waiting for the situation to stabilize, or perhaps he caught wind of Donzoi's runner-up victory last year...

Either way, Barabara knew that this was major.

Orcs could not travel among countries so lightly.

He would have had to pass through the Shiwanashi Forest to get to Dobanga Pit.

That forest was governed over by the elf archmage, Thunder Sonia.

The Nightmare of the Shiwanashi Forest... Even the dwarves knew the tale.

After a long battle, the undefeatable Thunder Sonia had been disgraced.

The elves were a vindictive race. Even if he was just passing through, there was no way Bash could have gone about his business unmolested. No doubt, he had been detained.

In fact, there had been rumors of late regarding a disturbance in the forest. And a lone orc had been held in contempt.

But that was not all. If the Orc Hero was traveling outside of his country, there

was no way General Houston of Krassel would just stay quiet about it.

Houston the Pig Slayer was well-known.

The man was said to abhor orcs. If Bash was on the move internationally, then no question Houston would have taken action.

But Bash was here. In this place, right now.

No doubt he had overcome great hardships to make it here.

Orcs were not an intelligent race, but they had made it through the war.

It was surely the result of their determination.

On this day, the involved dwarves had to have been reminded of the existence of the orc race.

And yet...

Barabaradobanga's ears rang from the cheering of the crowd.

He opened his eyes to see the orc emerge from the waiting room and walk toward him.

Bash. The Orc Hero.

More than any other participant in this tournament...

No, you could search the world and still struggle to find anyone who had ever bested this man in battle.

His gear was only ever so-so, but he had power.

No doubt, during this tournament, he planned to win, and then free the orc slaves.

However, Barabaradobanga would not be happy with that outcome.

If this orc swoops in, he'll make it all have been for nothing. And what will become of Donzoi's pride then?

Donzoi. The past three years.

No, even longer... For a long time, Donzoi had been working to free the slaves.

He would not want all that struggle to have been for naught.

“Sir Bash.”

“What?”

“I will cut you down, sir.”

“Very well.”

They exchanged the basic battle greetings.

But Barabara really meant it.

He would defeat this man. He would fell this infallible opponent.

Then Donzoi’s great efforts would not have to go to waste.

Barabara pointed his sword at Bash, determined.

He was stubborn and boorish, and while he was skilled with his hands, he was clumsy with his words. And now he challenged the Orc Hero.



Semifinal Round: Bash vs. Barabaradobanga

Barabaradobanga knew Bash’s weak point.

Of course, up until recently, Bash did not have any weak points.

Generally speaking, orcs are said to be pretty vulnerable to fire and thunder magic, but Bash could handle both of those without much issue.

After all, he had taken on the famous Thunder Sonia and emerged the victor.

Even if Bash did have susceptibility to fire or thunder magic, he would not be harmed by anyone who had considerable power in those areas. At any rate, the use of magic was forbidden during this tournament.

Bash’s weak point...

...was his equipment.

Most of the participants in this competition had no doubt noticed it already. And the artisan who had forged Bash’s gear was a rank amateur.

In other words, victory against Bash might be achieved if you focused on targeting the fastenings in his armor.

But there was only the tiniest chance of Bash letting his guard slip enough to allow someone do that.

Still, Barabara was confident that he could pull it off.

After all, Bash was not fighting at his full strength.

If Bash really got into it, his armor would fracture on his body, no doubt sending pieces of it flying everywhere.

He clearly did not intend to bring scorn upon his artisan...Primera.

Barabaradobanga was not confident he could land a blow on this man's armor if the orc was going all out.

The only one capable of forging armor strong enough for this orc was the fabled artisan, Doradoradobanga himself. Or perhaps the demon artisan Sarumon.

But with what he had now, Bash had to pull his punches.

Avoid any vigorous movements. Temper himself.

It was impressive indeed that he had so far managed to send all his opponents to their own funerals in one decisive hit, despite barely even moving around.

Surely that was what everyone thought, but the truth was a little different.

Bash *needed* to take out his opponents in one quick hit.

The more he moved around, the more likely his armor was to break. He needed to get his bouts over with as quickly as possible.

Barabara knew that. And so, he settled on his battle plan, embarrassing as it was.

"And what's this? Barabaradobanga is retreating?! He's running around in circles, with the great orc chasing him?!"

The announcer's voice was filled with incredulity, and the audience was flabbergasted.

He knew how he must look.

He had come to the coliseum full of quiet bravado and fought his way to the semifinals...only to run around the arena like a frightened rabbit.

How unseemly.

How shameful.

Never in his life would Barabaradobanga have pictured himself doing such a thing.

He was always prepared to face his opponent head-on, no matter who they might be.

But he couldn't do that this time.

This time, he could not win like that.

He could not protect Donzoi's pride like that.

"Huff!"

As he ran in a circle, he struck out at Bash's joints.

His knee, his shoulder, his elbow. He could not hope to get in a hit strong enough to break the solid pieces of armor.

But they had to be connected by something. There had to be weaknesses in the joints.

That was what he was aiming for.

He feinted to the side.

"Hmph!"

Bash swung and counterattacked.

A lump of metal filled with murderous intent whizzed past Barabara's head. If he had been a hair closer...

He felt cold sweat trickle down his spine.

Bash's weapon didn't seem like anything special. Even if hit, Barabara would probably survive. But a direct blow to the helmet could still cause him to fall unconscious.

That was how powerful Bash's attack was.

Every time Bash lunged, the metal fastenings around his ankle took on a heavy strain.

It would not take much to detach it completely.

If he could wear down the connections on the shin plates, next he could go for the shoulder area.

If he could just get that breastplate to detach, the rest of Bash's armor would tumble loose, too.

Take his time, strike shrewdly and cleanly. Coax his opponent toward his own ruin. He would strike in earnest only once to knock the breastplate free.

It was not a very dwarflike way of fighting.

Also, this plan could end in failure if he made even the slightest mistake. If he failed to dodge Bash's attacks. Or if Bash figured out what he was doing. Taking on the Orc Hero was no easy feat after all.

But Barabaradobanga remained confident right up to the end.

One more heavy step, and those shin plates will fall right off.

His confidence was born from faith in his own perception.

The vast difference between Primera's artisanal ability and his own strength.

He believed he could see this battle through based on that difference.

“Hmph!”

“Guh!”

The sword clashed against his helmet with a clang.

Bash had swung his sword to block Barabara's dodge.

Ah, but of course. His opponent was the superior fighter.

Barabaradobanga did not have what it took to dodge such a man's attacks for long.

He had tried to stay on the safe side, dodge conservatively, but he could not run forever.

But that was the last one, Barabaradobanga thought to himself.

Bash's shin plate, unable to take the burden, was on the verge of splintering right off.

He could not make another lunge like that.

And yet, Bash still needed to strike.

If a bout ended in a stalemate, with neither opponent able to continue, the victory would be called based on the condition of their armor.

Barabaradobanga's armor was still nearly perfect.

Bash, with his splintering shin plate, would be deemed the loser.

He had to strike. And yet he could not step heavily. Now Barabaradobanga countered, aiming for Bash's shoulder.

"Hmph!"

"Gah!"

But it was too late.

Bash lunged harder than ever before.

As if he was thinking: *That's odd. Today I can lunge deeper than usual.*

His iron sword came flying at Barabaradobanga's head at an insane speed.

Barabaradobanga watched it swooping, as if in slow motion.

He knew he could not dodge.

But he steeled himself, wanting to at least stay conscious.

The blow cracked across his helmet.

"..."

Barabaradobanga was unconscious even before he could hit the ground.

But in his last moment of awareness, he saw it.

He saw that Bash's splintering shin plate was still holding on.

You've progressed, Primera...

Barabaradobanga had miscalculated.

He had not realized that his upstart of a younger sister had actually upped her game somehow for this tournament.

Almost fit for an Orc Hero...



His sister had not changed her ways, hadn't listened to a word Calmera said. But she had backed this orc. And she had been right about him. Barabaradobanga fell to the ground and was still.

"Winner, Bash! And he's through to the final round!"

There was no applause.

9

THE GOD OF WAR FESTIVAL TOURNAMENT: DAY Two FINALS

The final.

The two winners of the semifinal round would compete, and the long tournament would come to its climax.

The audience had never been so excited. They watched with hearts pounding out of their chest... At least, that was what you might expect.

This year, the final bout was met with an odd silence.

They were all still stunned by the shameful display put on by Barabaradobanga in the semifinal.

Most of them knew how Barabara usually fought.

Like a dwarf. Trusting his gear, facing his opponent head-on.

The way his father, Doradoradobanga, had always fought.

That was Barabaradobanga.

For such a man to turn tail and run like a green soldier, and worse still, fail to run away cleanly and lose like that...

No one could applaud that. The audience as a whole was shaken.

But some of the spectators thought to themselves that it made no sense for Barabaradobanga to suddenly turn craven.

After all, he was the former champion of this same tournament.

Last year, he had knocked out strong fighters and trembled before no one.

This year, too, up until facing Bash, he had won every round.

There had to be something going on with him.

That was what they wanted to think.

He had to be worth his salt, or he never would have won up until now. He never would have survived.

The Orc Hero Bash was a great man indeed.

And now, the final challenger for that great man was a fellow orc.

The slave orc, who had been the runner-up in the last tournament.

Donzoi.

The leader of the enslaved orcs.

The favorite of the slave fighters clutched a buckler in his left hand.

Many knew of his strength.

None knew where he had gotten his armor. Not even the artisans in the waiting room. No doubt he was a favorite to win this year, too.

But his opponent was Bash.

The Orc Hero.

Having seen them both fight up until this point, hardly anyone believed that Donzoi could win.

The stronger fighter would emerge victorious. That was best. That was the law of the arena.

But those who had witnessed Bash's strength with their own eyes, those who knew his war nicknames, those who had heard tales of him on the battlefield, stayed quiet.

Childish.

It was as though an adult had joined a game for children. That was how this seemed. Of course, there was no rule that said Bash could not participate. Not in the official rulebook, anyway.

Now it was Donzoi alone in the arena.

In a few minutes, Bash's preparatory period would be up and he would emerge.



When Bash stepped into the arena, Donzoi had his eyes closed and his arms crossed, standing absolutely still.

But when he was faced with Bash standing before him, his lip twitched.

“Bash, why...?”

Donzoi hesitated, and Bash spoke.

“I know what it is you desire.”

Bash had no idea what had made Donzoi take part in this tournament, no idea why he had asked Bash to stand down.

But Bash had his hunches.

Donzoi had entered the tournament because there was something he wanted.

And in order to win, he needed to keep his opponent away.

But what was it that Donzoi wanted?

Perhaps notoriety. That was Bash’s guess.

All orcs have a desire to prove their strength.

Leaving the orc country, getting captured, becoming a slave. Donzoi had lost his good name.

In order to get it back...winning the tournament would be most effective.

That was what Bash thought.

On some level, he was right. Or at least, he wasn’t too far off the mark.

“But as for what I’m searching for... If I win, I want a woman.”

Donzoi paled when he heard those words.

It can’t be. Is this some sort of joke? Didn’t I say you could have mine...?

Donzoi looked up into the stands. There sat his dwarf woman, watching with bated breath.

Bash looked over there, too.

“Why? What’s the meaning of all this, Bash?”

Bash returned his gaze to Donzoi.

To be honest, Donzoi's woman...wasn't exactly Bash's type.

She had birthed healthy young, and Donzoi had said she was kind...

But that wasn't really the issue.

If Donzoi's woman had been a knockout beauty, perhaps Bash would have had a change of heart.

But there were two reasons to the contrary.

The first was that Bash was an Orc Hero.

Bash had often told himself that he'd be happy with any woman, but if he did actually bring one home, he wanted to bring one that wouldn't look shameful on the arm of an Orc Hero such as himself.

If he got handed a woman by the rogue orc Donzoi and brought her home... Well, how would he face the Orc King?

There was one other reason.

And this was the big one.

"Donzoi, if you have any pride as an orc, you'll fight for what you want."

"...?!"

Donzoi looked as though he had just been struck by lightning.

Yes... He's right.

Why was he trying to avoid the fight with Bash?

They had the same objective. They wanted to realize their fates by their own hands. Donzoi wanted to be the one who freed the slaves, with words he alone had spoken.

There was that.

But that was not all.

Some part of Donzoi thought like this:

I can't possibly win against Bash.

So he had given up before even fighting.

It was not so long ago.

When all the members of the Budarth platoon had been alive, he had believed himself to be the stronger orc. In fact, he once *was* stronger. At some point, Bash had overtaken him, but even then, he was confident he could stand up to him.

Then Bash had become the best soldier in their unit, gone on to become a top national fighter...

And while Donzoi was stuck as a slave, Bash had gone on to become an Orc Hero.

He no longer believed he had any chance of beating Bash.

“...My pride as an orc, eh?”

Pride.

Right. What Donzoi wanted to take back was his pride.

His prideful feelings that he had lost when he’d become a slave.

He recalled what his dwarf owner had said to him once, not long after he’d been enslaved.

“All you orcs need is fighting and women.”

Donzoi and the other slaves were commodities.

They were pushed into the arena, forced to fight the other slaves, made to beg the audience for mercy. That had all happened recently.

When they were fighting in the subterranean ring, they were given dull swords and armor that was easily broken.

When the armor broke, the bout was called. The same rules as for the tournament.

They were forced to play fight. No slaying, all for show.

That was not how an orc fighter should be.

When an orc fought, he fought to the death.

“Right. I was mistaken.”

At some point, Donzoi had grown weak.

He wanted out of this horrible situation, and so he had done something low. He had begged a Hero for help.

“Shall we show these dwarves what a real orc fight looks like?”

What he wanted was to fight.

He didn’t want women. He didn’t want freedom. He didn’t want pride.

He was an orc. He wanted—no, he *needed*—to fight.

With his orcish pride intact, even against an opponent like Bash...he wanted to fight and win, and take back what was his.

Looks like Bash taught me something new once again, didn’t he?

So thinking to himself, Donzoi readied his sword and shield.

Bash brandished his greatsword.

And then...

“GRAWWWR!”

The arena shook.

It trembled.

Then there was silence.

All had the same thought.

The dwarves...remembered.

It was not the play call of orcs pantomiming battle for an arena. This was the real thing, the sound they had heard reverberating across the battlefield.

They trembled and felt fear, just as they had on the battlefield when they heard the authentic orcish war cry once more.

“GRRRAGHWWWR!”

The second roar shook the stadium.

The battle cry of the Orc Hero struck terror into the hearts of the audience.

At the same time, their hearts leaped.

That was the first time Bash had loosed a war cry in this tournament.

This time was different. Against his fellow orc opponent, Bash finally meant business. The two battle-hardened opponents sized each other up, eyes ablaze.

The audience began to cheer with excitement.

In that instant, the orcs both took one step forward.

Two steps, three steps...then they were running. Thinking nothing of defense, instead giving their all to offense. They collided, their armor clashing together, the sound of it ringing against the walls of the coliseum.

The final bout had begun.



All thought that the bout had ended in a single hit.

Bash's swing battered Donzoi, knocking him back several feet.

But it was not over. Donzoi landed squarely on his feet.

Donzoi's feet had scraped out a furrow in the arena floor several feet long.

He had taken Bash's hit.

When the audience realized this, they reacted.

Those who knew the ferocity of Bash's swing all gasped in admiration.

They all knew that there was no armor that could protect a man from Bash's hit. They had seen that with Barabaradobanga.

But it was true that Donzoi had taken the hit with the small shield he held in his left hand.

But what man could take a hit that had been said to fell a dragon?

What incredible skill.

"Hey, that Donzoi fellow. He was in the same platoon as Bash, apparently."

Someone piped up, and the rest of the audience reacted.

There existed a man who was a match for Bash.

They had thought it was all over, that Bash would secure another easy victory, but perhaps not. Perhaps they were in for a real show, after all.

“GRAWWWR!”

Donzoi roared, charging at Bash.

His attack was very orclike, straight and true.

Bash deflected it. Readyng his greatsword, digging in his heels, swinging, timing it just right.

The furious rally between them sent gritty clouds of sand flying up from the arena floor.

Crash! Metal on metal.

Donzoi was sent flying, carving another deep furrow into the ground.

Bash was clearly not holding back.

This was the final round. There was no need to worry about any future rounds. Donzoi’s war cry had erased all thoughts of temperance from Bash’s mind.

What was happening now was a true orc battle.

Pride against pride, dignity against dignity.

The Orc Hero Bash would hold back no longer.

And Donzoi was all in.

Holding his shield in his right hand, gripping his sword in the left one.

Why? the crowd wondered.

Donzoi was right-handed. Every dwarf who was a frequent watcher of the slave fights knew that.

But the reason for it was easy enough to guess.

Donzoi’s left arm was already broken.

An orc never casts aside his weapon. And certainly not in a fight to the death.

If they did discard something, the shield would be the first to go. It made

sense for them to hold their weapon in their dominant hand.

But Donzoi led with his shield. With the shield he wielded so well.

He charged at Bash, shield held high.

“GRAWWWRRR!”

Bash roared and leaped.

“...!”

But his action was just a touch too slow.

The next moment, Donzoi took aim at Bash’s chest.

He had stepped in range of Bash’s greatsword. Wielding his sword in the other hand, Donzoi’s actions were nothing short of suicidal.

With the sword he held in his broken left arm, Donzoi struck Bash in the side of the neck, causing blood to spurt out.

Bash’s knee shot up, sending Donzoi flying.

Now there were several feet of space between them again.

Donzoi’s shield was dented. The thick armor plate was depressed in the center, now useless.

He had taken three direct hits from Bash. Surely, he was well past his limit.

The second hit had broken Donzoi’s left arm. The right arm was now broken as well. But still he held on to his shield and sword, to his strength.

It hurt.

Donzoi’s arms were burning with agony.

But a warrior who had loosed a war cry could not be swayed by things like pain.

“Basshhh!”

“Donzoooi!”

Bash readied himself.

His stance was different from how it had been up to now. He held his sword in

both hands, out from the shoulder, as if he intended to pierce his opponent with the end of it.

Donzoi did not change his stance.

As always, he held his shield across his body and faced Bash head-on.

They connected in an instant.

The sound rang out loud and long.

Bash and Donzoi paused, locked together.

Donzoi had not been thrown back. Bash, too, was still.

All understood that the battle had been decided.

But no one knew which of the two was the victor.



In the silence, the audience heard a sound, a sound like a tuning fork ringing out.

Ting... The sound echoed over and over.

Where did it come from? Outside the arena? No...above.

The audience looked up to see something falling from the sky.

The open sky above Dobanga Pit. Something like metal was shining up there, glinting as it fell back to Earth.

It hit the edge of the arena, then ricocheted in an arc.

It spun to the center of the arena, close to Bash and Donzoi... Then with a crunch, it became lodged in the arena floor.

It was a sword.

To be more precise, it was a sword's blade.

Half a sword's blade, embedded in the dirt.

Whose?

But the answer was obvious.

Bash's sword had snapped off halfway along the blade.

Donzoi was not holding his sword. But there was no need to look for it. It was sticking out of the edge of the arena. And it was in one piece.

Donzoi's shield looked like it was about to crack in two at any minute, but for now at least, it was still intact.

Only Bash's sword had broken.

"Win... Winner, Donzoooo!"

The announcer's voice rang out, and the winner of the God of War Festival's tournament was made official.



A few minutes later.

Donzoi was still standing in the center of the arena in a daze.

Bash was nowhere to be seen. The loser had withdrawn, leaving only the winner.

But Donzoi didn't feel as though he had really won.

His opponent had been Bash.

Before Donzoi had been captured, there was no one in his platoon who could beat him.

There had been talk of him becoming an Orc Hero, but it was Bash who had attained that title.

While they were fighting, Donzoi had felt the difference in strength between them. His smashed left arm, broken from taking one hit from Bash. He had stabbed the man in the neck, and it had not stopped his onslaught.

That last hit had been the same.

Surely Bash knew a way to take Donzoi out without breaking his blade.

But it had really begun just before that.

When Donzoi had gotten into Bash's space.

Yes. He had gotten into Bash's space.

Not even the speediest of beastkin had ever gotten that close to Bash during battle.

Donzoi had thought that Bash was pulling his punches.

But even so, he was sure that Bash had no intention of letting Donzoi win. If Bash had hit him even slightly harder, or if Donzoi had not managed to take Bash's blows, he surely would have died.

Perhaps Bash's plan had been to act as though he was holding back a little, fool Donzoi into thinking he had the advantage, and then strike.

Usually, Donzoi would have found this humiliating. But for some reason, he didn't really feel bad about it.

Because Bash had been far, far stronger than the opponent he lost to last year... That person was Barabaradobanga, the one Donzoi had been desperate to have a rematch against.

True to his word, Bash had shown the audience what a real orc battle looked like.

The pride of the orcs had been preserved.

And Donzoi had secured a victory.

While understanding everything.

The Bash he had known before would not have been able to do such a thing.

He would have taken out Donzoi and emerged the victor.

When he last saw Bash, Donzoi had felt the other orc was still somewhat of a young brat.

But no longer.

While Donzoi was enslaved, Bash had truly grown. He had become a man worthy of the title of Hero.

“Tournament winner, Donzoi!”

Donzoi lifted his head.

The Dwarf King had taken his seat in the aristocrat section and was looking down on him.

“Speak your wish!”

No, this was not Bash simply handing victory to Donzoi.

Donzoi had faced greater trials than the Orc Hero in his time and had overcome them all.

So Donzoi puffed out his chest and spoke.

For the sake of all he had done to fight his way here with his own hands.

“I wish for all the people enslaved here to be freed!”

And so, Donzoi won his freedom.

And the freedom of all those who had been enslaved in Dobanga Pit.

10

THE PROPOSAL

While the final bout was taking place, Primera was praying in the waiting room.

You might think she was praying for Bash's victory, but to be honest, she wasn't sure what she wanted to happen.

She was simply praying.

It was quiet in the waiting room after Bash left.

She could not hear any uproar going on in the arena.

Primera did not know it, but the arena was actually surprisingly quiet.

Still, she heard the gasp of the crowd as the bout finally began.

There were only a few people cheering.

And it did not go on for very long.

Every time the audience reacted, Primera trembled.

Soon, the roaring of the crowd became so loud, it even shook the room she was in.

She knew straightaway that the bout had ended.

Primera put her hands together and prayed. She didn't even know what she was praying for. Whether her prayers were heard or not...

Finally, the door opened with a *clack*.

Bash stood in the doorway.

He took a step inside the room and said: "Hmph."

In a small voice.

At the same time, there was a clatter, and his shoulder guard fell off.

The fastenings holding it had snapped.

Also, whether it had broken off in the arena or fallen off elsewhere, she noticed one of his shin guards was missing.

That was not all.

The sword Bash held in his right hand was missing more than half of its blade.

“Oh...”

Primera felt relieved but also guilty as she looked up at Bash.

So he had lost...

Because of her shoddy gear...

“You lost, huh?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Bash nodded, sounding downcast, as she had never heard him sound before.

Still, Primera thought it was for the best.

She felt sorry for Bash, but the difficult truth was that she was far too inexperienced.

Her weapons, her armor, they were far from perfect. Compared to the gear wielded by other fighters, hers were like a child’s toys.

There was no way she deserved to win with those.

She did not deserve that kind of accolade.

The runner-up spot was still more than she deserved, but it was better than actually having won.

She was relieved.

“I’m sorry.”

“...Don’t worry about it. Donzoi’s passion was the real deal. I had to fight in earnest. To do otherwise would have wounded his pride.”

But at the same time, the defeat was hard to swallow.

If only Bash had had better weaponry...

Strong weaponry, capable of withstanding being wielded by Bash at his full fighting capacity...

She couldn't help thinking that way.

If she had been better, Bash would not have to be speaking like this.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Hmm... I think I'll move on to another town."

Bash could continue his search for a bride in this town. In dwarf society, he could try his luck with as many ladies as he liked.

But he had lost his golden opportunity, his sure thing—a tournament win.

There was no other reason to remain in this town.

Besides, most of the women here were dwarves. Some of them weren't bad, but fundamentally, dwarf women didn't do it for Bash.

"Oh... I see..."

Primera bit her lip.

Bash had been unable to win, all due to her lack of skill. So there was no need for her to make good on the offer she had made before the bout.

But Primera felt conflicted.

With her relief came a feeling of regret. If Bash had, in fact, won the tournament, it would have been very wrong of her to go back on her offer, wouldn't it?

"Are you leaving straight away?"

"Yes. I have no further business here."

Then Bash turned, as if to go.

He would retrieve the sword he had left at Primera's place, and then set off on his travels again.

"Wait!"

Primera called out to Bash's back.

Something inside Primera was screaming to not let him go that easily.

And so, Primera made a decision.

She knew what she was saying was a crazy, but she said it anyway: "I—I... I want to...forge your armor again... For life, I mean..."

That was the phrase dwarves used to propose.

To provide gear for the warrior she would share her life with. To be one's battle partner forevermore.

That was what that phrase represented to the dwarves.

If the era of peace continued, perhaps a new phrase would come about. But only three years had passed since the end of the war.

That was the only phrase Primera knew.

"I can manage, thank you."

Bash did not know the dwarven phrase of proposal.

If only a certain blabbermouth fairy had been present to whisper: *Did you hear that, Boss? You might have a chance with her after all!*



Alas, Zell was not there.

"I see... I guess I expected that. A man of your caliber...wouldn't be satisfied with someone like me..."

Her shoulders fell and she nodded listlessly, which made Bash feel uneasy.

He had lost. And his failure had made a beautiful woman sad.

Hmm. I should say something to cheer her up.

"...If my current sword ever breaks, I shall return to you."

After deliberating over it, that was what Bash ended up saying.

"...! O-okay! Well, I'll learn all I can so I can make you the greatest sword when the time comes!"

Primera lifted her head and nodded at Bash.

She wasn't quite sure what Bash meant, but she thought that he was telling her there might be a chance for them in the future.

"I'm off, then."

"Okay..."

Primera watched Bash go.

He had gone along with her selfish requests, without a word of complaint, right to the end. And he had taught her something of vital importance. What a great man he was...

"Thank you. I'm going to do my best..."

All alone in the waiting room, Primera found a new sense of resolve.



"Boss! Good job out there! Ah, but what a shock to see you lose! Still, I think in terms of raw power, you've got the edge, Boss! Can't be helped, what with those strict rules and all! Seems Mr. Donzoi struggled with the rules, too! What I meant to say is, it was just luck that made it swing his way! And to be honest with you, if you'd have kept going at that rate, there's no way you wouldn't have won! Still, the odd defeat might be good for keeping you on your toes,

Boss!"

When Bash exited the waiting room, the fairy came swooping in.

Fluttering about Bash, flattering and placating him. That done, the fairy settled on his shoulder.

It was Zell, of course.

"Still, too bad, huh? You'd have won if your armor had been a bit more durable..."

"Yeah. But by beating me, Donzoi won back his reputation. Now he can return home with his head held high."

"I was shocked, Boss. Never did I think that Donzoi would actually win..."

Zell had been watching from the spectator seats.

It was Zell who had spread the information that Bash and Donzoi had served in the same platoon.

"So what's next? Want to continue hunting for women in this town?"

"No. I'll travel somewhere new."

"Hmm..."

Zell had noticed that Bash hadn't seemed entirely eager when searching for ladies in Dobanga Pit.

He had been much more excited and interested in the human town and in the elf town, his eyes following the passing women.

Even while they scoped out the local ladies, Bash had kept saying, "She's not bad, but..."

To be honest, Bash only ever seemed genuinely excited when he was staring at Primera's ample cleavage.

Yep, dwarves really weren't his type.

To be honest, even though he'd lost, he didn't seem all that broken up about it.

Perhaps his expectations had been lower this time, so the failure was not so

hard to bear.

“Eh, makes sense to me.”

In that case, it was best to bid this town farewell.

There had to be plenty of women out there more suited to the boss’s tastes.

“So where are we off to next, Boss?”

Just then, a shadow appeared before Bash.

“Sir Bash!”

He had metal armor and a broad sword.

Many were dressed like that, but this one’s face was different.

He was a young man with the head of a lizard. It was Tydonile. He was openly shedding tears as he grasped Bash’s hand.

“Just before... Just moments ago... All of the slaves were officially freed!”

“Hmm? Ah, I see.”

“I...sniff... I’m so moved... I wondered why a man of your eminent...sob... personage would take place in a tournament like this, but to think...to think, when I was inches away from enslavement myself once... *Waah!* To think, in the final bout...”

“Hmm.”

Tydonile was sniffling and blubbering so much, it was impossible to tell what he was saying.

But it seemed that this young lizardman knew what Bash had been after as his potential prize.

No doubt, he was sobbing from disillusionment.

To find out the truth—that the Orc Hero had this much trouble finding himself a woman.

“Um, Sir Bash, what will you do next?”

“Hmm. For now, all I’m thinking about is leaving this town. I have no information that would guide me to my next objective at this point...”

“You have no information? For your next objective?! Then you must come to our village! I know everyone would be delighted to have you!”

Tydonile was gasping with excitement, but Bash frowned.

The lizardmen and the orcs were friendly.

They had not teamed up directly during the war, as the orcs had with the fairies, but when battles took place near water, they had often fought in tandem with the lizardmen.

Bash didn’t have any sort of negative feelings toward the lizardmen as a race.

As war buddies, he found them reliable and dependable.

“No, it’s not a sightseeing trip. I can’t make any detours.”

“Oh... Oh, I see...”

When Bash considered his objective for this trip, he couldn’t say yes.

Besides, the orcs found the lizardfolk quite ugly. Far worse than the dwarves.

The only orcs who found lizardwomen acceptable to mate with were the ones who were a bit touched in the head. The thought of marrying a lizardwoman and having babies with one made Bash’s blood run cold.

Even if he could find one that was interested, that is.

“I’d like to visit a place that has something similar going on.”

“Something similar going on?”

Tydonile tilted his head to one side.

Unfortunately, he had not heard anything about orcs being enslaved illegally anywhere.

The only thing he could reason that Bash might be referring to was the God of War Festival.

“Ah!”

“Is there something?”

“Ah, no. It’s probably nothing that would interest you, only...”

“Hmm?”

“The third-born princess of the beastkin land, Innuella, is to marry Aconitum of the elves, so the atmosphere in the beastkin land will be very much like a festival.”

“I see.”

It really didn’t interest Bash.

Bash felt his shoulders slump.

But Zell sat up straight, at full alert.

“Boss... That’s it!”

“What is?”

“Lend me your ear a moment!”

Zell leaned in and began fairy-whispering. Many races had suffered as a result of the things this fairy had whispered in certain ears.

But to Bash, they were just words of advice from a friend.

(When people see something good happening to someone else, it makes them envious; makes them want to imitate it, does it not, Boss?)

“Hmm.”

Bash thought about what had happened in elf country.

After Bash’s failed proposal, the Strangler had tried his luck with a lady elf and managed to win her hand.

Some guys have all the luck.

Bash would be lying if he said he didn’t want to imitate that man’s success.

But alas, elves were a monogamous race...

(I bet a similar sort of thing will kick up in beastkin country, too!)

(Explain?)

(Oh, Boss, you blockhead! Listen here! When the princess gets married, it’s going to influence everyone else! It’s going to kick off an interracial marriage

trend in the beastkin land!)

“...!”

An interracial marriage boom was about to kick off again.

Yes, that was a very likely possibility indeed.

Bash looked at Zell.

Bash knew how well he could trust the prideful fairy's info-gathering skills, how shrewdly they interpreted the enemy's intentions from what was uncovered.

(Zell. I'm so glad I brought you along on this journey.)

(Hee-hee, oh, there's no need to butter me up, you!)

Zell punched Bash on the shoulder.

Feeling grateful for Zell all over again, Bash turned to Tydonile.

“I am grateful for the information. I believe I'll head for beastkin country.”

“...”

Tydonile looked puzzled.

Based on the sight of that whispered conversation, no doubt Bash had his own reasons, Tydonile concluded.

After all, this was Bash.

He had freed the slaves held captive in the dwarf country and kept their pride alive. He was a true hero.

“Very well! I am glad my information was of use!”

“Once my quest is complete, I may stop by your village for a visit.”

“Thank you, sir! You will be most welcome then!”

“Farewell, then!”

“Farewell, sir!”

And so, Bash set out on his journey anew.

In the direction of the beastkin land.



Talk about the tournament continued unabated in Dobanga Pit of the dwarf country for several days after.

They spoke of the orcs who had been enslaved since the war.

They spoke of one slave warrior, who had regained his freedom and his pride.

And they spoke of the Orc Hero, who had freed them all.

The Hero, with assistance from the Dwarf Battlelord's daughter, had shot up the ranks in the tournament, coming face-to-face with the enslaved warrior in the final match.

The Hero had tested the warrior's mettle, and the warrior had overcome his challenge.

As a result, the warrior had won back his pride and his freedom, and had returned to his own country...

The taverns were full of songs and tales about that, and the dwarves drank to the orcs' manliness and pride, and the wonderful fight they had performed.

The merchants who had enslaved the orc warrior realized that their crime had been laid bare, and they had fled Dobanga Pit.

The coliseum had become deserted, but the dwarves, with their love for moneymaking, would no doubt find a way to breathe new life into that facility.

“But you know...”

While the dwarves were discussing the incident in the tavern, there were two points that still remained unclear.

What exactly was the Hero up to now?

After conceding victory to the warrior in the arena, he had disappeared.

He had not accompanied the released warrior and his brethren home. Nor had he remained in Dobanga Pit. He had simply vanished.

At around the same time, news of what happened in the Shiwanashi Forest had begun to filter in to Dobanga Pit. “He’s a Hero. No doubt he is off to the next region, to restore the pride of the orcs there, too.” That was the general

consensus, which was neither completely right nor wrong.

"The Dwarf Battlelord's daughter, though, that's Primera, ain't it? Can't imagine how that stuck-up young girl came to be providing support for an actual Hero."

The other hot topic of discussion was Primera and how she had assisted the Hero.

"Ah, about that. It's actually the Hero Bash who put her in her place. After a good scoldin' from an actual true-blood Hero, she's apparently changed her ways."

"Has she?"

"Yeah. There's proof. Hasn't she gone to her older brother Barabara—the one she was at odds with—and asked him to take her under his wing as an apprentice? And she's not doin' it begrudgingly, neither. No matter how much he yells and scolds her, I hear she's doin' the work without a word of complaint. So much so, that just the other day in the tavern, Barabara was heard saying: 'I'd better watch my back, because she's coming up fast.' *That* Barabaradobanga said that, y'know?"

"Huh... Looks like that Hero set her straight, no two ways about it..."

Right. Primera was doing her best to fulfill her promise to Bash and had become Barabaradobanga's pupil, with the aim of becoming the best artisan in Dobanga Pit.

No longer would she compare herself to others or presume that she was better than anyone. Now she was focused entirely on her own work and improving her skills.

Some still had sarcastic things to say about her mother's blood and the perceived inferiority of it.

But she had assisted a real Hero and was even now working hard to better herself. So the naysayers had become thin on the ground.

"Ah, speak of the devil."

She stopped by the tavern once every three days.

Dwarves love to drink each evening and often tend to return to their smithies after a night of drinking. But she kept it to once every three days.

She did not come alone.

She always brought another woman with her.

“Huh, and she’s got her sister Calmera with her again.”

“All the time, lately.”

It was the day after the tournament ended when Primera went to visit Calmera for the first time.

She arrived at Calmera’s workshop, carrying a bottle of booze in one hand.

After that, no one knows what the two spoke of.

However, seeing the two of them frequenting the tavern and enjoying drinks together, it was clear they had made a permanent break from their old dynamic of bickering.

“Looks like in the end, the Orc Hero even managed to heal the rift between two of the Dobanga sisters.”

“Could you pull off something like that?”

“Don’t be foolish. He’s called a Hero ’cause he can do things others can’t.”

The two dwarves shared a hearty laugh, all the while double-fisting tankards of ale.

They raised their right-hand tankards and clanked them together.

“To the Orc Hero!”

They raised their left-hand tankards and clanked them together.

“To the Dobanga girl!”

Then they raised both their tankards high and clanked all four together.

“Cheers!!!”

That night at Dobanga Pit, spirits were higher than ever.

EPILOGUE

One month had passed since Bash had left the Pit.

In that time, Donzoi had gathered together the other orcs and departed as well. They passed through Shiwanashi Forest and returned safely to the land of the orcs.

When they returned, there was an uproar.

You see, before they suddenly reappeared, their entire group was believed to be dead.

The Orc King, Nemesis, decided that Donzoi and company were a band of rogue orcs who had teamed up to attack the homeland, and he immediately mobilized their defenses against them.

They were proud warriors who abhorred rogue orcs themselves and had endured long years of slavery. They were not willing to go quietly, and just when things were looking bad, Donzoi spoke the name Bash, and all hostilities instantly ceased.

The orc warriors were filled with pride when they heard about Bash's adventures on his travels and learned that it had been Bash's independent decision to help Donzoi's company help themselves; their chests burned hot.

And so, the issue of the illegal slavery going on in Dobanga Pit was fully resolved.

A month after that...

"Then came our Hero Bash! He entered the tournament and astonished the entire crowd! In one hit! He bested every opponent in a single strike and fought his way to the final! Now, we all knew that felling an opponent in one hit was just child's play for Bash, but the others didn't know that. Especially the young dwarves—they were all as pale as sheets! It was like they couldn't believe such

a mighty orc had really existed all this time! And what's more, even the dwarves who had been seasoned fighters in the war went white when they saw Bash! For they recalled his might on the battlefield! How could they fail to quake in their seats?!"

Clutching a drink in both hands, Donzoi was holding court at the tavern, regaling them all with the tale.

He was surrounded by young orcs.

They were all desperate to hear Donzoi's story.

He, after all, had been enslaved for several long years by the dwarves and had broken free of that by his own power.

He wasn't as amazing as Bash, of course, but they saw him as a Hero, too.

How could they not be enthralled by his tale?

Orcs loved telling boastful stories, and they also quite like hearing those of their fellows as well.

"...But regrettably, by the time Bash showed up, I had forgotten my orcish pride. I just wanted out. To get my freedom, I was willing to do anything, even become a rogue orc, even go against the decrees of our race. I even debased myself so far as to beg before Bash... I offered him my woman if he'd lose the final on purpose."

Donzoi's tale wasn't all boastful, of course.

It was more like he was trying to explain how shameful and foolish he'd been.

"What? So... So then what did Bash say?"

"He turned me down, in no uncertain terms! He said, '*Donzoi, if you're a true orc, then fight for what you desire!*'"

"Wow!!!"

"That's when I woke up. Bash was indeed a strong opponent. I could not win against him. But even so, I could not run. I could not debase the name of orc. Right. What I wanted was to escape slavery. But that was not all. What I really wanted was to return to being an orc again. To do that, what I needed to

reclaim was not my freedom, but...my pride!"

The young orcs trembled as Donzoi went on to explain how he had done that.

It was an unusual format for an orcish bragging tale to take, and they could not help being intrigued.

Perhaps Donzoi would have made a good troubadour if he had not been an orc.

"So then what happened?"

"I fought against Bash in the final! Bash is truly a Hero. He gave me just enough room to win against him. Usually, I'd think he was holding back, but his leaps...his killing spirit... It was genuine. Yes, he was holding back a little, but he was still coming at me as if to say, *If you lose to me like this, you are no true orc!* If I had not awoken as a result of Bash's words, I may have died. However, I fought with honor, like a true orc. I cracked a bone, I bled, my knees were shaking, and when I blocked with my shield, he broke my shield arm. But I pressed on. I struck him with all I had!"

Donzoi's recount was filled with respect for Bash.

All the young orcs highly respected Bash as well.

They were utterly spellbound as they listened to Donzoi's blow-by-blow account of their Hero's battle prowess.

"And finally, we freed the slaves together. But that's not even the last amazing thing that happened. After we left Dobanga Pit, we passed through the Shiwanashi Forest. Yes, the forest of the elves. We were prepared to lose at least half our number. I mean, this was the elf forest we were entering. The domain of Thunder Sonia, she who despises the orcs! We knew we could not avoid battle..."

"Gulp... So what happened?"

"It went as we expected. We knew the elves would not turn a blind eye if we stepped foot onto their land. The moment we entered the forest, they sent their troops to meet us! But even that seemed strange. The elves are the type to nock their arrows the second they see an orc, but they did not act hostile

toward us at all. The commanding officer himself came forth and said, ‘*What’s up?*’ We were shocked! And yet, we told them our tale. The moment the name Bash was spoken, the elves stood aside and opened the way for us... We were flabbergasted! While we had been otherwise engaged, Bash had been subjugating the whole of the elf race!”

“Ah yes, the King said something about that recently. An elf emissary came here and offered supplies of food as a token of gratitude or something.”

“Gah-ha-ha! I’d rather they’d sent women instead of food!”

The orcs felt pride for their race and for Bash. He was truly one of a kind.

Oh yes, the orcs were proud, indeed.

The Orc Hero Bash, though he had departed their land, was still acting as a Hero.

Showing the pride of the orc warrior to the other lands, even now, after the war was over.

Hearing that, no orc could fail to be delighted.

As Donzoi spoke of Bash, he felt himself growing misty-eyed.

“So we know Bash has been up to heroics, but what about with women? Is he bedding women left and right, as an Orc Hero should?”

“Fool! He does not need the concerns of an ignoramus like you! Why, in Dobanga Pit, Bash was well-accompanied by womenfolk! I myself saw him in the company of the comeliest dwarf woman in the whole Pit!

“Seriously?! That’s our Bash!”

“And no doubt, in elf country, too, he went on a ravishing spree with the elven women! How could he not enjoy the spoils after he so successfully bent the elves to his whims?!”

“But is that really going to be all right? Didn’t the Orc King outlaw nonconsensual mating with other races...?”

“You think the elves wouldn’t have kicked up a fuss if it wasn’t all right with them?!”

“Ah, you’re right! No doubt Bash was fighting off the lust-crazed elf women as best he could!”

“I’d be willing to wager that when Bash returns from his travels, he’ll be dragging home over a dozen pregnant wenches in chains!”

“I won’t even take that bet! ’Cause I bet you’re right!”

“Gah-ha-ha!”

The tavern erupted with bawdy laughter.

It was the usual raucous orcish laughter, nothing out of the ordinary. But to Donzoi, who had not heard it in several long years, it was the sweetest sound in the world.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everyone. I'm Rifujin na Magonote.

First, allow me to take this opportunity to thank you all for picking up a copy of *Orc Eroica*, Vol. 3.

Thank you very much.

I was thinking about writing a lively piece about the events that sparked the writing of the third volume, but I already did that in the afterword for the first and second volumes. If I ended up doing the same thing three times in a row, it wouldn't be very artistic of me.

So this time, I'd like to make a status report instead.

The year is 2021. The planet is in the grip of an infamous virus, on the brink of destruction.

It all began when the virus mutations reached Omega. After that, they started using the names of astrological signs. When the mutations reached Virgo, no, correction, it was around Gemini when the omen became visible.

The Gemini mutation of the virus gained the ability to infect rats, cats, and dogs.

The symptoms were quite evident. Within three days of infection, the animals became lethargic, turning into animated lumps of meat. As a result of the virus multiplying exponentially inside their bodies, they began to change. So stated an expert who appeared on television, although the true situation was unknown.

Many virus particles were present in the droplets aspirated by the flesh lumps. Through airborne pathogens, the virus reached humans. Luckily, they presented with only asymptomatic infection.

It was the Virgo mutation that changed all of that.

Right, the Virgo mutation infected the human gray matter, turning the brain into a flesh lump, and then controlling the host, leading the host to repeat certain actions that would lead to infecting other humans.

By the time the world learned of the Virgo mutation, it was already too late.

In all the major cities of the world, the humans infected by Virgo began to run amok. Soon, the world itself was on the brink of destruction.

The remaining humans all donned gas masks and evacuated underground.

The world above fell under the complete dominion of the virus.

After a long period of suffering, we discovered a single spaceship.

I don't really know the details, but apparently it was something they were working on around the time the viral infections started up. Its true use remained unknown.

At any rate, all 112 of us remaining survivors boarded the spaceship together and departed Earth.

After a long period of cryogenic sleep, we arrived at Dolos, a planet in the Misaki star system of the Hilbert galaxy, and decided to live there.

The galaxy, the star system, and the planet were all named after passengers on our ship.

My job on the planet of Dolos was to write novels for entertainment purposes. I had only written fantasy to this point, but what the people wanted was historical and contemporary novels. No doubt they all longed to dwell in their memories of Earth.

However, the mystery novels didn't go over very well. No doubt it reminded them of the strife we had lived through aboard the ship. The aforementioned virus had become the enemy of humankind by now, and no doubt the humans did not want to imagine further enemies among one another. When we arrived at Dolos, there were only around fifteen of us left. Most of us had died due to infighting.

Life on Dolos was harsh, but we were filled with hope.

We built houses, built fields for growing crops. We captured animals and

domesticated them, and bit by bit, we built our colony.

There were no natural enemies on Dolos, and we were just beginning to think of plans to propagate the human race anew when it happened.

From the sky, a single flesh lump came falling down.

We knew the sight well. It was a human, infected by Virgo.

At the time, we did not know what kind of mutation it was. No doubt the original virus had continued to mutate. We were shocked by how infectious it was.

The flesh lumps vomited something unspeakable from their swellings as they came to attack the humans.

The rest played out as you can imagine.

The humans were ousted from the colony they had built and scattered.

I ran away with a group, but before I knew it, I was all alone.

I don't know how many days passed after that. I'm alone now, living inside a shelter in the colony we built.

One good thing did come of all this misfortune, though.

I no longer have to write novels for everyone else's amusement. I didn't really dislike writing historical and contemporary stuff, but it was a relief to be free of the obligation.

So I decided to go back and finish writing the next installment of the novel I'd just started when the virus began spreading: *Orc Eroica*.

Then I sent this finished third volume to Earth, by means of super-dimensional Internet correspondence.

I have no idea if anyone is still left alive on Earth, but if anyone happens to read this transmission, I hope they enjoy the novel.

Now that I've successfully finished the third entry, I'm thinking of leaving the shelter and going in search of food.

I only have a few ration packs left now, so I need to act while I still have the strength to move.

I plan to continue writing the series upon my return.

So that ended up getting quite long...

To Asanagi, who drew such wonderful illustrations this time around, too, 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.

If I manage to make it back alive, let's meet in the fourth entry.

Rifujin na Magonote

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