

# The **Brilliant Healer's** New Life in the Shadows



**Sakaku Hishikawa**  
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**2**



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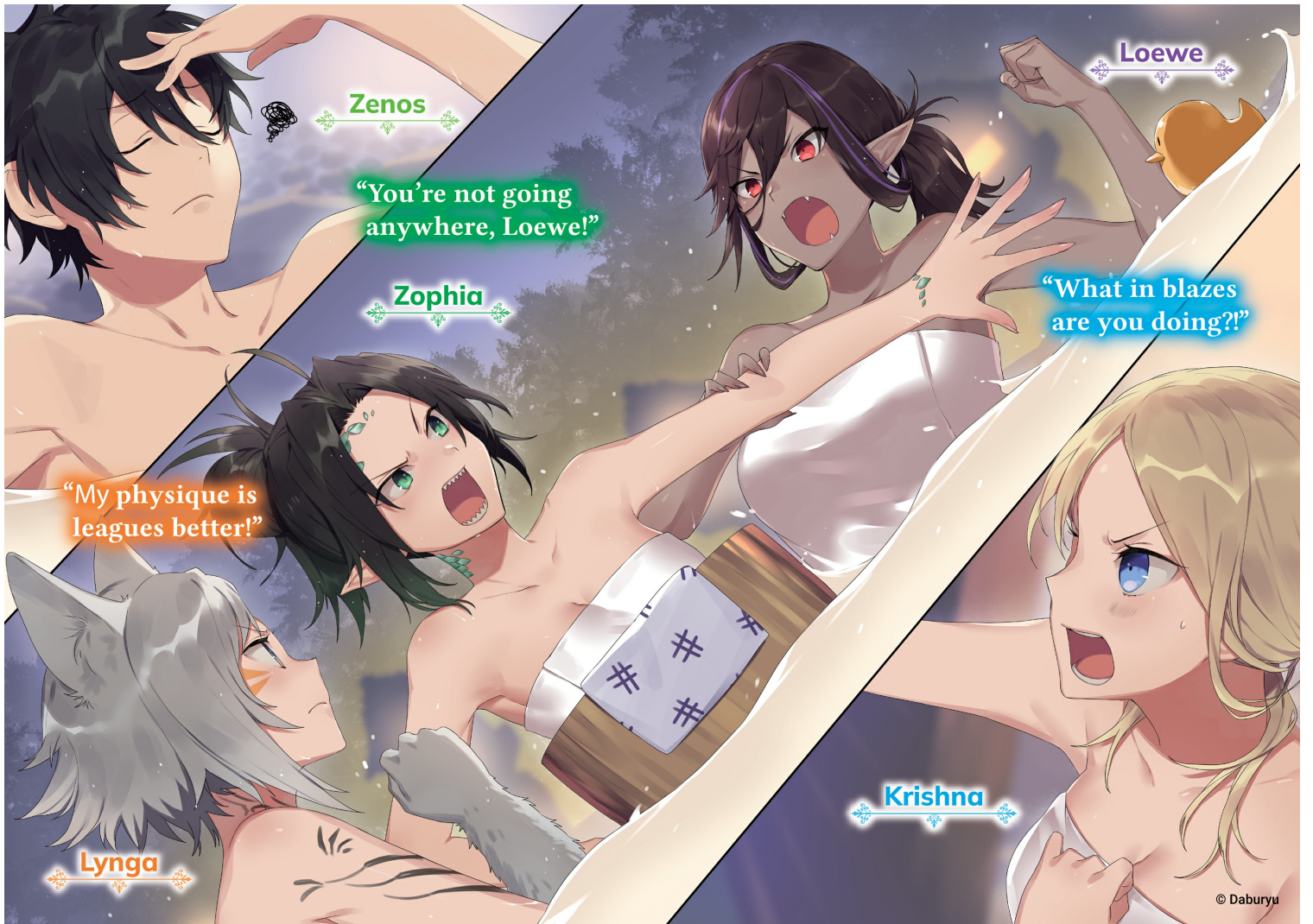
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Zenos

"You're not going  
anywhere, Loewe!"

Zophia

Loewe

"What in blazes  
are you doing?!"

"My physique is  
leagues better!"

Lynga

Krishna

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Becker

“Wow. This is impressive.”

Umin

Zenos muttered in admiration as he first set foot within the building. It was the Royal Institute of Healing, with its pristine white walls and privileged location in the administrative ward of the special district, where nobles resided.





As Zenos's chant echoed,  
a tsunami of white light engulfed the zombie king,  
sending ripples through the air that violently shook the trees.



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# Prologue

The founder of the Kingdom of Herzeth, also known as the Kingdom of the Sun, had famously said, “Our radiance shall shine bright across the land.”

At the heart of the royal capital was the palace, surrounded by an area known as the special district, where the nobility—descendants of the country’s founding heroes—resided. And in one corner of this area lay the administrative ward, where the major institutions of the nation were located. Within this ward stood a building of pristine white, its walls emanating an aura of serenity. High above the main gate was an emblem featuring a pair of hands cradling a sun—representing the king—as if healing it.

This was the Royal Institute of Healing—headquarters of all healers in Herzeth.

Inside one of the many buildings in the vast, sprawling grounds stood a girl wearing round glasses. “Dr. Becker,” she said, her sky-blue hair fluttering at her shoulders. She exuded an atmosphere so earnest, it was as though honesty itself had taken form and donned clothes. “Might I speak with you for a moment?”

“What’s the matter, Umin?” asked the man with brown hair and gentle features sitting before her. He seemed not to pay much mind to his appearance; a cowlick stuck out at the back of his head.

Hesitantly, Umin asked, “Um... Is it possible for an unlicensed healer to use elite-tier spells?”

The man tilted his head in confusion. “Why the sudden question?” he said after a moment’s pause. “I thought you were going to ask me what I had for lunch. I was trying very hard to remember what it was, actually.”

“No, I don’t have any particular interest in that,” she replied. “Besides, you’re often too busy to eat lunch at all.”

Becker let out a carefree laugh. “True, true.” Suddenly, his already thin eyes



narrowed further. “Hmm, an elite yet unlicensed healer... That’s quite the unexpected question.”

“Well, I was just wondering if perhaps such an individual might exist...”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Right, let’s see... Not having a license means either they never received a formal education, or they failed the exam.”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“And in those circumstances, becoming a top-tier healer is generally unlikely.”

“Yes, I thought as much...” Umin said with a small sigh.

“But,” Becker continued quietly, “if, by some miracle, someone like that *did* exist out there...” He trailed off, a glint forming in the back of his slightly droopy eyes.

A little taken aback, Umin cleared her throat. “I-If one did, then...?”

“That’d be so cool!”

Her knees nearly buckled. “C-Cool, you say?”

“Very cool,” he confirmed. “I mean, how amazing would that be? A self-taught elite healer!” The man’s eyes practically sparkled. “Most healers need *years* of diligent, formal studies before finally getting their license. From there, they can climb through the ranks from apprentice to beginner, and then on to intermediate and advanced. But most healers don’t make it past intermediate, and only a few make it to advanced. From there, fewer still make it to elite, and those that do, do so either through significant contributions or by demonstrating exceptional talent. Now, reaching that level via self-study alone? Don’t you think that’s praiseworthy?”

“W-Well, yes, but...” Umin muttered incredulously. The doctor could be rather scatterbrained at times, but that *was* part of his charm.

Finally, the man straightened and offered her a placid smile. “While I would love to meet such an individual, were they to exist, well, it’s complicated, no? We’d be obliged to take action against anyone operating without a license.”

“True...”



Many things fell under the jurisdiction of the Royal Institute of Healing, namely medical treatments, healing education, related research, providing support for adventurers, and the supervision and management of clinics. As a result, unlicensed clinics were naturally subject to stringent crackdowns by the Institute.

“So, why the question, Umin?” Becker asked.

“Oh, no reason. I was just curious,” Umin said, waving a hand in front of her face.

She thought back to the incident with the monster in the slums a week ago. They’d received reports that a giant creature had rampaged through the streets, and healers had been informally called upon to provide assistance on a volunteer basis. Because this supposed creature had targeted the slums, only a scant few had applied to provide treatment, Umin among them.

But upon arriving on-site, despite the collapsed buildings which made it evident that something massive had attacked, they’d found no injured, much to their shock. The monster had been nowhere to be found, and though details were few and far between, it was difficult to believe that there’d been not a single injury given how badly damaged the area had been.

Perhaps the incident had been staged by the poor to sow unrest in the heart of the city. Or perhaps there *had* been injured people, but they hadn’t trusted the healers sent by the authorities and had lied about it. Those were the hypotheses among her peers, despite the lack of solid evidence for either.

Umin had considered another possibility: someone had already treated all of the injured before the healers’ arrival.

Still, given the state the buildings were in, the situation had to have been dire. The casualties would have numbered beyond counting. No ordinary single healer would’ve been able to treat everyone before Umin and the others arrived. Yet they’d heard nothing about the saintess or other elite healers being involved.

In which case—could it be that, somewhere in this country, there was a brilliant healer, hiding in the shadows? No way, right? That was too much of a leap. Her theory was too far-fetched, she felt, and so she hesitated to speak



further on it.

There was no official announcement regarding the incident, in the end. Perhaps the Royal Guard was suppressing information—though the government never had concerned itself with the slums in the first place.

“What’s on your mind, Umin?” Becker asked.

“Oh, nothing,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Ah, right.” The professor seemed to remember something, and took an envelope out of a drawer. “It’s your turn to do the rounds in the countryside. Would you mind?”

“Again? You always send me.”

“Indeed. But providing medical care in underpopulated areas is also one of the respectable duties of the Royal Institute of Healing.”

“I mean, yes, but...” Umin didn’t dislike doing these rounds, *per se*. It was just that right now, she had much on her mind, and so she wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about it.

Noticing her mood, Becker’s tone softened. “Is *that* still bothering you, Umin?”

“Well, I...”

“I get it. I feel the same way. But you don’t want to jeopardize your own health with all that overthinking, you know? It defeats the point.”

“Thank...you.”

“Actually, that’s part of why I’m sending you out on this assignment.”

Umin tilted her head in silent confusion as Becker reached into the envelope and took out a piece of paper, then handed it to her with a thoughtful expression.

“This place’s great for treating fatigue. People tend to flock there for healing, see.”

“People flock there?” she echoed. If that was the case, then there was a chance to run into the person she was looking for...



Umin stared absentmindedly at the paper in her hands, lost in thought.

# Chapter 1: The Shadow Healer's Vacation

On the outskirts of the magnificent royal capital stood the ruins of a town once laid low by a plague. Tucked away in the shadows of the kingdom's prosperity, the weather-beaten streets—known only as a ruined town without name—told a story long forgotten.

And in a quiet corner of these ruins stood a crooked building with cracked windows and paint peeling off the exterior walls.

The house had been left as such on purpose in order to blend in with the surrounding abandoned homes. It was a clandestine clinic run by a genius healer who, due to his social standing as a poor man, couldn't obtain a license. He'd started the practice after being expelled from his party.

"Mr. Zenos," said Krishna, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed vice commander of the Royal Guard, "we have made little progress in uncovering the mastermind behind the golem incident. All we know thus far is that this individual calls themselves the Conductor."

"I see," replied Zenos, shadow healer and owner of this clinic, as he crossed his arms with a sigh.

A week ago, an ancient man-made weapon had rampaged through the slums where the demi-humans lived. Krishna's report concerned the person who had orchestrated the attack from behind the scenes.

"The Conductor," Zenos repeated. "It sounds familiar." That was the name of a member of the Black Guild who took on any request free of charge, provided it met certain conditions.

After the incident, the healer had covered the repair costs for the collapsed houses by selling the sword he'd confiscated from Aston, his former party leader—a valuable treasure Zenos had once picked up in an underground labyrinth. His labor, however, remained unpaid.

"I'll remember that name," the healer said. "We'll settle things someday."



“Indeed,” Krishna replied. “However, they seem elusive. I went to their hideout as indicated by Aston, but it was already deserted, with no traces of this individual remaining.”

The leader of the lizardmen bandits, Zophia, raised her right hand from her seat at the dining table in the back. “I’ve looked into this Conductor myself.” Her long black hair was tied back, and her slitted light green eyes were gazing at Zenos. “I sent my brother Zonde to the Black Guild to sniff ’em out. Apparently the Conductor was a pretty new arrival there. They didn’t associate with anyone. Seems like even the people from the guild thought they looked out of place.”

“I did some investigating of my own,” Lynga, a werewolf with large beast ears and ash-colored hair that reached down to her shoulders, added. “Heard pretty much the same thing.”

“It’s an unspoken rule of the underworld not to pry into other people’s business, so there’s only so much we’ll be able to glean from just asking around,” Loewe, an orc with tanned skin and red eyes, pointed out.

Zenos groaned softly.

Krishna raised her right hand. “The Royal Guard shall target this Conductor as a person of interest and potential risk, but given how thoroughly they have concealed their own tracks, ’tis likely they will not make any public appearances for a while.”

“I see,” the healer replied.

“But they’ll poke their head out someday,” Zophia murmured. “Call it a hunch.”

“Yeah,” Lynga agreed. “I get the feeling the Conductor’s still plotting something.”

“Agreed. Whoever this is, they’re sneaky,” Loewe said. “They might be burrowing away even deeper than we think.”

Krishna’s expression shifted to displeasure at their remarks. “You demi-humans really ought to stop making perfunctory guesses.”

“What was that?” Zophia asked. “Isn’t your opinion also a guess?”

“Not at all,” Krishna replied. “My speculation is backed by investigation and expertise—”

“Okay, hold up a sec,” Zenos said, slowly pushing to his feet. His gaze shifted between each of the women at the clinic, split between the dining table and the treatment room. “Can you guys at least all gather in one place if you’re gonna talk? It’s hard to follow the conversation.”

Krishna’s lips pursed into a pout. “W-Well, I have no choice, Mr. Zenos. Given my position in the Royal Guard, I cannot leisurely share a table and have tea with criminals such as Zophia and the others.”

“Same goes for us,” the lizardwoman protested. “Why are you even here?”

“I am here on *proper* business, delivering a report on the aftermath of the incident to an involved party. If anyone here is wasting Mr. Zenos’s time with frivolities, it certainly would not be me.”

“You’ve got a smart mouth on you, huh?”

“Oh, cut it out!” Zenos snapped. “No fighting in here. Also, business is closed today because I’m tired, so unless you guys are seriously ill or wounded, get out!”

Shooed out by the healer, the women reluctantly left the clinic. Last to leave, Krishna turned to look at him, her hand on the doorknob. “One final thing before I go,” she said. “About that man, Aston—it seems that he made no mention of your name when being interrogated by officers other than myself, Mr. Zenos. Though he excused it as not wishing to speak of your achievements, perhaps in his own way, he did have your best interests in mind.”

“I see...”

“Also, once again, you have achieved a great deal—”

“No records, no awards. I wanna lay low, remember? All I need is to be compensated for my labor.”

“I thought you might say as much. Should I locate the Conductor, I will contact you promptly.” The door shut behind her with a soft thud.



With the guests gone, the house was finally quiet again.

“Here’s your tea, Zenos,” said a pretty elf girl as she approached from the kitchen, holding a cup.

“Thanks, Lily,” the healer replied with a smile, gazing pensively at the hand-sewn nurse’s cap perched atop her swaying blonde hair. It was after finding her severely wounded and healing her, the day he’d been kicked from his party, that he’d decided to start his practice. Now she served as both his receptionist and a nurse.

The young elf watched him sip his tea, a tense look on her face. “Um, Zenos? I’ve been thinking...”

“About what?”

“So, what happened with the golem the other day. That was hard on you, right?”

“I guess,” he admitted. “I was pretty tired for the first time in a while.”

A golem—an ancient, man-made weapon of destruction—had ravaged the slums. Zenos had not only treated hundreds of victims in the middle of the night, he’d also fought the golem and restored the body of a former party member who was being consumed by a manastone. Claiming he hadn’t been tired after that would’ve been blatantly untrue.

“So I was thinking, um, you could take a break, and come with me to...to...” Lily stammered, frozen in place.

“To?” Zenos echoed.

“Come with me to a...”

“A...?”

“Come with me,” Lily mumbled, struggling, clenching her fists as if trying to find the courage to continue, “to a hot sp—”

“Doc!” came Zophia’s voice from the front door, now suddenly ajar. At the sight of her, Lily stopped talking.

Zenos looked at the lizardwoman, puzzled. “What’s up? Forgot something

here?”

“Nah, that’s not it,” Zophia replied. “I have an idea, actually, so I was waiting for Lynga and Loewe to leave.”

“An idea?”

Zophia chuckled sheepishly, rubbing her nose. “So, what happened the other day was hard on you, right?”

“I *was* pretty tired for the first time in a while.”

“So, like. Wanna go to a hot spring?”

“A hot spring?”

“Yeah. It’s spacious, and you get a nice soak in warm water. It’ll cure your fatigue, I think.”

“I see,” Zenos mused. “Might be nice once in a while.”

“Hells yeah!” Zophia exclaimed. “It’s a date, doc!”

In high spirits, the lizardwoman left. Almost immediately after, Lynga sauntered in, sneaking closer to Zenos while glancing over her shoulder.

“What’s up, Lynga?” the healer asked. “Forgot something here?”

“Nah,” the werewolf replied. “I actually have a great idea, so I was waiting for Zophia and Loewe to be gone.”

“An idea?”

Lynga beamed. “Sir Zenos, the golem incident was hard on you, wasn’t it?”

“I *was* pretty tired for the first time in a while.”

“So why not go to a hot spring with me? Get a nice soak in warm water, send that fatigue packing.”

“A hot spring,” he echoed. “Not a bad idea, but I—”

“Yesss!” Lynga exclaimed. “It’s a date, Sir Zenos!”

Her beast ears twitching, the werewolf left.

Moments later, Loewe came into the clinic, brimming with confidence and



grinning. “Zenos! I had an idea—”

“A hot spring, right? It’s a hot spring. You wanna go to a hot spring.”

“H-How did you know?” Loewe asked. “Great minds do think alike after all! You guessed my thoughts precisely!”

“You people are just peas in a pod, aren’t you?!” It was hard to believe these women used to be at odds over racial issues.

After Loewe left with a spring in her step, the door opened a fourth time.

“M-Mr. Zenos,” Krishna stammered. “I-I had an ide—”

“Not you too, Krishna!” Were Zophia and the rest rubbing off on her too?!

After seeing the visitors off, Zenos dropped his shoulders tiredly. “That was weirdly tiresome. What’s with them and hot springs, anyway?” Slumping, he turned back to Lily. “So, what were you saying?”

“Ugh...” Lily looked down, puffed up her cheeks, and ran off into the bedroom. “Nothing! Forget it!”

“Huh? What the...”

As an astonished Zenos watched the young elf run away, a semitransparent, black-clad woman floated down from the ceiling.

“Hee hee hee... How marvelous that all the rivals, in an attempt to outdo one another, offered the exact same suggestion. I never tire of watching the unseemly struggles of women...”

“You know, I’ve been wondering... Aren’t you supposed to be the highest of all undead or whatever? Shouldn’t you be classier?”

With a smirk, Carmilla—the wraith living in the second floor of the clinic—crossed her arms smugly, suppressing a chuckle. “It certainly *has* been a while since I last visited a hot spring.”

“What? No way. *You’re* coming too?”

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The hot-spring village of Flamme was about a half day’s ride from the capital, where the ruined town was. Though it was a small mountain settlement, it was

a highly sought-after health resort, known for its abundant hot water.

“Man, this feels amazing...” Zenos mumbled as he stretched, submerged in the spacious open-air bath.

Day had given way to night, and a sea of stars twinkled high above. He’d chosen to stay at an inn on the outskirts of the village, since the ones closer to the village center required proof of citizenship to enter. The building was somewhat old, but less crowded, which made it cozier. The men’s bath was completely empty save for him.

“Coming here was a great decision,” he murmured, the fatigue from the past few days melting away in the warm water.

This might’ve been the first time he’d ever been able to soak by himself in such a large bath. Though he’d intended to operate covertly as a shadow healer, his life had turned quite hectic. Zenos was enjoying this rare moment of quiet privacy.

“Doooc...”

“What?” he said, rubbing his face. The steam made it hard to see, but he could spot someone standing in the washing area barely wrapped in a towel, the seductive curves of her body on display. “Zophia? This is the men’s bath.”

“I know,” she said. “But at least let me wash your back. You’re here to relax, after all.”

“Nah. I can do it myself.”

“Aw, you’re no fun.” She stepped into the bath, the water sloshing around her.

“Aaand you just waltzed right in.”

“Eh, who cares? It’s not like there’s anyone else here.”

“For now, yeah, but not forever. And then you’ll just cause a scene, so just hurry on back to the women’s bath.”

“It’s fine. I hung up a ‘Cleaning in Progress’ sign outside after you went in.”

“So *that’s* why it’s empty!”



“Sooo, it’s just us two in here...” Zophia trailed off, licking her lips as she moved to stand confidently before Zenos. He immediately felt a sense of dread, but she pulled away, modestly sitting a little further out. “Honestly, I’d love to be more forward, but I don’t want you to hate me.”

“What is this? You, being reasonable for once?”

“Of course. You’re watching, after all.” Her face was a little flushed, perhaps due to the water temperature. “Lately, my brother and my men all keep saying I’ve changed. Probably because I met you.”

“You do seem to have calmed down compared to when we first met.”

“Yeah. See, doc, you say you just heal wounds, but I think you change people too. Well, not just people. I never dreamed I’d let my guard down around a werewolf or an orc, let alone have a conversation with a member of the Royal Guard. You’re probably gonna change the world one of these—”

“I’m not that impressive,” he cut in. “Just a plain ol’ shadow healer.”

His mentor’s words flashed in his mind. *“A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place.”* Zenos knew he was far from reaching that level.

“Whether or not you see it that way, people are just gonna keep bugging you,” Zophia said. “You’re probably gonna be out of my reach soon, so at least let me enjoy this bath with you, yeah?”

After a moment’s silence, Zenos spoke up slowly. “Hey, Zophia...”

“Yeah?”

“Have you been inching closer?”

“Oh, you got me,” she admitted. “I was planning on a sneak attack.”

“And here I was thinking you were being reasonable! What an idiot I am!”

Just as Zophia sprang up from the water, a familiar voice rang out from the entrance to the men’s bath. “Now wait a damn minute!” From the steam emerged someone with animal ears, loosely wrapped in a towel. “I’m not giving you a head start, Zophia!”

The lizardwoman clicked her tongue. “Lynga! This is the men’s bath! What are you thinking?!”

“Uh,” Zenos interjected. “Pot, kettle...?”

Lynga stumbled into the water. “I only ended up here because I’m so dizzy.”

“That’s a total lie, isn’t it?” the healer deadpanned.

“Oh no,” the werewolf said. “I’m so dizzy, I’m about to fall over!”

“A total lie!”

Lynga’s eyes gleamed and she tried to lunge at Zenos, but Zophia grabbed her from the side. “Hey! Don’t just approach the doc like that!”

“Let go, Zophia!” the werewolf protested. “I’m totally half-conscious and about to fall into Sir Zenos over here!”

“You’re pretty strong for someone half-conscious!”

“Come on, you two!” Zenos snapped. “I’m just trying to enjoy some peace and quiet here!”

“Hold it right there! Don’t just forget about me!” said another figure as she emerged from the water with a splash a little ways away from the others. There stood the orc Loewe, a smug smile on her face and her hands on her hips.

“Okay, sure,” the healer said. “But why the hells did you come from there?”

Loewe laughed heartily. “I’ve been hiding in the springs waiting for you, Zenos! But I ran out of breath and was in a state of suspended animation until the commotion jolted me awake. How clumsy of me!”

“And you’re beaming proudly about doing something that stupid?!”

“What do you think, Zenos? My physique is top-notch, right?” the orc asked.

“Uh, it’s dark, so I can’t really tell,” the healer replied.

“I’ll just come closer so you can get a better look.”

“Please don’t.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Loewe!” Zophia protested.

“My physique is leagues better!” Lynga chimed in.



The three demi-humans began to scuffle, splashing hot water everywhere.

“Seriously, though,” Zenos groaned. “I just wanted some quiet...”

“Hey now, demi-humans!” came another woman’s voice. “What in blazes are you doing?! This is the men’s bath, you lascivious lot!”

The three demi-human women looked over to the entrance, where Krishna stood.

“Wait, why are you here?” Zophia asked.

“Lady Iron Pervert!” Lynga exclaimed.

“You wanted to see Zenos *that* badly?” Loewe said.

Krishna blushed a deep red. “N-No! I-I merely lost my way and mistook the men’s bath for the women’s bath!”

“That’s a total lie, isn’t it?” the healer asked.

“E-Either way! Do not approach Mr. Zenos in that state! At least wrap your towels around yourselves properly!”

Zophia scoffed. “Everyone just keeps getting in the way.”

“I won’t let you guys win!” Lynga declared.

“Burn my glorious naked body into your eyeballs, Zenos!” Loewe said.

Turning to the women as they quarreled and jostled against one another, Zenos clenched his trembling fists and forcefully brought them down upon the water. “Enough already! Let me take a damn bath in peace! All of you get back to the women’s bath, *right now!*”

His shouts echoed through the evening mountain air.

\*\*\*

“Um, what?” asked a girl with blue hair from the adjacent women’s bath, looking around. She was certain she’d heard a shout just now. Was that from the men’s bath? “Ugh, and I picked an inn with fewer people precisely to avoid this kind of deviant...”

With her brows furrowed, the girl took the glasses she’d set aside and put

them on, looking at the partition between the men's and women's baths. Nothing happened, however, and everything fell silent once again.

Sighing in relief, she took off her fogged-up glasses, then wiped at her face with a damp hand. "To think Dr. Becker's 'field mission' for me was a visit to the hot springs of Flamme..."

Umin, an intermediate-level healer affiliated with the Royal Institute of Healing, had been sent by her boss out on an assignment to provide medical assistance in the countryside, only to find herself in a hot-spring resort. She'd decided to make the most of it, and here she was.

"I must've looked tired," she mused, rubbing her cheeks and sighing. "I'm grateful for the reprieve, but he really didn't need to worry..."

Still, this was a great opportunity to relax, if nothing else, so she wanted to take advantage of it. Umin stepped out of the water and sat down on a bench in the washing area. Looking up at the starry sky, she lost herself in thought.

There were two things weighing on her mind at present. "First, there's the matter of the mystery elite healer hiding in the shadows," she muttered, raising one finger. A genius healer was hiding somewhere in the country, and had operated behind the scenes during the incident with the monster in the slums. Right? "No, no, that couldn't be it. I'm overthinking this."

Umin chuckled, and was about to raise another finger when a voice from behind interrupted her thoughts. "For heaven's sake, have a modicum of shame! Act like ladies!"

A beautiful blonde woman passed by Umin, her shoulders squared in annoyance. She was followed by a woman with long black hair, a second sporting animal ears, and an imposing third with tanned skin.

"I don't wanna hear that from *you*, Krishna," the black-haired woman said. "And it's not like the doc was interested, anyway."

"I think he's just shy," the beast-eared woman chimed in.

"Unfortunate," added the imposing woman. "I wanted to show off my splendid physique some more."

As they argued, the three demi-humans headed for the open-air bath.

*Demi-humans?* Umin wondered, tilting her head. It wasn't that demi-humans were uncommon—they were often seen in the royal capital, especially in the slums. What *was* unusual was the fact they were mingling with other races; usually, they stuck to their own kind. Seeing them being friendly and sharing a bath was surprising. Between that and the misty air of the hot springs, the whole situation felt almost dreamlike.

“Well, I'll be...” she murmured as she looked on in awe.

“You need something?” the black-haired woman—a lizardwoman?—asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Oh! No, sorry!” Umin replied, shaking her head in a panic. “It's nothing.”

“Hmm. All right, then,” the woman said, sinking up to her shoulders in the hot water, seeming uninterested.

“Perhaps my perfectly proportioned curves caught her eye,” the orc woman said. “Ah, how sinful my physique is to even capture the attention of women.”

“You know,” the werewolf woman retorted, “I have no idea where you got that much confidence.”

The orc woman did have an impressive figure, though. That much was true.

“Must be nice...” said a small voice. Umin turned to look in the direction of where it'd come from, and there stood a blonde-haired little girl.

*Oh, an elf girl! She's adorable!* the healer thought. Elves lived in the north, so they were a relatively rare sight around these parts.

The cute girl brought her hands to her chest and sighed. “With a body like that, I could've barged into the men's bath too...”

“B-Barged into the...?” Umin stammered. The girl looked adorable, but she was saying some rather disturbing things.

“Zophia, Lynga, Loewe, Krishna...” the elven girl mumbled, her gaze distant. “They all have big boobs... I have...nothing.” Suddenly, her gaze shifted to Umin.

Feeling her breath catch at how adorable the little girl was, Umin gave her a



small wave.

But the girl's gaze seemed to be directed somewhere below the healer's face. It lingered there for a while, and then the elven girl grinned and waved back.

"Wait, did she just commiserate with me...?" Reflexively, Umin brought her own hands to her chest.

"Hee hee hee..." came a voice from behind the girl. A figure stood there, but between the mist and not having her glasses on, Umin couldn't make out the details very well. "Fret not, Lily. You are a growing young lady, after all. Besides, Zenos would likely not make his choice based on chest size."

"Well, maybe, but..." Lily trailed off.

"Moreover," the figure continued, "bigger is not necessarily better."

"What? Really?"

"Hee hee... Of course. This world is far more complex than a child's mind could comprehend."

"The world's...complex!"

Apparently, the figure in the back was filling the innocent girl's mind with questionable ideas.

The elven child seemed to remember something. "Oh! Carmilla, you're a ghost, right? Can you still enter the hot springs?"

The figure chuckled. "Do not concern yourself with the details. It will impair your growth."

"O-Okay. I won't."

"What matters is the mood. I find the openness of the space and the misty atmosphere quite enjoyable."

"Huh."

"Yes?"

"Carmilla, you're more see-through than usual."

"So I am. Perhaps I am so relaxed I am about to ascend to the afterlife."

“What? No! I don’t want that! Are you okay?!”

“Oh... I am fading... Fading... Fading...away...forever...”

“Ahhh! Nooo!”

“Hee hee! I jest. I am simply a bit more translucent, is all.”

“Ugh! You scared me!”

“E-Excuse me!” Umin hurried over to the child as she began to fuss. “Is everything okay?!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the elven girl, relieved. “I’m okay. She was just joking.”

“‘She’?” Umin echoed, her eyes fixing on the person behind the girl.

The figure had a towel on her head and was humming. But her body was translucent, clearly not human.

“G-Goodness gracious,” she stammered. “A...a wraith?” A shriek escaped her lungs. “A-Ahhh! Why is an undead creature of this caliber here?!”

In a panic, Umin began to chant a healing spell. Undead were said to be vulnerable to healing magic, but she had no idea how effective her magic would be against a wraith. Still, as a healer, it was her duty to protect the people here. Goose bumps spread across her skin as she readied herself for the life-or-death struggle about to unfold.

“Oh dear,” the wraith said. “Looks like another patron is here. I shall retreat for the time being.” With that, the wraith floated away, disappearing into the men’s side of the bath before Umin could finish casting her spell.

As the healer watched, tense, voices echoed from the men’s bath.





“Seriously, Carmilla?! You too?!”

“Oh, come now, Zenos,” the wraith replied. “Circumstance dictates that I take refuge here, is all.”

“Let. Me. Have. My. Alone. Time! Let me rest in peace or I’ll make sure *you* do!”

“My! Agitated, are we? Here, I shall wash you. It will calm you down.”

“Calm me down?! How am I supposed to calm down?!”

From the women’s side, Umin stared at the partition in a daze. “Wh-What? What’s going on?” The demi-humans, however, carried on chatting as if nothing was happening, showing no signs whatsoever of surprise. “A-Am I dreaming?” she mumbled quietly, standing there with her head in her hands. “I must really be very tired...”

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After fully enjoying the hot springs, the group had gathered in a private dining room.

“So, everyone got their glasses?” Zophia asked. “Now then! Doc, thanks for everything! Cheers!”

The many glasses rose up and clinked softly in the air. “Cheers!”

“Wow, these all look so good!” Lily exclaimed, holding a fork and spoon, watching the local delicacies laid out across the table with sparkling eyes.

As everyone tasted the dishes made with flavorful ingredients—mainly foraged from the mountains and caught in the local river—Zophia looked over her shoulder with a frown. “You know, it feels like we’re being watched.”

“I sense malice,” Lynga said.

“One of us clearly has a different vibe,” Loewe agreed.

They were all looking at Krishna, sitting alone at a distant table and glaring at them.

“Hey, Krishna,” Zenos said. “If you’re gonna make that face, just come over here.”

“Yeah!” Lily agreed. “Come eat with us.”

The knight gritted her teeth and shook her head. “I-I cannot. As a member of the Royal Guard and steward of order, I cannot toast with those at the helm of the underside of society. We must maintain that we all simply happened upon one another at the hot springs.”

“You’re way overcomplicating this,” Zenos remarked.

Zophia shrugged. “Well, that stubborn woman can do what she wants. Let’s ignore her and enjoy ourselves.”

“This food is delicious,” Lynga said, “but there’s so much of it.”

“I don’t mind,” Loewe replied. “My stomach knows no bounds.”

“Hey, Zenos!” Lily said. “The mushroom soup is so good!”

“Ooh,” the healer replied. “It *is* pretty good.”

Krishna groaned. “They look like they’re having fun...” Far from the others, Krishna wiped at the corners of her eyes and downed her drink. “Heh... Has alcohol always tasted this bitter?”

“Krishna,” Lily murmured as she watched the knight. “I think those are tears...”

“Oh,” Zenos said, looking around. “By the way, where’s Carmilla?”

“She said she was gonna drink alone in her room,” Lily explained.

“Hmm...”

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Sometime after the banquet began, a bespectacled girl walked down the corridor of the inn.

Having finished her dinner, Umin gave her full belly a satisfied pat. “Phew. That was tasty. I may have eaten a bit too much.” Singing voices rang out from the next dining room over, sounding quite lively. “I don’t mind being on my own, but I’d like to visit with my colleagues next time...”

She quietly looked out the window at the pitch-black darkness as she spoke. This inn was on the outskirts of town, so there were no other lights. The sound

of the trees rustling in the wind tickled her ears.

Though she wasn't particularly frightened, she did feel a slight chill, possibly due to her strange experience earlier at the hot spring. "I must be tired," she reassured herself. "I should hurry and go to sleep."

Umin opened the door to her room, but as soon as she walked in, she froze in place.

*Splish.*

What was that strange sound? "Am I imagining things?"

*Splish. Splish.*

She was most definitely not imagining things. There was a somewhat horrifying sound, like fresh blood dripping from somewhere, and she suddenly felt cold. Gulping, she cautiously stepped forward.

The strange sound was coming from behind a sliding door. Slowly, she approached it, then boldly pulled it open.

"Huh?"

Someone was there, holding a large bottle of sake, sipping contentedly from a cup. "Mmm, that hits the spot, as the kids say," the figure said, squirming happily and making slurping noises. But their body was a little...translucent?

"N-No, n-n-n-no, n-no way! The wraith from earlier?!" Umin blurted out.

"Hmm?" The figure's pitch-black, abyssal eyes turned to the young woman.

"I-I-I-I knew it!" she shrieked. "It's a w-wraith! *Ahhh!*"

The semitransparent woman blinked. "Oh dear. Wrong room." With that, she floated out the open door, holding the bottle of sake.

Left alone, Umin stood there in bewilderment, her head in her hands. "Th- This isn't a dream—no, no, it *is*. It has to be. I'm dreaming. Please be a dream!"

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"I'm back."

When Zenos opened the door to his room, Carmilla, who had been sitting in a



chair by the window with a cup in hand, stood up. “Oh, is the feast already over?”

“Yeah. I heard screaming from the room next door earlier, by the way. What was that about?”

“Who knows? I certainly do not,” the wraith said, averting her gaze conspicuously. “Perhaps you were imagining things.”

Regarding her with suspicion, Zenos walked to the bed in the back of the room and gently laid down Lily, whom he’d been carrying on his back. After making sure she was fast asleep, he took a seat across from Carmilla.

“Man, I’m beat...”

“Did you not have fun at the feast?”

“It was fun for a bit. Then Krishna, who was sitting away from us, got drunk. And then she started crying and throwing a tantrum, yelling, ‘I want to drink with Mr. Zenos too!’”

The wraith chuckled. “So Lady Iron Rose, whose glare can intimidate the burliest of men, is a sentimental drunk? Fascinating.”

“And then they all started a drinking competition where the winner would get to sit on my lap.”

Loewe had been, shockingly, the first one out.

“She was bragging about how, quote, ‘My tolerance to alcohol knows no bounds,’ end quote, and then she took one sip and was out cold. Turns out she’d been drinking water the whole time.”

“Considering how she looks, that is quite hilarious,” the wraith remarked.

“Then they drained a ton of bottles, and the next one out was Lynga, I think.”

She’d gotten drunk, started meowing, curled up on the table, and fallen asleep.

“Is she a werewolf or a cat?” Carmilla mused.

“Then Zophia and Krishna joined arms, started singing, and passed out together.”

“A bandit and a knight linking arms? That is quite the quandary.”

“And then Lily, who’d only had juice, said, ‘Tee hee, I win,’ sat on my lap, and fell asleep.”

“Hee hee.”

And that was the story of how Zenos had carried four sleeping grown women to their rooms, then finally returned to his own.

“And here I’d thought the feast was supposed to be in my honor,” the healer grumbled.

“Ah, do not grumble, now,” Carmilla said. “Enjoy the liveliness while you can. Soon enough you’ll be embroiled in something or another either way.”

“Don’t jinx it.”

She chuckled once more. “A wraith’s gut is always right.”

Zenos shrugged, then remembered something. “By the way, Carmilla, you kind of showed up at this inn out of nowhere. How did you get here?”

Undead couldn’t be out in the sun for long. The village of Flamme was half a day away from the royal capital by carriage. How had she gotten all the way here?

“Hmm? Did I not tell you?” the wraith asked. “Allow me to explain, then.” She pointed to an old cane leaning against the wall. It looked quite ancient, with strange, intricate patterns engraved on its surface. “As a spiritual being, I can possess objects to which I have a strong attachment. During the day, I stayed in that cane, and had Lily carry me.”

“Ohhh.” Zenos did remember Lily carrying this cane during their carriage ride. “When you say ‘attachment,’ do you mean this cane is yours?”

“Well, yes, indeed.”

“I’ve asked you this before, but what did you do when you were still alive?”

“That is ancient history. I have long since forgotten.”

“You’re always prying into other people’s business, but you never talk about yourself.”

Carmilla chuckled yet again. “And what is the fun in talking about myself? Drinks are much better served with the stories of others’ misfortune.” With a bold laugh, the three-centuries-old wraith took another cup and tossed it to Zenos. “Here. Allow me to pour you a drink and alleviate some of your unfortunate burden of having to care for all these women. You are old enough to drink, yes?”

“You know, my first memory is of the orphanage in the slums. I don’t actually know how old I am.”

The wraith tipped the bottle of sake into Zenos’s cup, slowly filling it with clear liquid. In the hot-springs village of Flamme, the quiet night went on.

And then a tiny little incident happened the next morning.





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Alone in the inn's dining hall, illuminated by the refreshing morning sun, Umin rubbed her sleepy eyes and let out a long yawn.

Her body felt heavy, her head foggy. She hadn't slept well the night before, concerned about the mysterious, wraith-looking spirit she'd seen. "Well, this isn't good," she mumbled. "I came here to get some rest, and yet..." She stretched wide, then took a sip of the amber-colored soup filled with chopped vegetables and dried meat. "Oh, this is tasty."

Despite its simple appearance, the soup was deceptively well seasoned. This inn might've looked a bit decrepit from the outside, but the food was certainly excellent. She took a sip of warm tea and inhaled in contentment.

Suddenly a loud rumbling noise echoed through the building, which shook violently.

Umin stood and rushed out of the dining hall. "Wh-What's happening?!" Looking around, she saw that the door at the end of the hallway was damaged, having conspicuously fallen over. "Whoa!"

Past the door was the kitchen. Burnt ingredients and utensils were strewn across the floor, and part of the wall was scorched and singed. It looked like the aftermath of an explosion.

A badly injured man lay face-up on the floor.

"Darling! Darliiing!" screamed the inn's landlady next to him, her face white as a sheet.

"Is he all right?! What happened?!" Umin asked, kneeling next to the woman.

The pallid landlady trembled as she spoke. "Wh-When my husband went into the kitchen to prepare the meals, there was a loud noise..."

"Perhaps a fire manastone malfunctioned and went off?" Umin said quickly, taking a look around and spotting scattered fragments of a kitchen-use manastone.

The man's burns were severe. His right half was red and swollen, and the bottom part of his right arm was carbonized.

“Oh, I told him to get rid of that old stone!” the landlady wailed, shaking the fallen man. “Darling, please! Say something!” But he barely so much as twitched. “R-Right! There was a healer doing their rounds here!”

“That would be me,” Umin said.

Taking her hand, the landlady pleaded, “You’re the healer?! Please! Save my husband! It’s always been just us two running this place!”

“I’ll do what I can.” Umin immediately began to chant, activating her healing magic. As a faint glow enveloped the man, his expression of agony softened a bit.

This was just emergency first aid, however. Minor burns could’ve been healed with just this, but severe burns took time and effort. It was best to take him to the Royal Institute outpost in the center of the village, which was equipped with a powerful healing magic circle, while using magic to minimize the victim’s pain and the spread of the damage.

“Doctor,” the landlady said. “How is he?”

“I think he’ll live,” Umin replied.

“Really?! Oh, thank you!”

“But—” It would take a considerable amount of time for him to recover fully. Not only that, his carbonized fingers might never recover, making it unlikely he’d ever hold a knife again.

As Umin pondered how to tell his wife this, a carefree voice echoed as a relaxed, black-haired man walked into the kitchen, wearing a black cloak that seemed like it would blend in with the darkness. “What happened?”

“Um, and you are?” the bespectacled healer asked.

“I’m a guest here,” the man replied. “I heard the explosion and wondered what was going on.”

“I see! Well, you have good timing! This man needs to be carried to the village center!”

The male guest’s gaze shifted to the injured victim as he slowly stepped closer. “Hm... Burns, is it?” he said, seeming unfazed despite the severity of the

injuries. “A fire manastone exploded, I’m guessing. Gotta be careful with the older ones. This can happen sometimes.”

“Um, would you mind giving us a hand? He’s heavy, and it would be easier to carry him with a man’s help—”

“Why are you taking him all the way to the village center, by the way?”

“There’s an outpost of the Royal Institute there, equipped with advanced healing magic circles.”

“Huh, really? That’s pretty interesting.”

“‘Pretty interesting’?”

“No need to go that far for these injuries, though.”

Umin blinked. “Huh?”

“Whoa!” came a voice from the corridor. “What’s going on, Zenos? What happened?” It was the young elf girl Umin had seen in the hot springs last night.

“Oh, it just looks like there was a small fire, but it’s fine,” the man casually responded. “The carriage’s gonna be here soon, so we should get going. Also, I’d hate to miss out on the great food here, so consider this a special freebie.” With that, the man quickly left the kitchen.

“W-Wait! Wait a moment! Please help us carry him!”

Unbelievable. He’d simply left, paying no mind whatsoever to the injured man right in front of him!

But then something even more unbelievable happened—to Umin’s utter astonishment, the man who had been lying on the floor suddenly sat up.

“Hngh... Huh? What happened to me...?”

It wasn’t just that he’d sat up. His horrific burns had vanished completely, as if they’d never been there.

Overwhelmed with emotion, the landlady gripped Umin’s hand, her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, thank goodness! Thank you, doctor! Thank you!”

Umin was shocked. “H-How?”

Had her magic had a delayed effect? No, that couldn’t be it—there was no

way injuries of that level could've been easily healed. Even a high-level healer wouldn't have been able to instantly cure burns of that degree without a supporting magic circle. The only ones who might've been able to were the saintess and a select few elite healers—

In a panic, Umin rushed outside, breaking into a full sprint to the carriage stop, but it had already departed. Unused to running like that, she heaved for breath as her lungs burned and her heart hammered in her chest, all the while thinking about the man who'd come and gone like a mirage.

"That...wasn't a dream," she wheezed. So he'd been there all along, hidden in the shadows.

An elite-level healing prodigy.



## Chapter 2: A Special Summons for an Elite Healer

“...And that’s what happened.” Umin, having returned to the Royal Institute of Healing at the capital, had reported the events that had taken place at the hot-springs village of Flamme to her superior.

Becker, with his ever-present cowlick, sat at his desk smiling placidly as usual. The cowlick was so consistently in the exact same spot on the back of his head that some people thought he styled it that way on purpose. “Wow. That’s quite a story!”

“There were also demi-humans of different races acting friendly with each other, and I saw a wraith holding a bottle of liquor. It was an unforgettable experience in more ways than one...”

“Well, it sounds like you had fun, in a way,” Becker said with an awkward smile as he leaned back on his chair. “An elite healer who can heal severe burns, though... Hmm...”

“I’m telling the truth, Dr. Becker.”

“Oh, I’m not doubting you. I was just thinking that from a professional standpoint we can’t simply ignore this person’s existence.”

“That’s true,” Umin agreed. “And if he’s operating without a license, he needs to be subject to regulation.”

“Exactly. And the state would want to keep someone with that level of healing skill under their thumb. Elite-level healers are a rarity in this country; there are fewer than ten.”

“I was careless and lost track of him. I’m very sorry.”

She did, however, have *some* information—while they were on their way out, the elf girl had called the man by name: Zenos. A search of the healer registry had turned up no matches.

“Hmm. It could be a pseudonym,” Becker mused. “Hard to say. Do you

remember what he looked like?”

“I remember he had dark hair, but I only saw him for a brief moment, so I’m not sure,” Umin answered apologetically. “I think I’d recognize him if I saw him, but...”

“Oh, well,” Becker said, his expression gentle. “Strictly speaking, we should be looking for him, but we do have plenty of other work keeping us busy.”

“Are you sure that’s okay?”

“He healed the injured man and left, correct? He doesn’t sound like a bad person, so it’s probably fine to just leave him be. Besides, if we ran into him, we’d actually have to bring down the hammer of laws and regulations, and the higher-ups would have a lot of choice words to say about it,” Becker said with a laugh. Whether he was easygoing or simply cared little was hard to say, but the doctor was always like that.

While Umin was personally very curious about the mystery healer, she couldn’t go against her superior. She’d been about to leave the room when she suddenly stopped. “Oh, right. I do remember one other thing about his appearance. He wore a black cloak.”

“A black cloak?” Becker echoed, a faint crease appearing between his brows as he touched his chin pensively. “An elite healer wearing a black cloak...”

“What’s the matter, Dr. Becker?”

The doctor slowly turned his gaze to Umin. “Actually, I’ve changed my mind. Let’s do this by the book and find this man.”

“Oh! Okay. Why the change of heart, though?”

Back to his usual placid smile, Becker replied, “I’d hate to waste the opportunity to meet a man of such wonderful talents.” A pause. “And it’s not every day I get to meet another elite healer.”

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A day after the discreet exchange at the Royal Institute, Zonde, younger brother to Zophia, had come to the clinic in the ruined town.

“Hey, doc,” he said, sweating profusely and grimacing. “My belly’s been

hurting since this morning.”

Zenos stood and pressed a palm to the lizardman’s forehead. “Looks like you have a fever. Lily, help Zonde lie down.”

“Okay,” the young elf said.

With her help, Zonde lay down on the bed, and Zenos held his hand over the lizardman. “*Diagnosis.*” A white light passed through the infirm man’s abdomen. “Hmm, looks like there’s inflammation around your intestines. Did you eat anything weird?”

“Come to think of it, the meat I ate yesterday tasted different than usual.”

“That’s probably it, then. Food poisoning.”

Zonde’s expression changed. “P-Poisoning? Am I gonna die?!”

“It’s not that serious. Just a stomach bug.”

“O-Oh, that’s what you meant.”

“Are you vomiting? Do you have diarrhea?”

“I had it coming out both ends this morning.”

“I see. That’s good. Best to get it all out if possible,” Zenos said, placing his palm over Zonde’s belly. A faint light spread from there all throughout the lizardman’s body. “I’ve suppressed the pain for now and boosted your body’s natural healing ability. Ideally, I’d like to give you an IV drip to counter dehydration, but the water around here isn’t clean, so I can’t inject it straight into your bloodstream. Once you’re feeling a little better, try to drink water.”

“O-Okay.”

After resting a while, Zonde’s expression grew much more relaxed. Slowly, he got himself up and out of bed.

“I feel much better now. I think I’m good. Thanks, doc.”

“Anyone else you know with the same symptoms?” the healer asked.

“Nah, I was the only one who ate that meat.”

“All right, then. Don’t overdo it.”

Zonde nodded, then left with a bit of a spring in his step.

Lily, who sat at the reception desk, turned to face Zenos. "I always thought you only healed wounds. You can cure illnesses too!"

"Well, it depends on the illness," he mused. "If it's something I can just cut out, that's one thing, but all I can do for things that spread throughout the body is boost the patient's natural immune system, like I just did. Minor stuff heals on its own."

"I see."

"Actually, using medicine in conjunction with magic would be more effective." Medicine could be used to eliminate the cause of the disease while the body's natural defenses were boosted by magic, making the combination of these two techniques the fastest way for a patient to recover. "But since I'm unlicensed, I have no means of getting any meds," Zenos said with a small sigh. All he could get were dubious items from the black market. "Long ago, there was an epidemic in the royal capital. A lot of people died in the slums, but a good deal more were saved when a cure was developed. That was when I realized how amazing meds are."

"Huh..."

As their conversation continued and they considered having lunch, the door suddenly burst open. Standing there with a sense of urgency were the three demi-human leaders.

"What's up?" Zenos asked. "You guys here for lunch again?"

"This probably isn't the time for that, doc!" said Zophia, who stood at the front, as she quickly stepped closer. "There's a woman in a white coat wandering around in the slums."

"A white coat?" the healer echoed, tilting his head.

"It's definitely the Royal Institute's uniform," Zophia continued with a grave expression. "She's sniffing around for you."

"The Royal Institute?" Zenos's brows furrowed. The Royal Institute of Healing oversaw all healers and clinics in the kingdom of Herzeth, and he'd heard they

also cracked down on illegal practices. “Seriously?” he said, shocked. “Even a nameless healer in the slums is subject to their rules?”

The demi-human women exchanged solemn glances.

“I mean, I thought this day would come, but...” the healer mumbled.

“Your healing magic is too conspicuous, Sir Zenos,” said Lynga.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Guess they finally found us.”

Lily clasped her hands together. “Zenos, what do we do?” she asked anxiously.

“Hmm...” he mumbled softly, crossing his arms. “Zophia, who exactly is out there looking for me?”

“One of my men said it’s a woman with blue hair and glasses going around the slums asking if anyone knows a healer named Zenos.”

So they even knew his name for some reason. “A blue-haired woman wearing glasses?” he echoed, suddenly raising his head. Zenos had seen someone like that somewhere. “Oh! The one from the hot springs?” He’d treated a man with burns at the inn and, now that he thought about it, it felt like someone matching that description had been there too. “So she was a member of the Royal Institute? I didn’t even charge the guy! Leave me alone, damn it!” He held his head in his hands, frustrated.

Lynga, who stood near the entrance, turned to face Zenos and energetically raised her right hand. “I have a great idea! It’s just one person looking for you right now, so why don’t we kidnap her and give her a good scare? She won’t come near the slums again after that!”

“Uh, let’s not,” the healer replied.

“But I’m worried about you, Sir Zenos,” the werewolf said.

“The doc doesn’t like that kinda thing. Knock it off, Lynga,” Zophia cut in. “Besides, one wrong move, and we’re basically leading them straight to him.”

“Point taken,” Lynga said, her ears drooping.

Loewe, standing behind the werewolf, spoke up. “Maybe we don’t even need



to worry that much. Zenos has been a big help around the slums. I doubt anyone would talk, and the Royal Institute of Healing isn't gonna do anything insane like that Conductor guy did, sending golems over. If we keep playing dumb, they might just give up eventually."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Lynga said.

"Who just said we should kidnap and threaten the woman, again?" Zophia retorted.

Leaning back in his chair, Zenos sighed. "Oh well. Guess I'll just lay low and see what happens for now."

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Back in a room filled with thick tomes and test tubes, Umin reported the situation to her superior.

"It's no good, Dr. Becker. I've been going to the slums every day, as you suggested, but no matter who I ask, they all insist they don't know anyone by that name."

"Huh. I see, I see."

"I'm starting to wonder if a healer like that really does exist." Umin furrowed her brows, an expression of uncertainty on her features. "Why are we limiting our investigation to the slums in the first place?"

"Well, an illegal business in the special district would get reported quickly. And if this man is responsible for the lack of casualties in the monster incident, then it's likely he has a strong connection to the slums."

"But no one seems to know him."

"Maybe he doesn't exist, then."

"Really...?" Umin murmured, deflated by her boss's nonchalance.

"How long have you been going to the slums, Umin?"

"Ten days now."

"Then it's time to stop investigating. You have other work to do, and I can't keep pushing you like this."

“But...I’ve come this far. Maybe we should ask for help from higher up the chain?”

“Sadly, the information we have is too shaky to warrant a report to the higher-ups.”

“True... But still, can we really stop halfway like this?” she asked, skeptical.

Becker smiled placidly. “Yes. We’ve learned one very important fact.”

“Huh? And what’s that?”

“The fact that, after ten days of investigation, we have no facts whatsoever.”

“Seriously?” Umin slumped her shoulders.

No wonder people called this man eccentric.

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Another ten days passed.

Sitting at the clinic’s now-quiet reception, Lily seemed hopeful. “Zenos, maybe the lady from the Royal Institute of Healing gave up.”

“That’d be nice,” Zenos replied.

The bespectacled woman had apparently not been to the slums in ten days. At the clinic, they’d been limiting patients to severe and emergency cases to avoid attracting attention, hoping they’d be left alone.

And on that peaceful afternoon, they finally got a visitor: Zonde, carrying a frail, disheveled man over his shoulder. “Sorry, doc. This is pretty serious.”

The man was coughing violently and had dried blood around his mouth.

“Is he sick?” Zenos asked.

“He collapsed out there and was coughing up a bloody storm, so I brought him in. That okay?”

“If left alone, he could trigger an epidemic. Good call. Lay him down on the bed, please.”

Zenos moved over and cast Diagnosis on the man, whose face was contorted with pain.

“His lungs are compromised...especially the upper part, on both sides.” The healer’s expression suddenly changed as he spoke. “Lily, Zonde! Get back!”

“What’s wrong, Zenos?” Lily asked in a panic as she backed off.

“You have to be kidding me,” Zenos muttered, eyes still fixed on the patient. “Red lung...?”

“Red lung? What’s that?”

“I told you before about an epidemic that killed many people, right? This is similar.”

“Huh?!”

“But a miracle drug was supposed to have eradicated red lung. Why now...?” Zenos once again cast Diagnosis, carefully examining the patient. His brow furrowed. “Wait, that’s not right. It *looks* like red lung, but something’s different...”

A sudden, calm voice startled Zenos out of his thought process. “Goodness me, but you’re good at diagnosing!”

To the shock of everyone around, the patient on the bed slowly sat up, coughing lightly.

“You know, if after a full ten days of probing you can’t even catch a whiff of a rumor about someone, it means one of two things: the person doesn’t exist, or everyone’s making a concerted effort to hide them. And if it’s the latter, that means everyone in the slums trusts them fully. So I figured if someone became seriously ill in the slums, someone would bring them to this person for sure.” With a smile, the man extended his right hand. “Nice to meet you, shadow healer of the ruined city. My name’s Elnard Becker, and I’m an elite healer with the Royal Institute of Healing.”

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“An elite healer with the Royal Institute?” Zenos echoed, staring intently at the man.

“Indeed,” Becker said with a gentle expression. “Although I should mention that, despite being considered ‘elite,’ I’m not very good with healing magic.”

“Wait, so, *is* this red lung? I thought something was off, but—”

“Well, see—”

“Dr. Becker!” came a frantic yell from the front door as it burst open before Becker could answer. A blue-haired girl with glasses rushed in.

“Oh! You’re the one from the inn at Flamme!” Zenos exclaimed, pointing at Umin.

“Oh! You’re the healer from the other day!” Umin exclaimed back, pointing at Zenos. “So you *were* here!”

From the bed, Becker waved a hand at the newly arrived girl. “Hey, Umin.”

“Don’t ‘hey’ me!” Umin snapped. “What were you thinking, trying to tail this man by becoming so gravely ill that you’d be brought to him?! That crosses every line!”

“Well, I mean, if I hadn’t—” He coughed violently, interrupting his own words, and proceeded to hack up a concerning amount of blood.

“Eeeek!” shrieked Umin and Lily in unison.

“Ah, my apologies,” Becker said. “I thought I’d weakened the poison enough, but this is still quite harsh.” He wiped at his mouth before taking some medicinal powder from his pocket and swallowing it, letting out a deep breath.

“I get that you’re from the Royal Institute,” Zenos said quietly. “But what’s the deal with your symptoms?”

“What do you mean? It’s simple. If I became seriously ill, someone would bring me here. So I took a drug that mimics the symptoms of red lung. While it *looks* bad, it metabolizes quickly and the effects die down, so it’s not fatal. I took an antidote just in case, so I’ll be fine.”

“And where did you get that drug?”

“I made it.”

“Huh?”

“It was necessary for the research needed to make the cure for red lung.”

“The cure for red lung? Wait, did you...?”

Many lives had been saved by the development of a specific cure for the deadly disease.

Umin, who stood by the front door, puffed out her chest proudly. “That’s right! Dr. Becker has developed cures for many illnesses, like red lung, hooting cough, and crimson fever. He’s earned the title of elite healer for his achievements!”

Becker laughed softly. “I’m not that great, you know. I’m total garbage at healing magic.” He scratched his messy hair and got off the bed, looking around slowly. “Now then, shadow healer, this doesn’t look like a properly licensed clinic, eh?”

Suddenly, the atmosphere grew tense. Zonde swiftly drew the dagger at his waist and moved next to Zenos. “Sorry, doc. This is my fault. I’ll hold ‘em off, so you go ahead and run!”

“Oh, it’s not your fault,” Zenos said dismissively. “We just didn’t foresee this kind of approach. Besides, fighting’s prohibited in the clinic.”

“But...!”

“Nooo!” Lily, who’d been standing further back, ran up to Zenos, spreading her arms in front of him. “I won’t let you take him! He gives hope to everyone here!”

“Well, I’ll be,” Becker said, scratching his cheek awkwardly. “You seem well loved.”

Behind him, Umin timidly raised a hand. “Um, Dr. Becker? I was just thinking maybe we could ask this man for help with *that*?”

Becker narrowed his already-narrow eyes even further. “Umin. That’s an internal matter, unrelated to this man.”

“W-Well, that’s precisely why we should! Sometimes an outsider has more freedom to act!”

“But—”

“I mean, at first you didn’t seem very interested in the shadow healer matter, but then suddenly you decided to take it seriously, so I assumed that was what

you had in mind...”

“Well, no, it’s just that when you mentioned an elite healer in a black cloak, I thought it might be an old acquaintance,” Becker explained. “But no, this is someone else. And with our position, now that we’ve actually found an illegal clinic, we have no choice but to crack down on it.”

Umin slowly lowered her hand. “I...see.”

“Zenos, was it? If you’d be so kind as to accompany us to a nearby outpost for questioni—” Becker’s words came to an abrupt halt as his gaze landed on Zenos’s black cloak, hanging on the back wall. “Is that cloak yours?”

“Yeah, but it used to be my mentor’s.”

“Mentor? What was your mentor’s name?”

“Dunno.”

“You don’t know?”

“Nope. Never got a proper introduction.”

Becker said nothing as he approached the wall, taking the well-worn black cloak in his hand and examining it closely. With his back to the others, he spoke. “All right. Umin, I’ve changed my mind. Let’s leave *that* to him.”

“Huh?” Umin mumbled. “I-I mean, sure, but, Dr. Becker—”

“And what is *that*, again?” Zenos asked, tilting his head.

Turning around with a smile, Becker said, “Say, Zenos? This is quite sudden, but would you like to join the Royal Institute of Healing?”

“Huh?!” The atmosphere in the treatment room came to a complete standstill. “Uh, did you just...ask me to *join the Royal Institute of Healing*?” he echoed reflexively.

“I did,” Becker confirmed with a nod and a smile. “See, we have a little problem, and we’d like your help with it, if possible.”

“And you’re asking a total stranger like me *why*, exactly?”

“Well, see, there’s a lot of red tape at the Institute around this and that, and Umin’s right in that an outsider has more freedom to act. Besides, this task



requires someone who can use healing magic.”

“So in other words, what you’re saying is that someone unaffiliated with the Institute who can also use healing magic is the best fit for...whatever it is you’re wanting me to do?”

“Precisely. All qualified healers are registered with the Royal Institute, so someone like you is extremely rare.”

“Hmm...” Zenos hummed softly and crossed his arms.

Just as he was about to respond, however, the door flung open and multiple voices cut in.

“Doc! Don’t listen to that guy!”

“I agree, Sir Zenos!”

“Zenos! Are you all right?!”

“You guys!” Lily exclaimed, looking at the three demi-human leaders.

Becker scratched his cheek. “Oh my, looks like you have guests. Hello, everyone. My name’s Becker, and I’m with the Royal Institute of Healing.”

Zophia scoffed. “Like we care about the Institute!”

“Aw, don’t be that way,” Becker said. “I was offering Zenos a deal that would defer exposing his illegal operation. Not a bad idea, I don’t think.”

“Oh, yeah?” Lynga replied. “And where’s the guarantee that you’ll keep your word?”

“I agree,” Loewe added. “We can’t trust a government agency dog.”

“Hmm, fair point,” Becker mused. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“Dr. Becker!” Umin exclaimed, tugging on the doctor’s sleeve. Out the window, they could see a crowd of demi-humans gathering around the clinic.

“What are you all doing here?” Zenos asked.

“The red flag’s up on the second floor,” Zophia explained, pointing upwards with her thumb. “We rushed right over.”

“A flag? Oh. Right.”

A yellow flag meant to be cautious and stay away. A red flag signified an emergency. Most likely it'd been Carmilla, listening in from the second floor, who'd had the foresight to raise the flag.

The three leaders stood defiantly before the two members of the Royal Institute of Healing.

"Go ahead," Zophia taunted. "Try and take the doc."

"As per Sir Zenos's orders, we won't lay a finger on you in the clinic," Lynga pointed out.

"But the second you're outside," Loewe threatened, "there's no telling what our men will do."

"D-Dr. Becker," Umin stammered, on the verge of tears, still tugging on her superior's sleeve.

"Dear me. What a predicament we're in," Becker said with a chuckle.

"Uh. Doctor? What's there to be so pleased about?"

"Oh, I'm just genuinely impressed. I knew the people of the slums trusted him, but to actually see the different races unified in protecting him is something else. I wonder if any healer has ever achieved such a feat before." Becker placed a hand on his chest and nodded repeatedly, profoundly moved, before turning back to Zenos and bowing his head deeply. "I must reconsider my approach. I apologize for my heavy-handedness. How about a formal deal—no, a request? I'm open to negotiation, and you will be compensated. I could even put it in writing, if you'd like."

After a moment's silence, Zenos let out a long breath and nodded slowly. "Sure. Why not?"

"Zenos!" Lily exclaimed.

"Doc, you sure?" Zophia asked, surprised.

"Well, I hesitated because it sounded like a pain," Zenos explained. "But as something of a healer myself, I'm interested in the Royal Institute. And besides, now that they have evidence of my illegal business, currying favor with them would be smart. Plus, this guy was brought in here severely ill, right? But he

could've, say, offered people emergency rations laced with poison instead, made someone *else* severely ill. But he didn't, which tells me he's not inherently a bad guy."

Becker let out a laugh, scratching his messy hair. "I just couldn't resist testing it myself. Bad habit, you see."

"Besides," Zenos continued, "I hear many lives were saved in the slums during the red lung outbreak thanks to medicine being distributed by the central authorities for free. Was that your doing?"

"It was!" Umin confirmed, scoffing proudly, her chest puffed out. "Many were opposed to handing out medicine in the slums, but Dr. Becker insisted that eradicating the disease required giving medicine to *everyone*, and even paid for it out of pocket!"

"All I did was take the scientifically correct approach," Becker said.

"Huh. Didn't think anyone like you existed in the government," Zophia said. "We sure owe you for that one." The atmosphere around the demi-humans surrounding Becker seemed to soften a bit at the lizardwoman's words.

Zenos stared intently at the elite healer who stood before him. "Lastly, and most importantly—you know my mentor?"

Becker's eyes narrowed sharply. "Come with me to the Royal Institute and we'll talk."

"Looks like you've got yourself a deal, then. You're pretty crafty."

The doctor laughed. "I get that a lot. I'm sure you are too."

"All I want is to live my life as I please, in peace."

"Well, once this is settled, I'm all for it," Becker said with a bright smile before extending his right hand once more. "Now let's do this over, shall we? Welcome to the Royal Institute of Healing, shadow healer Zenos."

## Chapter 3: Trainee at the Royal Institute of Healing

It was said that the Kingdom of Herzeth, once but a small nation in the vast continent, only acquired the title of the Sun Kingdom due to the excellence of its healers. Their frontline soldiers, backed by these healers, took minimal damage while winning battle after battle, thereby expanding the nation's territory.

For this reason, healers held a somewhat special position in this country. How much importance was placed on them was clear based on the fact that an institution separate from the Ministry of Magic was established for healing magic—despite it being just one branch of magic as a whole. That was the Royal Institute of Healing, headquarters of all healers in the nation, with its pristine white walls and its privileged location in the administrative ward of the Special District, where nobles resided.

“Wow,” Zenos muttered in admiration as he first set foot within the building. “This is impressive.” The predominantly white entrance hall was so tall one had to look up to see the ceiling, from which dazzling sunlight poured down. Among the sparkling light, healers clad in white coats walked proudly.

“It's so big, even I still get lost in here,” Becker scratched his head as he walked ahead of Zenos. “Well, Umin will give you a full tour later, so for now, let's head straight to my lab.”

“All right.” Umin, walking beside the healer from the slums, pointed ahead. “Mr. Zenos, the research facilities are to the left—that way.”

The three left the entrance hall and, enjoying the view of the carefully maintained greenery in the courtyard, walked down a spacious corridor. Their destination was the research building, yet another towering structure. Within the premises of the Institute were also facilities for treatment and education, as well as an administrative building, dormitories for staff, and even a cafeteria, a general store, and a grocery store.

“This is all so luxurious, it's making me dizzy,” Zenos pointed out. “Honestly,

someone like me shouldn't be here. Is there nowhere around here that's darker and smaller? More damp, maybe?"

"Don't talk as if you were some sort of shady character," Umin said.

"I'm objectively shady," Zenos retorted.

"It's troubling how confident you sound when you say that..."

As Zenos continued to chat with Umin, the trio entered the research building and, using a magic elevator, made their way up to the tenth floor and into a room in the back. Books and experimental equipment cluttered the space, and a somewhat stale smell hung thick in the air.

"This room's more my style," Zenos mused.

"Would you mind not implying my office is a den for shady characters, Zenos?" Becker said with a wry smile as he sat on the chair behind the desk. Straightening up, he offered Zenos a seat on a couch. "Now then, let's go over the details of my request for you one more time."

"Right. This is about a missing person investigation." From what he'd been told on the way there, someone in Becker's research team had simply vanished without a trace.

Becker nodded slowly. Standing behind the doctor, Umin added, "He doesn't seem to have gone to his parents' home, as far as we can tell. I sought advice from the administrative department, but they didn't take me very seriously."

The Royal Institute of Healing had a large number of staff and trainees. Occasional disappearances weren't unheard of, and usually happened due to an inability to keep up with studies, research going poorly, or any number of other stressors. The administration had apparently judged it to be one such case and, given the lack of anything clearly pointing toward foul play, they couldn't go to the Royal Guard for assistance either.

"It was an excellent and promising healer and researcher who vanished, you see, so we believe something to be amiss," Umin explained.

"Hmm, where could a disappeared healer have gone?" Zenos pondered, furrowing his brows. "I get the situation, but finding people isn't exactly my

area of expertise.”

“Well, we’re out of options,” Becker said in an upbeat tone. “We’d really appreciate it if you could gather some information. You don’t have to go out of your way or anything.”

“I mean, sure, I can say yes if that’s all you need, but I’m really not sure how much an outsider like me can find.”

“It’s precisely *because* you’re an outsider that you have more freedom. Special trainees,” Becker said, pointing to the badge hanging around Zenos’s neck, “can enroll in the Institute’s educational program on a recommendation, rather than having to go through the usual route. You can go to different departments, making information gathering easier.”

“By the way, is my identity safe? I don’t even have a citizenship card. I’d rather not make myself too well known so I don’t have problems later on.”

“Please wear a mask at all times. We’ve made up a story that you have a weak respiratory system and need a mask as a precaution against infection. You’ll also be known by the alias ‘Xeno,’ and the story goes that you’ve been abroad for a while and have only recently returned.”

“And people are really gonna fall for that?”

“Normally there are background checks, but since I’m vouching for your identity and I’m an elite healer, a lighter check will be enough.”

“Hmm. So if I mess up, it’s on you as the one vouching for me.”

“If this boat sinks, we sink together,” Becker said in an amused tone, chuckling mischievously. “Anyway, your program starts tomorrow. I’ve arranged for a room at the dorms for you to use during your stay.”

After that, Umin led him to the staff dormitories located in the back of the premises. Though a bit dated, it was still several cuts above his dilapidated clinic in the ruined city. As the door to his room opened, someone came rushing in from the back—Lily, his young elven assistant. “Zenos! Welcome back!”

“What? What are you doing here, Lily? Weren’t you supposed to be waiting back at the clinic?”



Since he couldn't leave the people of the slums behind for long, Zenos and Becker had agreed that he would be undercover in the Royal Institute for no more than a month. During that time, Lily was supposed to be house-sitting with the help of the demi-humans.

"Dr. Becker gave his permission for the time being," Umin said slowly. "Dormitory rules dictate that spouses or blood relatives may share a room."

"Spouses or relatives?" Zenos echoed.

"Yep!" Lily said cheerfully. "And I'm your bride!"

"No, you're marked down as his little sister," Umin pointed out.

"Boo..." Lily puffed up her cheeks in annoyance, her elf ears hidden behind earmuffs.

Umin bowed her head apologetically. "I'm sorry to drag you into our affairs like this. We figured it would be reassuring to have someone you know around, and so we wanted to at least provide you with that much."

"I see. Well, I *was* worried about leaving Lily behind, so in that sense, it's helpful."

"I'm glad. I'll see you tomorrow, then." With a soft click, the door closed behind Umin.

Beaming, Lily turned to Zenos and cooed, "Darling..."

"Darling'?"

"Would you like dinner? A bath? Or perhaps...me?"

"I think you're mixing up the roles a bit there, Lily."

"Boo..."

"Who taught you to talk like that, anyway?"

"Twas I."

"Oh, not *you* too!"

Carmilla floated in gently from the back of the room. Propped against the wall was the old staff that housed her spirit, the same one that Lily had brought to

the hot springs.

“Why are you here?” Zenos asked.

“Oh, you know,” the wraith replied with a chuckle. “To give you a hard time.”

“I knew it!”



Zenos shrugged, letting out a sigh. “Also, you do realize this is basically Healer City, right? If they see you, you’ll get exorcised, you know.”

Carmilla chuckled. “If I were afraid of a little exorcism, I would’ve made for a very poor tormentor, would I not?”

“Oh, yeah. Forgot it’s you we’re talking about.”

“Besides, very few can use healing magic to the extent that you can.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Carmilla gracefully retreated toward the back. “And thus, the minor request from the Royal Institute of Healing was about to turn into a major imbroglio...”

“Will you stop it with the ominous predictions? You just got here!”

At the Royal Institute of Healing, a new chapter was about to begin for Zenos the shadow healer.

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The next day at noon, Zenos sat opposite Umin in the staff-only dining area of the Institute. It was spacious, with potted plants here and there and bright sunlight shining in through the windows lined along one of the walls.

“Now then, Mr. Zenos—” Umin paused to correct herself, looking around. “I mean, Mr. Xeno. How was the orientation?”

Currently, Zenos was masquerading as a special trainee named Xeno. Special trainees weren’t enrolled through the customary route, but rather by recommendation, and were allowed to rotate through the various departments of the Institute for about a month. It was primarily a program that provided experience at the Royal Institute for a limited period to outstanding students from healing schools, exchange students from friendly nations, and any others deemed to have a promising future.

Or so Umin had explained to Zenos that morning, in any case. “I guess I’ll be jumping from place to place, but I don’t even know how being an ordinary healer works,” Zenos admitted.

“Oh, right,” Umin mumbled, taking a sip of her soup. “Allow me to explain.”

According to her, those who wanted to become healers first needed to apply to a healing school in the town district. Those who passed the aptitude test were allowed to enroll and underwent several years of education. Then, if they passed the healer’s qualification exam, they were granted a healer’s license.

“I see,” Zenos mused. “I didn’t know it was that hard to get a license. Healers really are something else.”

“That’s a little awkward to hear coming from you,” Umin said, smiling uneasily as she ate her salad.

After one became a healer, there were several options available, the most common of which was to work at a branch of the Royal Institute of Healing. After gaining some experience that way, one could open their own practice after passing an examination if they wanted to. There were also those who were more free-spirited, and thus obtained a permit to become adventurers. Some became exclusive healers for the royal family or the nobility, and still others joined the military.

“And the Royal Institute oversees them all,” Zenos mused.

“That’s right,” Umin confirmed. “Those who come here want to do research or teach, learn advanced treatments, or get involved in system design and management.”

“This is making my head hurt.” He felt as if he’d stumbled onto a whole other planet, far too dazzling for an outcast who lived squirreled away in a remote corner. And somehow he’d have to masquerade as a special trainee in this resplendent sanctuary for healers to gather information about a missing person. “For now, can you tell me more about the person who disappeared?”

“Of course. His name’s Afred, and he’s been here longer than I have.” She went on to explain he was the deputy head of the laboratory and an advanced-level healer. “He’s outstanding, intelligent, kind, and cooperative. Mr. Afred contributed significantly to the development of the cure for red lung that Dr. Becker mentioned. He was expected to make it to elite-level someday.”

“Hmm.” Zenos crossed his arms and nodded. “Honestly, orientation alone

made me want to run for the hills, but if this guy is all that, he's worth seriously looking for." During his time living in the slums, Zenos had witnessed many lives saved by the cure for red lung. As a former slum dweller himself, he felt it'd probably be the right thing to do to at least convey his thanks for what this man had done at the time. "Information gathering is all fine and dandy, but it wouldn't be efficient to just do it blindly. Do you have any leads?"

"It's not that we don't have any—" Umin began, cut off by a commotion at the entrance to the dining area.

A group of several dozen people sauntered in as though they owned the place, with a middle-aged, mustached man at the forefront. His hair was streaked with white and slicked back, and he had a sharp glint in his eyes. The man gave off a strange aura of power, and the crowd parted cleanly as if to make way for him.

"Who's that?" Zenos asked.

"That's Professor Goldran," Umin explained. "He's the deputy director of the Institute, and a class-seven advanced healer."

"'Class seven'?"

"Yes. Each rank—beginner, intermediate, advanced—is further divided into seven classes. A class-seven advanced healer is just below elite healers."

"He's got quite the posse. Must be a big shot."

"Rumor has it he's going to be the next director. The current director is quite ahead in years and often takes time off due to his ailing health, so at the moment, Professor Goldran is essentially the most powerful person here."

"Hmm."

"Just...since he became deputy director, the Royal Institute of Healing has...changed," Umin said, oddly vaguely.

"Changed how?"

"Well, while they provide ample care to the wealthy, they've begun to blatantly discriminate against other patients..."

Zenos said nothing to that.

“Professor Goldran is more focused on politics than honing his skills as a healer. Some say he only reached advanced class seven through guile, by securing the backing of a prominent noble house.”

“Sounds complicated.” Better not get too involved, he decided.

Umin looked at Zenos apologetically. “I’m afraid we need you to get involved with Professor Goldran, Mr. Xeno.”

“Eh?”

“There’s a possibility he’s involved in Mr. Afred’s disappearance. Professor Goldran is power hungry and wants to pull capable people to his side. Mr. Afred is quite capable, of course, and was called to Professor Goldran’s lab as a temporary transfer.”

“And Becker allowed it?”

“Apparently, Dr. Becker owed the Professor some favors for financing the development of the medicine against red lung, so he couldn’t object much. Mr. Afred himself called it a good opportunity to broaden his knowledge.”

A month after the assignment, however, Afred had vanished without a trace. Inquiries had been made to Professor Goldran, but he’d consistently denied having any knowledge of the incident, complaining that the questions were inconvenient. Ultimately no conclusion had been reached.

“But we believe something may have happened,” Umin continued, making a pleading gesture as she spoke. “That’s why, Mr. Xeno, we’d like you to grow closer to Professor Goldran to gather information.”

“Okay, I get what you’re saying, but how am I supposed to ‘grow closer’ to the guy? He doesn’t know me. If I just randomly show up, he won’t tell me anything.”

“Don’t worry about it. If you show promise during your special trainee program, he’ll approach you whether you like it or not.”

“Isn’t that even less likely? I do want to help find this Afred guy, but I don’t see how a backstreet healer like me could make that much of an impact at the Royal Institute of all places.”



“Huh? Mr. Xeno, are you unaware of your own skill?”

“Eh?”

“Hey, Umin,” said a man carrying a tray with the day’s special as he approached the two of them. The tips of his brown hair were curled, and he gave off a somewhat unpleasant vibe. “What are you doing in this lonely ol’ corner?”

“Last I checked, Cress, I was free to eat wherever I pleased.”

“Hey now, don’t get pissy. I just came to thank you for knowing your place and moving out of the way for us Goldran followers,” said the man, apparently one of Goldran’s groupies. Suddenly, his eyes turned to Zenos, staring at the trainee badge hanging from the dark-haired man’s neck. “Huh. A special trainee, are you?”

“Yeah,” Zenos replied. “Nice to meet you.”

“Well, try not to embarrass whoever recommended you, yeah?” With that, Cress left, a smirk plastered on his face.

“What’s his problem?”

“Don’t mind him,” Umin said. “He joined the Institute the same year as I did, so he has no more seniority than I do. Ever since he joined Professor Goldran’s lab, though, he’s been way too full of himself.”

A quick glance at the clock told them it was about time for the first part of Zenos’s program to begin. He shifted his mask to take a bite of his leftovers before letting out a sigh and pushing to his feet. “Guess I’ll get going, then.”

“Okay. And don’t worry. Do as you always do, and you’ll be just fine,” Umin assured him with a smile and a small wave.



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“Now then, let us begin the lecture,” said a stern-faced professor as he placed a thick stack of materials on the lectern with a *thud*.

Zenos’s first program seemed to be a lecture aimed at Royal Institute of Healing personnel, conducted in the educational facility. He sat amid the young staff members with a black mask strapped across his face. Given the nature of where they were, there were others wearing masks as well, so he didn’t stand out too much—for that, he was grateful.

“I specialize in adventure healing,” the professor continued. “I don’t know how many of you wish to become adventurers, but the Royal Institute of Healing does dispatch healers when the Adventurers’ Guild requests it, so there’s a possibility you may accompany a party in due time. It doesn’t hurt to have this knowledge.” His gaze scanned everyone in the room. “Today’s topic is the undead. I will go over the latest information on these postmortem wanderers of the land.”

The lecture went over zombies, ghouls, ghosts, and the like. Their characteristics, behavioral patterns, and weaknesses were explained, as well as what healing magic was most effective against them.

*Huh. This is interesting.* Zenos knew a lot thanks to his own experiences as an adventurer, but the information was clear and well-put together. Time flew by in an instant.

“Now, does anyone have any questions?” the professor asked, and several attendees raised their hands.

“Professor, what about wraiths?” said one. “Is there nothing on them?”

The lecturer’s expression darkened. “That’s a good question, but in truth, there’s been very little research on wraiths, which are among the highest-ranking of the undead. One of the reasons is the fact there have been very few sightings.” With a solemn expression and after a moment’s pause, the professor continued. “Another is that most parties that have challenged one did not live to tell the tale, so very little information has made it back.”

The classroom went suddenly quiet.

“One thing is for certain,” the professor cautioned. “If you encounter a wraith, don’t think, just run. The ones that can speak are particularly horrific. Generally speaking, monsters that can speak are a cut above the rest, and a talking wraith is beyond what anyone can handle.”

“Huh. Really?” Zenos muttered from the back of the lecture hall. There was a talking wraith lounging around in his dorm room right now, but it seemed smart to stay mum about that little morsel of information.

“Lastly—has anyone here ever fought an undead?” the professor asked. “If so, share your experience with the class.”

Several hands went up, and one attendee—the man Zenos had seen in the cafeteria at noon whom Umin had mentioned had joined the Institute the same year as she—was selected to speak. “My name is Cress Wembley, and I’m with the Goldran Research Lab,” he said. “I’ve been an adventurer for many years, and have taken down at least thirty ghosts.”

A murmur spread among the attendees, with voices of admiration rising all around.

Cress proudly spoke of how to defeat ghosts before turning his attention to Zenos. “Oh hey, what about you, special trainee?”

“Huh?” Zenos looked up, surprised. “Me?” All eyes in the room were now turned toward the back, where the black-haired healer sat. *Now how do I answer?* Umin had told him to just do his thing, but he felt like he’d have problems later if he attracted too much attention. Yes, he had to show results to catch Professor Goldran’s eye, but attracting the wrong type of attention on his first day was probably a bad idea. It was easy enough for him to take out about fifty ghosts at once, but it was likely safest to match Cress’s claim. “Uh, I’ve also taken down about thirty.”

“What? Liar.”

“I’m not lying. I can only take down about thirty at a time.”

“Like I said, you’re exagger—wait, *all at once?*”

“Huh? Are you not supposed to take out all thirty at once?”

Suddenly, the lecture hall echoed with a buzz of excitement. At the lectern, the professor looked at the documents in hand. “You’re Xeno, the special trainee, correct?”

“Oh. Yes, I am.”

“Could you explain what you just said?”

“I don’t know if there’s much to explain. There’s this underground labyrinth that’s practically overflowing with ghosts, so you can just cast Cure and purify a bunch in one go—”

“An underground labyrinth?” the professor echoed, puzzled. “With that many undead? Are you talking about the Underground Labyrinth of Garminton?”

“Uh, yeah, I think that’s the one. Why?” That was the labyrinth at the old manor of a great noble that Aston had once made Zenos explore for treasure.

The buzzing in the hall grew even louder, and the professor raised both hands to quiet everyone down. “Xeno, venturing into the Underground Labyrinth of Garminton is quite the undertaking even for a Gold Class party. Let’s not joke about this, please.”

“Is it? Well, it *was* teeming with undead...”

“Only a scant few parties have ever returned unscathed, let alone safely retrieved treasure from there.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I mean, I myself got seven—er, I mean, like, two things from there.”

“You what?!”

*Huh?* He’d reduced the number from seven to two and still the professor had raised his voice in a weird way. Okay then.

The lecture ended amid murmurs. A bit perplexed by the reactions of those around him, Zenos quickly left the lecture hall, and the remaining attendees immediately started gossiping.

“Thirty ghosts at once? Is that guy for real?”

“Don’t people say Garminton is ‘where adventurers go to die’?”

“Just who *is* he?”

With everyone’s focus having shifted away from him, Cress glared at the door Zenos had exited through, clenching his fist. “What the hells is that guy’s problem? There’s no way any of that is true. Grinds my gears...”

Thus did the mysterious special trainee gradually begin to attract everyone’s attention.

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“Now then, let’s begin our next lecture,” said a man with slightly thinning hair standing at the lectern.

There’d been a break after the lecture on adventure healing, and now the second lecture of the day had begun.

*Hmm...* Zenos, sitting in a back corner, felt a bit uneasy. The other students kept casting strange glances his way for some reason, and the atmosphere at the hall had been strange since the end of the last lecture. *This feels kinda weird...*

When he glanced over to his side, someone was sitting there glaring daggers at him: Cress, Umin’s contemporary, who squared his shoulders and glowered fiercely at Zenos as soon as their eyes met. “So, you said your name was Xeno?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I get that you want attention, but you need to not spout random bullshit.”

“Uh, actually, that’s the opposite of what I want.”

“Then what’s this crap about taking out thirty ghosts at once? It’s such a blatant lie.”

“Oh, uh...” Truthfully, thirty *had* been a lie—he could take out *fifty* at once.

“Just wait until we get to the practical program. Everyone’s gonna know what you’re *really* made of then.”

“I guess so,” Zenos said with a downcast expression. The guy had a point. And Umin *had* told Zenos to just act like he normally did, but would that really be

eye-catching enough for the man supposedly about to become the next director of the Royal Institute of Healing?

Cress furrowed his brows. “Anyway, from now on, don’t just say whatever nonsense comes to mind.”

“Right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The professor at the front began to speak slowly. “Now, then. I specialize in magic circles. As you all are aware, a magic circle is a geometric pattern drawn with mana, which produces various effects depending on the shapes used. Some are simple circles used during adventures, while others are huge and take days, months, or even years to draw. Some magic circles remain unfinished after more than a hundred years, but let’s not talk about that just yet.”

Illuminating the tip of his finger with mana, the professor drew a magic circle on the blackboard, composed of simple straight lines and curves. The whole circle emitted a faint light.

“This is quite basic, and should be easy for excellent healers such as yourselves. If by any chance one of you doesn’t understand this, you need to start over from elementary training facilities.”

A small chuckle arose from the students, and Zenos sighed internally, feeling increasingly more disheartened. *Oh, boy.* Honestly, he didn’t know much about magic circles. Since he hadn’t received a proper education, he’d hardly ever used them, feeling it was faster to just hurry and heal instead of spending time drawing such things.

“Today, we’ll discuss how to put magic circle theory into practice,” the professor said as he began to modify the circle he’d drawn. As he did, the faint light grew stronger, drawing murmurs of awe from the audience. “By manipulating their structure like this, we can enhance their effect or add other properties without having to redraw the magic circle every time.” After going over the somewhat complex theoretical background, the professor looked over the attendees. “Now, let’s have one of you draw your best magic circle. I’ll revise it and make it more effective.”

A young man sitting in the front was selected and drew a magic circle on the blackboard. It was more complex than the basic circle, but the professor made



various corrections to it.

“This is still very inefficient,” he explained. “Too many unnecessary elements and too much blank space in the structure. If you do this, you can make it stronger while also adding a detoxifying effect.”

“I see! Thank you!” said the attendee.

“Now then, next up—”

“I’ll do it,” Cress said with a raised hand. He stood, gave Zenos a triumphant glance, and confidently walked to the front. Then, he went on to demonstrate an even more complex magic circle than the first attendee.

The professor crossed his arms and nodded, as if impressed. “Hmm. That’s quite skillfully done. And drawn in such a short time, with hardly any need for corrections. You’ve applied the theory well. Would you like to join my team?”

“I’m working under Professor Goldran, I’m afraid.”

“One of Goldran’s, I see. That makes sense. A pity, but ah well. A round of applause, everyone.”

Clapping echoed throughout the room. Immediately after, Cress pointed at Zenos’s corner. “Professor, it seems the special trainee over there wants to give it a try.”

“Huh?” Again, Zenos looked up in surprise.

“Oh?” the professor said. “Then come to the blackboard.”

“No, I—”

“What? There’s no need to be shy just because you’re a trainee,” the professor assured him. “This will be a good learning opportunity.”

Zenos would’ve preferred to decline, but the hall was heavy with a mix of expectation and suspicion, and it didn’t seem like refusing was an option.

Cress snickered. “Go embarrass yourself,” he murmured quietly on the way back to his seat.

Reluctantly, Zenos quietly stood up and trudged his way to the blackboard.

“Now then, any circle will do,” the professor said. “As a special trainee, surely

you can draw at least something?”

“I-I guess,” Zenos stammered.

*“Frankly, Zenos, you don’t need a magic circle,”* his mentor had once told him in a corner of the slums. *“It’s supplemental, essentially.”* He’d never explained *why* it wasn’t necessary, though. *“But using them well makes your life easier and is pretty convenient, so there’s no harm in knowing how to draw them. Here, I’ll teach you one I came up with when I was bored.”*

His mentor had then used a finger to draw a magic circle on the ground, grinning mischievously. Its shape was extremely complex, like ten intertwined fingers.

*“It’s not just about drawing it right,”* he’d explained. *“You need to imbue it with the corresponding mana, or it won’t work. But with your mana, you just might be able to use this one.”*

At the time, Zenos had just hummed in agreement and figured he’d learn it. Why not? Ultimately, though, it hadn’t been that useful. And to that, his mentor had said, with a sly grin, *“That killed some time, right?”*

The bastard.

“What’s the matter?” the professor asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Zenos mumbled. He hadn’t thought about his mentor in quite some time. A lot had happened in the intervening years since, after all, and he’d never gotten the chance to learn more about magic circles from the man.

Out of options, Zenos decided to draw the magic circle he’d learned back then—though that dodgy old bastard had only come up with it out of boredom, so he wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate for this occasion, not that he had a choice.

Cress snickered again. “What the hells is that? I’ve never seen that kinda magic circle,” he declared in a voice loud enough for the others to hear. “Looks like our special trainee’s true colors are starting to show.”

A few people chuckled, but one man’s face turned pale—the professor’s. “You—that magic circle is—”

“Yeah. Sorry,” Zenos muttered. “Honestly, that’s the most I can do.”

“Th-This is no ordinary magic circle! It’s amplified by infinite spirals arranged in the cardinal directions! Is this regeneration—n-no, but something’s different here...”

In an instant, the atmosphere at the lecture hall grew heavy. Zenos, of course, had been oblivious to how incredibly advanced the circle was.

“Ah, yes, it seems to be for regeneration at a glance, but it has a little trick,” the professor mused. “When multiple fingers are lost, it regenerates one at random.” It was an unusable, pointless circle, filled with the characteristic whimsy of Zenos’s mentor. “Wh-What the...?! Conditional branching, random sampling... Could a single magic circle theoretically do all that?! But this is certainly—” The professor continued to mutter to himself, as if he’d completely forgotten about the lecture and its attendees. “But the required mana would be enormous, far beyond what a human can handle—”

“I mean, I can do it,” Zenos said.

“Whaaat?!” Tentatively, the professor touched the edge of the magic circle. “I-It’s true. I can feel the surge of mana. Wh-Who the hells are—”

“Well, it’s still useless, anyway. If you lose a finger, you can just use magic to grow it back in no time.”

“G-Grow it back? In no time? With *magic*?” The bewildered professor grasped Zenos’s shoulders in awe. “I have no idea what you’re saying, but i-it doesn’t matter. Would you join my team? Please?”

“Uh, I mean, that’s—”

Since the professor had completely lost interest in the other students, the lecture was over. In the end, Zenos had to spend another half a session in the lecture hall just to be able to turn the man down.

Outside, the other attendees were talking among themselves.

“Just who exactly *is* that special trainee?”

“I’ve never seen anyone draw a regeneration circle that fast.”

“Never mind that! The guy said he could regenerate fingers ‘in no time’ with

magic!”

“No way that’s true. Even skilled healers have trouble with full limb regeneration.”

Left out of the conversation entirely, Cress glared at the people around him and gritted his teeth tightly. “What the hells... Who *is* this bastard?”

Like a pebble hitting the quiet surface of a lake, Zenos’s presence had slowly but surely begun to ripple.

## Side Story I: Meanwhile, at the Clinic...

Around when Zenos's presence had, unbeknownst to some, begun to make itself known at the Royal Institute of Healing, a lone figure stood before the clinic in the ruined city. Their gray hair swayed in the wind as their large beast ears flitted left and right, scanning the surroundings.

"I might be a genius," said the werewolf leader Lynga as she crouched down and smirked to herself. The owner of the clinic, Zenos, had left for the Royal Institute with some weirdo named Becker. And it seemed the elf Lily and the wraith Carmilla had tagged along, which meant this building was currently empty. "Heh heh heh..."

Slowly, Lynga inserted a wire into the keyhole. The place was decrepit and the lock quite old, so it wasn't difficult to pick. She pushed the door open quietly and swiftly went inside, silencing her footsteps. Finally, she closed the door behind her, locking it from within.

A profound silence enveloped her and a mischievous grin played upon her lips. "Now I can do whatever I want..."

But suddenly, Lynga heard a faint noise. She held her breath and crouched low. *Who the hells...?* She focused her ears forward and felt someone's presence slowly drawing nearer.

Whoever this was had noticed her intrusion too.

Clutching her axe in her left hand, the werewolf crept deeper inside. Then, in an instant, a black shadow lunged at her from the direction of the kitchen, hissing.

"Gah!" The glint of a dagger thrust caught Lynga's eye, and she swung her own axe just as quickly.

Instead of clashing, however, their weapons stopped abruptly midair. Lynga and the shadow froze in recognition.

"Zophia! Why are you here?!"

“Lynga?! That’s my line!” The leader of the lizardmen had beaten the werewolf to the punch. With her eyes wide open, Zophia sheathed her dagger at her waist once more. “Don’t tell me you came to steal stuff while the doc’s away!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Lynga protested. “You’re the thief here, not me!”

“What? I would *never*!”

“Oh yeah? That thief’s blood in you didn’t stir at all?”

“Don’t lump me in with *you*!”

“Don’t lump *me* in with you!”

Both of them brandished what they’d been holding in their other hands, and a pair of long sticks crossed between them, sparking: a broom and a duster. The two of them stood at a standoff, a long moment of awkward silence and even more awkward glances hanging between them before they slowly lowered their cleaning tools.

“So you came here to clean too, did you?” Zophia said.

“You too?” Lynga replied.

“You’re not subtle, trying to win points with the doc by cleaning the place while he’s away.”

“I could say the *exact* same thing to you.”

“Just so you know, I got here first.”

“What matters is how much you contribute,” Lynga said, glaring at Zophia. “And I may not look it, but I’m quite fond of cleanliness.”

“I am too!” Zophia protested, glaring right back.

“I’m *such* a genius,” came a third voice as the front door fell over with a loud *thunk*. “Cleaning up the place while Zenos is gone is one of the best ideas I’ve ever had!”

Zophia and Lynga exchanged glances and sighed heavily at the sight of Loewe, the orc leader, standing there with a mop.

“Can’t say I didn’t expect this,” the lizardwoman muttered.

“And now the door’s broken and we have even more work to do,” the werewolf lamented.

“Hmph. Zophia and Lynga. I see I’m late,” the orc grumbled.

With no other choice, the three started cleaning—competitively. Thanks to that, everything was squeaky clean in just under an hour. Zenos and Lily would usually split the cleaning duties, but with both being absent for a few days, a fair amount of dust had accumulated.

“Well, would you look at that!” Zophia exclaimed. “I’m so good at this.”

“I did more than half of the cleaning,” Lynga pointed out.

“I fixed the door,” Loewe said. “Perfectly too.”

“Yeah, the door *you broke*,” the lizardwoman and werewolf retorted in unison, prompting a quiet groan from the orc.

“All right! The place’s clean,” Lynga said with a bright smile. “You two go home now. I’ll lock up.”

Zophia and Loewe both cast a suspicious glance her way.

“Something smells fishy,” said the lizardwoman.

“Why are you trying to get rid of us?” asked the orc. “What are you planning?”

The werewolf averted her gaze. “I-I’m definitely *not* thinking of sneaking into Sir Zenos’s bed and sniffing it.”

“Wow, she really just said it,” Zophia said.

“We can’t unhear that, Lynga,” Loewe pointed out, glaring sharply at the werewolf. “Also, that’s a great idea. I’ll go first!”

“Hey! Not you too! Both of you, stop!” the lizardwoman called out, desperately trying to stop the other two as they took off running toward the bedroom. After a brief quarrel, she blurted out, “If we do that, the doc’s gonna hate us!”

At that, the two finally relented.

With a heavy sigh, Zophia glanced toward the stairs. “Hey, what about the



second floor?”

“We can’t,” Lynga said. “That’s where Lady Carmilla’s room is.”

“What if we touch stuff and get cursed?” Loewe pondered.

The three nodded solemnly to each other.

Zophia leaned an elbow on the desk and her cheek on her hand, gazing out the window. “Anyway, I wonder if the doc’s doing okay...”

“Sir Zenos has nothing to fear,” Lynga said. “It’s those around him who should be afraid.”

“Zenos still seems to think he’s a third-rate healer,” Loewe pointed out.

Birds chirped merrily outside under the warm rays of the midday sun, and peace was thus, unbeknownst to some, maintained at the clinic in the ruined city.

## Chapter 4: Undead Subjugation Team

The stark white walls of the Royal Institute of Healing glistened in the sunlight. Near the top floor of the research building, one of many edifices across the vast complex, was a professor's office.

Within the lavishly furnished room stood Goldran, a mustached, middle-aged man who was rumored to soon become the next director of the Royal Institute. His forehead crinkled as he looked down upon the grounds below.

A secretary knocked on the door and entered the room. "Excuse me," he said. As Goldran turned around, the secretary approached and bowed low. "Professor, there's something I'd like to inform you of."

"What is it?"

"There have been whispers of an interesting individual."

Goldran sat down wordlessly. His subordinates were well aware that he was cementing his power by incorporating capable and influential people into his team. Because of this, word of individuals who'd achieved some success or showed great promise reached him quickly. "I suppose I can spare the time."

"Thank you, sir. The rumors say this man can cast healing magic powerful enough to lay to rest thirty ghosts at once."

"Oh? And is that true?"

"The man said so himself."

"What? This is self-proclaimed? What a joke. That's not even worth discussing."

"That's not all. Associate Professor Fasso allegedly saw him draw a magic circle unlike anything ever seen before."

"Fasso? Oh, that nerd with the magic circle fetish." Goldran leaned far back in his chair. A recovery magic circle even a researcher of the subject didn't recognize was indeed a matter of moderate interest. "You may as well tell me

the name of this man.”

“Xeno, it would seem.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“He appears to be one of this year’s special trainees.”

“A special trainee, you say?” Goldran’s expression suddenly turned stern. Special trainees entered the Institute through recommendation for temporary employment experience; they weren’t officially staff members. Though the recommendation system lent them *some* credence, their status was, frankly, ambiguous. “Don’t report this nonsense to me. You think my team is so low-level it’ll accept special trainees?”

“M-My apologies, sir!” The secretary lowered his head in a panic. Many secretaries were eager to bring information about capable individuals to Goldran as soon as possible, with an eye on the monetary reward they’d receive if the man took an interest.

“Excuse me, professor,” a second secretary walking in said. “I have a report—there appear to have been numerous sightings of undead at the Sura Graveyard.”

Given the nature of the Royal Institute, deaths there were inevitable. The organization had an alliance with the church, arranging for the deceased to be taken to church-managed cemeteries, and the Sura Graveyard was the one nearest to the Institute.

“Someone will exorcise them sooner or later,” Goldran said. “Why trouble me with trivial matters?”

“Well, there seem to be a considerable number of them, and we’ve received multiple requests for assistance—”

“Then just send whomever. Don’t bother me with every little thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the secretary left, Goldran turned to the other secretary, whose head still hung low. “Enough already. Out.”

“Yes, sir! My apologies for disturbing you!”

“Oh. Come to think of it, you said something about laying thirty ghosts to rest, right? If that story’s true, then I might consider this new special trainee.”

Goldran wasn’t being serious. To a man of immense power like him, the affairs of a mere special trainee were irrelevant. The secretary, however, took it very differently.

“I understand, sir,” he answered softly before quickly excusing himself from the professor’s office.

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Goldran’s whimsical remark reached Zenos the same day.

“*Whaaat?!*” Lily asked, surprised. “You’re gonna hunt undead, Zenos?”

“Yep,” the healer responded with a nod. “Sounds like it.”

He’d been about to head back to his room after the end of the day’s lectures when he was suddenly summoned by administrative staff. Apparently, a large number of undead had appeared at a nearby cemetery, and they’d wanted him to join the subjugation team. The departure would be at night, so he’d returned to the dorms for dinner in the meantime.

“Undead hunting, you say?” said Carmilla over the rim of her glass of wine. “How unfortunate.”

“Agreed,” Zenos grumbled. “Came out of nowhere.”

“Unfortunate for the undead, not you,” she retorted quietly.

The young elf placed a steaming plate brimming with stew on the table. “A mass outbreak...” she muttered worriedly. “I suppose it makes sense that cemeteries attract the undead.”

“They’re under management from the church, so that doesn’t usually happen,” Zenos explained. “The cause of this outbreak is unknown.”

“Huh...” Carmilla muttered, staring into the void for a moment before pointing at the dishes on the table. “Well, one cannot fight on an empty stomach. Eat.”

“Don’t act like you’re the one who made this,” Zenos retorted. “Lily did.”

“How rude! I will have you know I added in a number of mysterious spices while concealing my presence.”

“Does it still taste okay? You didn’t add anything weird, right?”

“Lily, I would like more chicken,” the wraith said, ignoring Zenos’s question. “And if you put carrots on my plate, I *will* curse your descendants.”

“That’s scary!” The young elf whimpered. “Wait, Carmilla, you eat too?”

“Since when can you eat solid food?” Zenos asked.

The wraith chuckled. “Anything is possible with enough willpower.”

“I understand less and less of your biology...”

Now that he thought about it, Zenos did remember hearing in a lecture that much about wraiths remained a mystery. Observing and researching this one could even earn him a degree, not that he had any intention to do so. Besides, this particular wraith was far too unique to serve as a general reference.

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After the casual-but-brief dinner, it was time for Zenos to depart. It was already deep into the evening as he headed to the designated meeting spot—the plaza in front of the Royal Institute of Healing. He spotted Umin among the group of healers under the moonlight.

“Huh? Zenos—erm, Mr. Xeno, you’re going too?” she asked.

“Seems like it,” he replied.

“How odd. Special trainees are guests, so they shouldn’t be recruited for subjugation.”

“I don’t really understand it either, but I’m told the decision came from higher up.”

“Higher up...” she echoed, placing her index finger on her cheek. “I see. Perhaps you’ve already caught the eye of Goldran’s faction.”

“Really? I don’t think I’ve done anything to attract attention.”

“You attract it all the same. Just do as you normally do, Mr. Xeno.”

“I mean, that’s the plan anyway...”

“Now then, let’s get going,” enthusiastically said the man at the front of the group—the same one who’d kept harassing Zenos earlier. “I’m Cress, and I’m with Goldran’s research lab. I’ll be your leader today.”

“Huh. He’s the leader?” Zenos asked quietly.

“Despite his questionable suitability for the task,” Umin replied. “It was a sudden summons, so senior healers were unavailable. This subjugation team looks to be mainly composed of younger members.”

Zenos and Umin filed in with the group and kept pace. The cemetery, the site of their mission, was surrounded by woods. Passing through a path lined with dense trees, with the eerie hooting of owls ringing in their ears, the group moved further into the forest.

“There they are,” Cress whispered from the vanguard. Among the rows of crosses were floating, pale-blue ghosts and wandering, decaying zombies. Cress slowly raised his staff. “Charge! Follow me!” he commanded as he dashed forward.

The group followed, and chants of healing magic began to echo from different directions. Flashes of white light flickered in the darkness, accompanied by the death cries of the undead.

“Let us hurry, Mr. Xeno,” said Umin.

“Right.” Since the two were at the back of the line, they were a little late to the action—the battle had already begun in various places. “Huh. Taking them down one or two at a time? Meticulous, but maybe a bit inefficient.”

“I suppose it *would* seem that way to you, Mr. Xeno...”

Nonetheless, with this many healers present, it felt as though there wouldn’t be much for the pair to do. No sooner had that thought crossed Zenos’s mind, however, than he was struck with a realization: the number of undead wasn’t decreasing.

At all.

Though the group was steadily taking out enemies, their numbers seemed to

be going *up*, not down. Soon the number of undead surrounding each healer had grown to three, four, and more. Ghosts drained their targets' life force upon touch. Unable to fend off the attacks, some healers were turning pale and falling to their knees. Voices of panic began to rise all around.

"H-Hey! What's going on?!"

"We're...no match for them!"

"Dude, this is bad!"

"Hey! Leader! Do something!"

"R-Right!" Cress stammered. The leader's voice was tinged with unease as he barked out commands. "We can't fight them individually! Let's group up!"

The young healers gathered in a circular formation at the heart of the cemetery, so they could focus solely on the enemies directly in front of them. It didn't go to plan, however.

"It's... It's no use!"

There was an even sharper increase in the number of ghosts and zombies. They formed a tangled mass, overwhelming the healers with sheer numbers.

"No... Ah... *Ahhhhh!*"

Just as Cress screamed in terror, however—

*"High Cure!"*

A brilliant white storm roared, bringing forth a heavy heat wave and glittering particles of light. Countless undead, swallowed by the pale vortex, returned to the afterlife with faint shrieks.

In the now-silent cemetery, the group of bewildered healers let out a collective, "Huh?"

"That was a big help," Zenos said nonchalantly. "Thanks for grouping them up. Made it easier to get them all."

Another collective, "Huh?" escaped the astonished healers' lips. A long, deafening silence fell over the cemetery.

"Um, I know I said to do what you always do," Umin murmured in

amazement, “but I never imagined it’d be anything like this...”

“Hah...ha ha!” The next voice to pierce the silence was Cress’s as he broke into nervous laughter. “D-Did you all see that?! That’s the power of my healing magic right there!”

“What?!” Umin exclaimed, astonished that the man was speaking as though he’d been the one to do it.

“That was you, Cress?” someone asked.

“What, really?” another joined in.

“That was some amazing magic!” a third added.

The other healers began to buzz with excitement, looking at Cress with admiration. In the extremely chaotic situation, no one had seen the actual source of the spell.

Umin quickly spoke up, confronting her colleague. “Wait a minute, Cress! That was Mr. Xeno’s—”

“What?” Cress snapped. “What are you talking about, Umin? No way some special trainee can pull *that* off!”

“Wh—Mr. Xeno! Please, say something!”

“Umm,” Zenos mumbled, looking thoughtfully at his right hand. “I’m pretty sure I did use a spell...” He’d definitely felt the sensation of casting magic, and his hands had tingled as the undead were exorcised. That, however, didn’t mean someone else couldn’t also have cast a spell.

Cress quickly turned to the other healers. “Hey! Who are you all gonna believe? Me, the guy from Goldran’s lab, or this random-ass, no-name special trainee?”

The others all exchanged glances.

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“If he’s in Professor Goldran’s good graces, he must be capable.”

“Cress really is incredible.”

It seemed the group of young healers had fully sided with Cress. Triumphant,



their leader shrugged. “Welp, there you have it. Can’t have my achievements stolen, after all.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—” Umin stomped her feet in frustration as her face turned red.

Cress laughed. “Now then, make sure you let the higher-ups know about my heroics!” In high spirits, he announced the success of the mission and told the group they were dismissed. Then he glared and pointed an index finger at Zenos. “N-Now listen here!” he said, his lips trembling. “I’m never gonna accept you!”

“Okay...” Zenos deadpanned.

“Dammit!” Cress snapped. “The hell’s with you, anyway? Why would the higher-ups tell me to observe some nobody special trainee?!”

“Observe? What are you talking about?”

“N-Nothing! Anyway, just remember you’re an outsider! Know your place!”

“I mean, yeah, I *am* an outsider...” And he’d apparently become the target of a grudge for some reason. As Cress turned to leave, Zenos called out to him.

“Hey! Wait!”

“What? What do you want?”

“The undead hunt isn’t over yet.”

“Huh?” With a frown, Cress turned around. The other healers, who’d begun to scatter, also stopped.

Umin turned to Zenos with a fearful expression. “What do you mean, ‘isn’t over’?”

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Zenos explained. “There’s still something here.”

A foul wind blew from the direction of the graveyard. Illuminated by the pale moonlight, the multitude of imposing crosses cast countless shadows that seemed to writhe, as if blowing in the wind. It was as though an earthquake had happened right there, the ground heaving and rumbling.

From below the earth, a moaning sound erupted as if rising from the depths of hell. The malevolent birth cry grew louder and louder.

“It’s coming!” Zenos shouted.

With a roar, the ground burst open like a geyser, mud raining down in a torrential downpour. In the midst of all this stood a gigantic zombie, towering over the group in the dark night, its skin patchy and distorted. Drool dripped from its mouth, sizzling as it hit the earth, and a suffocating stench emanated from its body.

“It’s a zombie king!” someone cried out.

Zombie kings were the highest-ranked of all zombies. A clear sense of panic quickly swept over the young healers.

“Why would a fiend like this appear out of nowhere?!”

“Wh-What do we do?!”

“We can’t deal with this on our own! We need senior healers here!”

“Y-Yeah, but we can’t get them here immediately! Can we hold this thing off in the meantime?!”

“That’s...”

Silence fell upon the group, all eyes turning to one person.

“Wh-What?” Cress stammered, his forehead beaded with sweat as the group began to plead with him.

“You’re our only hope, Cress!”

“Use that awesome healing spell from earlier to hold it off!”

“I’m so glad you’re here, Cress!”

“U-Uhh, right. Yeah.” The leader, his face ashen, nodded and looked to Umin as if asking for help.

Umin’s lips curled into a small smile as she shrugged. “We expect a repeat of your stellar performance from earlier, Mr. Cress, pride and joy of Goldran’s lab.”

“D-Damn you, Umin! You won’t help your own colleague?!”

“Huh? *You* need help from the likes of *me*? You, *the* Mr. Cress from Professor Goldran’s research lab?”

“Ugh! I-I-I don’t!” Gritting his teeth, he cast a brief side glance at Zenos.

The dark-haired healer raised both hands in mock surrender and took a step back. “Oh, I get it. You don’t want an outsider to interfere, right?”

“Huh? Uh, no, I mean—y-y-yes! You got that right!” Cress exclaimed shakily. “Th-Th-The rest of you, call for backup immediately! I’ll handle things here in the meantime!”

“You’re so amazing, Cress!”

“We’re counting on you!”

“Hang in there!”

With words of praise and encouragement for Cress, the group—excluding Umin and Zenos—ran off.

“Heeere I c-cooome! You b-better be reaaady!” Cress declared weakly before raising his staff high in his right hand and charging toward the zombie king with the look of a man ready to lay down his life.

Watching from the back, Zenos commented, “I mean, it’s great that the guy’s got spirit, but why was his voice cracking? *And* he was stuttering.”

“I think...if you looked up ‘poetic justice’ in a dictionary, it’d just be an illustration of this exact moment,” Umin noted with a shrug, clasping her hands together lightly.

“Gah! Ahhh! Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Roaring as if to psych himself up, Cress faced the zombie king.

The creature slowly turned its head to look down at the brown-haired healer, its body oozing slime. It shambled forward, its legs looking like they could come apart any minute, and a powerful stench of decay carried forth in the wind.

“*Hi-Cure!*” Cress chanted, raising his staff forward. A white light struck the zombie king’s abdomen, blowing a hole straight through it. “Y-Yes! Ah ha ha ha!

How's *that* for a powerful...spell..." A mass of flabby flesh quickly filled the hole, however, prompting Cress to raise his voice in astonishment. "What?!"

With a mighty roar, the zombie king swung down its right arm. Its movements were somewhat sluggish—perhaps due to the creature not being used to its body—and Cress managed to dodge it with a sideways leap. The undead's arm hit the ground and shattered, sending its broken remains flying all around. In no time at all, the scattered flesh reattached to the arm, regenerating it.

Cress rose to his feet and once again charged at the zombie king, but had to roll on the ground to avoid its next arm swing. This repeated several more times and Cress, now covered in dirt, put his hands on his hips and laughed haughtily once more.

"And the crowd goes wild! We're more than evenly matched!" he gloated. "It hasn't laid a finger on me!"

"Um, except for the fact that you cast *one* spell and have been simply running around since," Umin grumbled in an exasperated tone. "Also, your 'crowd' is...two people." Since the other healers had left to call for backup, the only people present were Cress, Zenos, and Umin. "At least this explains the cause of the undead outbreak."

"Does it?" Zenos asked.

"Yes. Undead are naturally drawn to stronger undead, especially in places closely linked with death, like graveyards."

"Ah, so the zombie king was the cause, then," the raven-haired healer mused, crossing his arms and nodding. "Still, that guy over there claimed he was the one who wiped out the ghosts and zombies earlier, right?"

"He did say that."

"His fighting style seems a bit passive for that claim."

"Well, that would be because he lied."

"Huh? He did?"

"He did. But please, Mr. Xeno, don't help him. He needs a little pain for a little gain."

After a moment's silence, Zenos turned to Umin. "You say that, but you're worried about him, aren't you?"

"Wh-What makes you say that?"

"You didn't go with the others to call for help and chose to stay here instead."

"Well... I suppose I should at least collect his bones. He *is* my colleague."

"You're a good egg, Umin."

"Oh, no, not at all," she said, flustered, as she waved her hands in front of her face and glared at Cress's back. "Also, he's only rolling around, not fighting. Is he planning on stalling until help arrives?"

Zenos frowned, his arms still crossed. "That won't do."

"It won't," Umin agreed. "He talked the talk and isn't walking the walk."

"Oh, not because of that. Leaving the zombie king be as it gets used to its body will make it stronger. Stalling for time is a bad move."

Umin gasped, and immediately after, Cress's groan echoed through the air. Finally, the zombie king had caught the brown-haired healer by the torso and violently hurled him against a tombstone.

"Damn it! *Cure!*" After casting the spell on himself, Cress crawled away to put distance between him and the enemy and clicked his tongue. "Got careless there. But this is just a flesh wound." Despite his bravado, his knees were shaking, showing his exhaustion. "Now the real fight begins—"

The zombie king's fist exploded onto Cress, interrupting his bold declaration. With a loud groan, he was thrown backward, sent tumbling across the ground.

"*Cure...*" he chanted weakly, coughing. "*Cur—* Gah! Arrrgh!"

With the zombie king's speed increasing as time went on, Cress couldn't keep up with healing. In a relentless flurry of strikes, the brown-haired healer was flung around like a leaf in a storm. Finally, the zombie king caught him with both hands and lifted him up high off the ground.

"G-Gahhh!" he screamed. "No! L-Let go! Let me go!"

"Oh! Oh no!" Umin said in a panic.

Standing next to her, Zenos felt an inexplicable sense of discomfort. What was it that bothered him? Something about the conversation with Umin earlier had made him uneasy...

“Oh!” he exclaimed.

Cres shrieked. “Nooooooooo! H-Help meeeeeeee!”

The zombie king’s gaping maw lunged at Cress’s head, its jagged, stake-like teeth inches away from reaping the young healer’s life, when— “*Mega Cure!*” Zenos chanted, and a tsunami of white light engulfed the hulking creature. The air rippled, trees shook violently, and the undead, overwhelmed by the holy torrent, roared loudly as it was reduced to mere bones.

As everything grew silent once more, Cress, now sitting on his rear, gasped for air. His bravado, however, was not forgotten. “N-Nobody asked for your help!”

“*You* did,” Umin retorted pointedly. “You were clearly screaming for help.”

Cress stood up, raising his voice. “I was not!”

“You were too. You were sobbing and screaming, ‘Help meeeeeeee!’”

“N-Nooo!”

As the two bickered, Zenos wiped the sweat from his brow. “Uh, actually, I wanted to apologize,” he mumbled awkwardly.

“Huh?”

Finally he understood what had been bothering him. Umin had said that undead were naturally drawn to stronger undead. And yes, the zombie king was indeed a high-ranking undead creature, but it was newly born and far from its full strength. Why would that many undead have gathered around it, all things considered? Could there be another, more powerful one nearby?

And then it’d hit him—there was, in fact, an even stronger undead around. Not far from there was a certain undead of the highest possible rank...

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“Achoo!” loudly sneezed the wraith Carmilla as she stood in the dormitories of the Royal Institute of Healing near the cemetery.

“Carmilla, are you okay?” Lily asked, concerned, as she peered over at the wraith. “Do you have a cold?”

Carmilla floated up gently, crossing her legs and snickering. “I, the Lich Queen, catching a cold? What an amusing notion.”

“Well, I’m glad if not. It was just quite the sneeze.”

“It was indeed. Perhaps the superstition holds true, and someone is thinking of me.”

“Wow! You’re so popular, Carmilla!”

The wraith chuckled. “Quite the flatterer, are you not? I should say, your stew was truly delectable.”

The elf chuckled in turn. “You’re pretty good at compliments too, Carmilla.”

Carmilla and Lily both carried on chuckling amid the relaxed atmosphere.

Sitting in Zenos’s room, the cause of the undead outbreak continued to engage in utterly carefree conversation.

## Chapter 5: Invitation

After the undead subjugation was complete, Zenos returned to the dorms and explained the situation to Carmilla.

“Huh. So I was the cause?” The wraith’s eyes widened, and she pointed to herself, letting out a cheeky laugh. “I see. So that was what that was.”

“Did you know this would happen?” Zenos asked.

“No, but it does not surprise me. Such things have happened around me often since long ago.”

Indeed, the healer recalled that there’d been an unusually high number of ghosts around when he’d first visited the building that would go on to become his clinic.

“Now this is what they call exuding a regal aura,” the wraith said, clearly letting it go to her head. She showed no signs of contrition as she lifted her right hand dramatically. “Bow to me, mortals!” Floating in midair, she narrowed her eyes and lorded over Zenos, laughing. “That is fun and all, but what now? Are you sending me away?”

After a moment’s consideration, Zenos replied, “Nah. It’s actually safer for everyone if you stay close to me.”

“What?!” exclaimed Lily, sitting at the dinner table and bashfully pressing her hands to her cheeks. “I-I wanna hear you say that to me too...”

Carmilla, meanwhile, stared at Zenos, frozen in place.

“What’s wrong?” the healer asked.

“N-Nothing!” the wraith stammered, huffily turning her face away. “You are a strange man, wanting a loathsome wraith at your side.” With that, she floated off toward the back of the room. “Well, suit yourself. I will continue to pester you to my cold dead heart’s content,” she added with an eerie snicker before disappearing.



“That wasn’t the zinger she thought it was.”

The reality was probably that it wasn’t so much that undead always gathered where Carmilla was, but more about her proximity to places like ruins or graveyards, where undead already were likely to gather in the first place. Either way, they’d been dealt with for the time being, so things would likely remain okay for now—which didn’t mean Zenos would get to relax all that much.

Fanning her face, Lily changed the subject. “So, what about your task here?”

“Well...” Zenos trailed off.

Life at the Royal Institute of Healing was different and interesting, but the purpose of his infiltration was to gather information on a missing person—a man named Afred. To that end, he needed to find a way into Goldran’s laboratory, where the missing man had been working until recently. And to do *that*, he needed to do something noteworthy enough to catch the professor’s eye...



“You defeated a whole bunch of undead,” Lily pointed out. “I think that’s already pretty impressive.”

“I hope so, but...” Zenos leaned back in his chair, gazing absentmindedly up at the ceiling.

The problem with that was the fact no one, Umin aside, believed Zenos had been the one to do it. And the key to solving said problem lay with a certain someone...

\*\*\*

The day after the undead subjugation, a man with curled dark brown hair and bangs stepped into a room in the research building of the Royal Institute of Healing. “Excuse me, it’s Cress—may I come in?”

“You may.” Sitting in a chair at the back of the room was professor Goldran’s second secretary. Though he was merely riding on the coattails of the professor’s authority, he was still working directly under Goldran, and his words carried weight. “Now then, Cress. I’m told you played a significant role in the undead subjugation.”

“W-Well, it was a trivial matter for a man of my caliber,” Cress replied proudly.

“The young healers who took part in the subjugation all sang your praises, saying you single-handedly wiped out a horde of undead and even defeated the zombie king. That’s quite the achievement. I’m proud to have referred you to the professor.”

“H-Ha, ha ha...”

“However...” The secretary’s brow furrowed deeply. “Your success implies that Xeno, the special trainee, was a letdown.”

Cress said nothing in response. Before the subjugation had taken place, he’d been summoned by the second secretary and instructed to keep an eye on the abilities of a special trainee named Xeno, which the brown-haired healer surmised had to do with the professor’s desire to attract talent. The special trainee showing too much competence, then, would’ve been a thorn in Cress’s

side.

The second secretary shook his leg nervously. “Damn it. That means the man I recommended to the professor was a fluke. This may count against me...”

“Yes, well...” Cress trailed off, standing quietly in place for a while.

“What is it, Cress?” the secretary asked with a frown. “You may go now. Keep doing a good job.”

“R-Right. It’s just...”

“Is there something else?”

After opening and closing his mouth several times, Cress clenched his fists tightly. “Well, I-I *am* great, mind you, but...that guy...the trainee, he’s pretty good too.”

“Hmm?”

“He’s the one who actually took down the horde and the zombie king.”

“What are you saying?”

“The truth. I saw it with my own eyes. Now, if you’ll excuse me!” Cress fled the room without looking back.

He’d been scared when he’d been surrounded by undead. He’d been scared when he’d fought the zombie king. He’d thought he was going to die. Prepared himself for it, even. And yet, despite the fact Cress had tried to take all the credit, the guy had saved him. The guy’d done so effortlessly too, like it’d been no big deal.

“Shit,” he cursed, clicking his tongue loudly and slamming his fist into the wall in the hallway. “Damn it! We’re even now, special trainee!”

After Cress left, the second secretary stared silently at the closed door for a few moments, before standing up slowly and making his way toward the professor’s office.

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The next day, Becker summoned Zenos to his lab—which was cluttered as ever, with piles of documents that looked like they could collapse into a paper

avalanche at any moment—and greeted the black-haired healer with a smile. “I have some news for you, Zenos—er, I mean, Xeno.”

“News?” Zenos echoed.

“Mm-hmm. Goldran’s lab wants you to come over.”

“Huh? Did I mess up?”

“Oh, no. It’s probably an invitation to join them.”

“What, really?”

“Wow!” Umin, standing behind them, clapped her hands. “That’s amazing, Mr. Zenos!”

Becker ran a hand through his tousled hair. “Yes, it’s very impressive. I wasn’t expecting it to happen this soon.”

“Why would they invite me, though?”

“It would seem your actions during the undead subjugation have been brought to their attention.”

“Huh...”

“Surprised?”

“I thought that the credit officially went to that Cress guy.”

“I don’t know the details either, but either way, the fact of the matter is that they want you to drop by.”

Zenos sat down on a chair and sighed as his shoulders slumped. “So I’ve passed the first hurdle, basically.”

“It’s more like you’ve just reached the starting line,” Becker said, still with that placid smile of his, bringing his hands together in front of his face.

“Professor Goldran has several secretaries. Maybe one of them recommended you to him.”

“Does that mean...?”

“Alas, you still have an interview with the professor himself.”

“What, really? Sounds like a pain. Can’t I have a more casual conversation

with him?”

“Professor Goldran leads the largest faction at the Royal Institute. You can’t just casually chat him up.”

“Organizations seem way too complicated for my tastes,” Zenos remarked with a sigh.

Becker smiled wryly. “Professor Goldran is quite the stickler for rank and appearances. Though he certainly has his accolades as a healer, I’ve heard his magic abilities aren’t anything to write home about; he’s more known for his political savvy and fundraising skills. Some say he only reached his position through substantial financial contributions to the Institute and close ties to one of the seven great noble houses, which earned him a strong backing among the aristocracy.”

Society in the Kingdom of Herzeth was strictly hierarchical. Nobles possessed great wealth and power, especially those belonging to the seven great families, said to be so influential they could turn water to wine. Goldran, allegedly, had brownnosed his way up to join the ranks of this powerful elite.

“Hmm.” Zenos crossed his arms and lifted his gaze to Becker. “This Goldran guy is only an advanced healer, right? Aren’t you elite? Doesn’t that make you more important?”

“Sadly, titles and influence don’t always go hand in hand. My case’s particularly unique, since I’m known for developing medicine, which isn’t as prestigious or popular as other forms of healing. It would be no exaggeration to say my faction is the weakest in all of the Institute,” Becker said with a chuckle.

“This is no laughing matter, Dr. Becker,” Umin chastised him, puffing out her cheeks.

Becker scratched his head. “Also, the other elite healers are...eccentric, themselves. I’d love to introduce you to them, Zenos, but they’re often up to their necks with work, or off to parts unknown.”

“I would be interested,” Zenos said, “but I don’t plan on staying here long.” He was an unlicensed, illegal healer, after all. “Well, for now, I’ll go and answer their summons.”

“Indeed. Good luck with that,” Becker replied.

“Please do what you can, Mr. Xeno,” Umin added.

After Zenos left the room, Umin and Becker slowly nodded at one another after a moment’s silence.

“Well, then,” Becker said pensively.

“Something’s bothering you,” Umin remarked.

“I’m not worried about Zenos’s skill, but Professor Goldran is cautious and suspects even his own shadow. That concerns me.”

“You’re worried about Zenos’s pedigree being questioned?”

“We should have a Plan B ready in case we need to flee in the middle of the night,” Becker said with a laugh.

“Doctor! This is no laughing matter!” Umin exclaimed, flustered.

“Well,” the doctor replied with a hint of amusement, “our bets have been placed. Now we just trust and wait.”

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Zenos’s destination was on the second-to-last floor of the research building—only one step away from the summit. Upon arrival, Zenos wasted no time in knocking.

“Come in,” said a low voice from within the room in response.

Inside, two men were waiting at a long desk. The one with a fox-like face sitting at one end was likely the secretary Becker had mentioned.

“So you’re the special trainee,” the man at the center said. His graying hair was slicked back, and he sported a thick, jet-black mustache.

Zenos had seen the professor before from a distance in the cafeteria. From up close like this, the man exuded a unique, imposing air, the confidence of someone who had climbed to the position of vice director of the Royal Institute of Healing apparent in his tone and demeanor.

The air in the room was tense as Zenos gave a small nod and lowered his mask for just a moment before taking a seat.

“Welcome, Xeno. I am the professor’s second secretary. I hear you’ve been keeping quite busy, drawing unusual magic circles and defeating countless undead.”

“I suppose,” Zenos said. Apparently word of the incident at the graveyard *had* reached their ears.

“We’ve invited you here today to offer you the unique opportunity to personally experience life at the Goldran lab. We are proud to be the largest in all of the Institute, and this is a rare chance not often afforded to special trainees. Wonderful, wouldn’t you say?”

Zenos figured it was best to nod in agreement for now.

Satisfied, the secretary smiled and, as if his role was finished, turned his gaze to Goldran, who shot Zenos a piercing gaze and spoke in a solemn tone. “What can you do?”

Zenos’s brow furrowed at the sudden question. “What can I do? I can heal. That’s about it.”

“How small-minded,” Goldran replied. The tension in the air grew thicker. “Any healer can heal. If you have the power, you need to aim higher than that.”

“Higher?”

“Healers hold a special status in the Kingdom of Herzeth. Our excellence has played a part in decisive victories in wars, contributing to this country’s expansion. We are intrinsically tied to the history of this nation. True power and privilege, however, remains in the hands of the ruling class.”

Zenos listened quietly as the man spoke.

“I refuse to stop at being a mere healer. Being vice director of this Institute is but a stepping stone. Soon, I will be part of the ruling class, and members of my faction will doubtlessly benefit.”

The shadow healer did recall Umin saying Goldran was more interested in making strides in politics than in healing magic. “Umm, and what do you want to do once you’re in the ruling class?”

“Hey!” the secretary exclaimed sharply, his face turning pale. “Mind your



tongue!”

Goldran’s eyebrow twitched up slightly. “What one gets should be commensurate with their worth. And that includes healing,” he explained. “The rich and poor receive different qualities of treatment. Not all lives are worth the same.”

Zenos had nothing to say to that.

“Normally, the likes of a special trainee wouldn’t be allowed to speak to me. However, I do not dislike useful individuals. If you can be of use to me, I am prepared to welcome you into my team.”

“Th-Then, professor, does that mean you’ll accept him?” the secretary asked anxiously.

“Mmm,” the professor hummed before stopping himself. “I cannot say. Yet.”

The secretary was startled.

A hint of doubt glinted in Goldran’s eyes. “You said your name was Xeno, correct? Draw me your magic circle from that lecture.”

“The magic circle?” Zenos echoed.

“All I know about you is secondhand. I haven’t personally verified your usefulness.”

That was indeed a reasonable request. Zenos took a piece of paper, infused his fingertips with magical power and drew the magic circle his mentor had taught him as a joke. He wasn’t sure if this would be up to par, but he did remember how shocked the lecturer had been when he saw it.

As Zenos handed the paper back to Goldran, his secretary asked, “Professor, can you judge his usefulness from this?”

“Looking at a magic circle of one’s own creation can teach much about one’s knowledge in healing magic.” Goldran peered into Zenos’s eyes. “And about how dubious their background may or may not be.”

Zenos stared back in silence.

“There are various schools of magic circles, but regardless of school, there are

basic principles and foundations that must be adhered to in the study of healing magic,” the professor explained.

“How does that relate to one’s background?” the secretary asked cautiously.

Goldran waved the paper between his fingers at the fox-faced man. “You know nothing, do you? If his magic circle doesn’t adhere to these principles, it means he hasn’t received any formal education. And if the circle deviates from the norm, it should be clear whether this is an intentional choice or a result of a lack of understanding.”

The room fell into an awkward silence for a moment.

“And in the unlikely event he hasn’t been educated because he comes from the very bottom of the social ladder, well, welcoming him into our prestigious lab would be utterly abhorrent.”

“The very bottom of the ladder?” the secretary repeated, surprised. “You mean he might be part of the poor class?”

“I did say it’s unlikely, but yes. I do not know this young man, and he’s allegedly been abroad, so he lacks a citizenship certificate. Falso, the magic circle scholar and lecturer, may well have focused only on function rather than checking for principle integrity. This is a precaution.”

Zenos continued to listen without a word.

Goldran glanced at the dark-haired healer, then flipped the paper toward himself to examine it. “Our faction must only consist of legitimate and outstanding members. We cannot allow the inclusion of anyone that deviates from that, especially if I am to become the next director.” With that, he put on his glasses and stared intently at the piece of paper.

The secretary looked anxiously between the professor and the special trainee, clearly concerned that his career would be over if the result was unfavorable. “H-How is it, professor?” he asked, sweat forming on his brow.

Goldran scrutinized the paper a while longer before slowly standing up. “Hmph. Quite the interesting circle this is. I’ve never seen such an application before,” he said, placing his hand on the door and glaring sharply at Zenos. “And the foundations appear solid. Come to our lab starting tomorrow.” With

that, he closed the door sharply behind him.

As he listened to the man's fading footsteps, Zenos let out a sigh. *My mentor taught me this magic circle...*

The shadow healer was hit with the newfound realization that the mentor he'd thought he'd known so well—name aside, that is—was actually a complete mystery to him.

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"Whoa! What the..." Zenos exclaimed as he took in the sight before him.

It was the day after his successful infiltration of Goldran's faction. Zenos had gone to Goldran's lab in the morning, and a secretary had directed him to the medical ward, where patients were admitted. Upon traversing the corridor connecting the research building to the medical ward, Zenos was greeted by the sight of a number of healers in white coats walking in two orderly rows. As he watched the procession, wondering what was going on, a man at the end of the line turned around, clicked his tongue, and gestured haughtily.

"Hey!" The man—Cress, Umin's acquaintance—snapped. "What are you standing around in a daze for? Hurry and get in line."

"Oh," Zenos replied. "Cress, right?"

"Yeah. I'm the great Cress. Also your senior, just so you know." When Zenos lined up, his brown-haired "senior" pointed an index finger at him. "You're a member of Goldran's lab from today on. Make sure you follow the rules!"

"Yeah, I know."

"Ugh. It's rare for a special trainee to be allowed in here, you know. You should be *extremely* grateful for my recommendation."

"Oh, it was you? I mean, thank you, but why?"

Cress smirked and lowered his voice to a whisper, chuckling. "It's obvious, dude. I'm gonna use you to climb up the ranks. I recommended you, so you better repay the favor."

"Well, at least you're honest..." For better or worse, the man seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Looking down the long line, Zenos asked, "Also, what's

this line for?”

“The professor’s doing the rounds.”

“The rounds?”

“Professor Goldran is visiting the hospitalized patients.”

Apparently, his faction followed him around, lining up in order of rank within the group.

“So...before I joined, you were at the bottom of the ladder?” Zenos asked.

“Sh-Shut up!” Cress snapped. “Just you watch! I *will* climb my way to the top someday!”

“Yeah? Well, good luck with that.”

“Stop pitying meeeeeeee!”

The medical ward was uniformly white, with dazzling floors and walls. Zenos’s little clinic in the ruined city was nothing next to the grandiosity of these facilities. He was so far back down the line that he couldn’t even see Goldran’s back, let alone tell what was going on.

“Hey, what happens during these rounds?” he asked.

“Well, he’ll listen to the patients, verify treatment plans with their assigned healers, and occasionally perform simple healing on the spot.”

“And he needs this many people for that?”

“Idiot! Mind what you ask!” Cress looked around for a moment before lowering his voice. “This is all to show his authority. Besides, the professor only visits the wealthy patients.”

“Huh...” Zenos nodded noncommittally and quickened his pace.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna go take a peek,” he said, walking briskly along the wall and heading toward the front of the line. If he was going to investigate the missing persons case, he needed to know more about Goldran. Since he was a relative unknown among the members of the man’s posse, it was unlikely anyone would chastise him for breaking protocol.

As he got closer to the front, he spotted the professor talking to a very refined-looking patient in an opulent room.

“Dr. Goldran!” said the patient. “I twisted my ankle yesterday. The pain’s been so intense...”

The professor hummed thoughtfully. “This would appear to be a ligament injury. A sprain,” he explained as he placed his right hand over the affected area. “For an injury like this, we’ll need three healers.”

From a distance, Zenos watched as three young healers moved to the professor’s side. He touched each of them with his left hand, then began chanting something.

*What the...?*

Goldran’s hand glowed white, and the patient’s expression visibly brightened. “The pain has eased! Thank you so much!” The refined-looking patient’s hands clasped together in gratitude, as if praying to a deity.

Zenos tilted his head, then made his way back to the end of the line. Cress walked up to him, annoyed. “You can’t just do as you please!” he snapped.

“Right, sorry. But, uh, what’s with the way he heals people?” Zenos asked.

Cress shrugged with an exasperated look. “Dude, everyone knows about that. Professor Goldran’s specialty is transference healing.”

“Trans-what now?”

“Transference! Look, I don’t know the details either, but it’s some kind of magic that transfers life force, or...something, from one person to another.”

“Huh.”

“It’s groundbreaking stuff. With it, even if you don’t have much magic power, you can heal very effectively.”

*Right. Becker did mention that Professor Goldran’s own magic powers aren’t all that.*

Cress explained it thusly: say you had an injured person. Through transference healing, you could take another person’s life force and pass it on to the injured

one, enhancing its healing capabilities in the process. Naturally, the more severe the injury, the more life force was required for treatment, making it difficult for a single person to provide it all. In those cases, a number of healthy individuals would supply their life force so that only a small amount needed to be taken from each of them to transfer to the patient. Thus, the patient was saved, and each donor only experienced a bit of fatigue.

“Fascinating,” Zenos mused. “So the more people you have, the more you can heal.”

“There are various limitations, like the donor’s aptitude and energy decay, but broadly speaking, yeah,” Cress confirmed.

“Is that why he wants to add all these people to his team?”

“Part of it, but there’s another reason too.” Cress went on to explain that it had to do with the upcoming election for the next director of the Royal Institute. “The current director, Shalbart, is pretty old, y’know? Word has it he’s retiring soon, so the professor wants to secure votes from powerful people for the election. And if nothing changes, he’s almost guaranteed to win.” Cress chuckled. “The fastest way to a promotion is to bet on the winning horse—”

“Hmm...”

“Wait. Don’t tell me you don’t know who Director Shalbart is?”

“I mean, I was abroad until recently.” Which was the cover story, yes, but compared to this place, the ruined city may as well have been a foreign country.

Cress told Zenos that the current director had once been an adventurer who’d reached Black Class and attained nobility after retirement, eventually taking the position of director of the Royal Institute of Healing. “Got it, birdbrain?”

“Yeah. Thanks for explaining all that. You’re nicer than you seem.”

“D-Don’t be stupid. I just want to use you, that’s all.”

“While we’re at it, do you know anything about a guy named Afred?”

“Afred?”

Zenos had finally found his way to the site of the disappearance, and he figured it was best to gather as much information as he could. Admittedly,

being in the middle of the Royal Institute made him uneasy, but with the leverage Becker had over him thanks to his illegal clinic, he had to at least do the bare minimum that'd been asked of him. He might've been able to escape, had he really tried to, but then he wouldn't be able to ask Becker about his mentor.

"Yeah," Cress replied, looking disgruntled. "The guy came from Becker's lab. Goldran had high hopes for him, but he just up and vanished one day. Grinds my gears."

"You got any idea where he went?"

"Beats me."

"Did something happen before he vanished?"

"Hells if I know. Dude even got an invitation for a dinner party, then he goes and vanishes immediately after. Way to bite the hand that fed him, the prick."

"Dinner party?"

"Yeah, the professor throws those sometimes. He only invites his favorites, and an invitation pretty much guarantees a future leadership position, y'know. Ugh, I'm so jealous..."

"You really just speak your mind all the time, don't you?" Zenos remarked. Cress seemed to be a man who just *really* felt the need to put his feelings into words. Regardless, this dinner party was clearly a key point of interest. Looking at the long line following the professor, Zenos let out a small sigh.

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"I see. A dinner party at Goldran's..." Becker mused at Zenos's report, nodding slowly. Navigating around the usual clutter of books and experimental equipment piled high, the doctor moved closer to Zenos and handed him a cup of tea. "I've heard stories about those. Afred is an excellent healer, so it makes sense he'd have been invited." He gave Zenos a small nod as he returned to his seat. "This is valuable information. Thank you, Zenos."

"Is it?" the dark-haired healer said. "Then my job here's done, right?"

Becker chuckled. "Of course not. You found us a lead, yes, but we're still

nowhere near the heart of the matter.”

“Figures...”

After the professor had finished his rounds, Zenos had spoken to a few people who’d seemingly attended the dinner party, with no conclusive results. The guests had been leisurely relaxing in the professor’s vast estate, so no one had paid much attention to Afred’s whereabouts.

“Looks like we have no choice, Zenos,” Becker said. “You’ll just have to become one of his favorites and get in one of his dinner parties before your special training period concludes.”

“Uhh...”

“If you can do that, I’ll add a nice bonus to your pay. And, of course, my promise to keep out of your illegal healing practice stands.” Becker’s words were likely to be true—he’d been facilitating Zenos’s entry into the Royal Institute under a false identity at great personal risk to himself, after all.

“I mean, you can tell me to ‘become’ his favorite all you want, but actually doing it is kind of...”

“You’ll be fine, Zenos.”

“Oh, yeah. *Juuust* peachy.”

“Have you no confidence?”

The question caught Zenos off guard and he fell silent for a moment. *Did* he have confidence? Before coming here, he’d thought he would’ve been a complete flop at the Royal Institute, but now he was starting to feel he wasn’t that incompetent. “Honestly, I’m not sure,” he said finally. “Here we have people like you, making miracle cures, but then we also have people losing their minds over a few dozen zombies.”

“A few dozen zombies, he says,” Becker echoed with an amused chuckle before standing up. “This place certainly does have *interesting* people, it’s true. But those people mostly do their own thing, so you won’t run into them all that often.”

Zenos shrugged with a sigh. “I’m worried about the clinic too. I wanna go back



as soon as I can,” he admitted. “Also, once this job’s done, you’re telling me all about my mentor.”

“Of course. I’ll tell you all I know, and—ack! Whoa!” Becker had accidentally bumped his hip against the desk as he stood up, and a stack of coins that had been carelessly left near the edge scattered across the floor. “Oh dear. What a mess.” He bent down to pick them up, then glanced at Zenos. “Say, Zenos, I’ve been wondering...why did you become a healer?”

The shadow healer hummed thoughtfully. “My mentor had a pretty big hand in it, I guess. And well, it’s about all I can do, really. What about you?”

“Me? Well, it’s rather trite, really, but I wanted to make the world a little better with medicine, since I had no talent for healing magic.” And indeed, Becker was known for having developed several drugs to treat infectious diseases. The man was eccentric as hell, but his achievements were undeniable.

“Healing magic only works on people right in front of you, but medication can travel far,” Zenos remarked. “I think that’s pretty impressive.”

Becker laughed. “Well, that’s high praise coming from you! Still, there are limits to what I can do.” This was also true. While many illnesses could now be treated, many more were still considered incurable. Becker stopped collecting the coins and straightened up. “I have one more question for you, Zenos.”

“What is it?”

“There are a lot of coins scattered across the floor right now.”

“Yes. I have eyes.”

“I would like to continue collecting them, but unfortunately, I have my research, and meetings, and all sorts of things keeping me busy and just don’t have the time.”

“And?”

“If you were in my shoes, which coins would you pick up?”

Zenos furrowed his brow in confused silence and looked down at the floor. Among the coins were both rough coppers and shiny silvers, and...was that a gold coin gleaming from behind a stack of books?

Becker had asked him which coins to pick up, given his limited time. What was he trying to get at? Zenos glanced over to the doctor who still had a placid smile on his face. “Zenos, do you think all lives are worth the same?”

A brief silence fell upon the room, broken by the sound of the door opening.

“Dr. Becker, are you there?” Umin entered the room, looking between Becker and Zenos in confusion. “Oh, Mr. Zenos is here too. Am I interrupting?”

Becker, now sitting in his usual chair once more, replied, “No, we were just having a casual chat. Did you need something?”

“The office staff said you were late for a meeting.”

“Oh. Right, that. I’ll be going to the meeting now, which...is...somewhere, I’m sure.”

“Really, doctor?” Umin said in disbelief. “I’ll take you there.”

“Thank you, as always.” On his way out, Becker gave Zenos a wink. “Now then, I look forward to seeing what you can do. Good luck getting into Professor Goldran’s good graces.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

The door closed slowly, and the room fell silent once more. Sipping his tea, Zenos stared at the coins still strewn across the floor.

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Upon arriving at the research building, Zenos found Cress waiting for him. “You’re late, special trainee,” the brown-haired healer grouched, his arms crossed. “Were you dragging your feet or what?”

“Pretty sure it’s not time yet,” Zenos pointed out.

“You’re the lowest-ranking member! You’re supposed to be here before me!”

“Oh. So, what am I supposed to do, exactly?” Zenos asked, scratching his head. His duties as a member of Goldran’s lab were set to begin in the afternoon, but he wasn’t sure what that entailed.

Cress snickered. “I will allow you the honor of helping me with my work,” he declared, smirking triumphantly.

*What kind of work could it be? I mean, it's the Royal Institute of Healing, so...healing? Or maybe research assistance?*

As Zenos pondered this, Cress confidently continued. "And that is to take care of the professor's beloved dog!"

"A *dog*?" Zenos echoed, incredulous.

The two healers then went on to take the professor's canine companion to the Institute's spacious grounds.

"I said I'd let you help, but you're actually just gonna watch," Cress said. "This is *my* honor and privilege."

"Uh, okay."

Professor Goldran's dog, named Milk, had long, beautiful silver fur and exuded an air of nobility. Holding its leash, Cress proudly walked it across the lush green grounds.

"Say," Zenos spoke up, "this isn't *all* you do in the lab, right?"

"What are you talking about? Of course not," Cress said.

"Good to know."

"I don't just take her for walks. I also feed Lady Milk, bathe her, groom her fur, and much more."

"Uh, that's not exactly what I—"

Cress snickered. "Don't be jealous, now. I know my position is enviable."

"No, it's just...don't you have anything more important to do?"

"What do you mean? This is a massive responsibility, entrusted to me because I'm just *that* capable."

How optimistic.

Cress kept talking, his tone triumphant. "Listen. The professor adores Lady Milk. The fact he entrusts me with her care shows how much faith he has in me."

"It does?"

“Of course it does. Anyway, the professor has received a summons from the seven great noble houses today. Dining with such highly influential nobility is something to aspire to, don’t you think?” Cress looked up at the blue sky, his voice tinged with envy. “And if I stay on this path to success, it won’t be long before I’m invited to those gatherings, myself.”

“You want to climb the social ladder?”

“What? Duh! I want to be important, join the upper class, enjoy the good food and women, and bark orders at the plebs. That’s why I work so hard as a healer.”

“Oh? Because I thought, you know, healers were supposed to heal people.”

Cress froze in his tracks. After a brief silence, he glowered at Zenos. “Hah! Idealistic nonsense. Sure, maybe back in the day I cared about saving lives and finding cures for things, but it’s not like healing magic is omnipotent. There are limits to what it can and can’t do. It’s all about money and power at the end of the day.”

“Huh...”

“Wh-What’s with that look?” Cress asked. He was about to say something else when a voice called out to him from behind.

“Hey, Cress. Still hard at work looking after Goldran’s dog, huh?”

“Oh, Mr. Bonds! Yes, I am!”

A middle-aged man with slightly reddened cheeks and coarse stubble approached them, sporting a rough demeanor and a bottle of liquor in his right hand. He glared at the professor’s dog. “Damn fleabag, acting all high and mighty. Stupid mutt.”

“Mr. Bonds, if the professor hears you say that—”

The man scoffed. “It’s always about appearances with you people,” he grumbled as he walked off.

“Who was that?” Zenos asked.

“That was Professor Goldran’s first secretary,” Cress explained.

“His first secretary? *That* guy?”

“Crazy, right?” Cress frowned as he continued to bad-mouth the man. “Apparently he and the professor go way back. The guy doesn’t work much, just drinks all day. I get that they’re old friends, but I don’t see why *he* gets to be first secretary.”

From a distance, the first secretary spoke up again. “Hey! Cress!”

“Sir!” the brown-haired healer replied in a hurry, turning around with a smile. It was almost commendable how quickly he could put on a mask. “How may I help you?!”

“Here. I’m giving you this booze.”

“Huh? Whoa!”

The first secretary threw the bottle he’d been holding. It arced through the air, landing near the professor’s dog with a loud crash, shattering into pieces. The dog whimpered, and a startled Cress let go of the leash.

“O-Oh no! Lady Milk!” As the first secretary laughed loudly in the background, Cress chased after the fleeing dog, running across the grounds and through the Institute’s massive hall.

And then, a high-pitched yelp echoed through the air.

“M-Milk! Miiilk!”

“What happened?” Zenos asked as he caught up. He saw Cress on his knees in front of the entrance hall, holding the professor’s limp, bloodied dog in his arms. A carriage was parked nearby. “Wait. Did the carriage hit her?”

“Th-That was the dog’s own fault! It jumped out all of a sudden!” the coachman attempted to explain. Cress just stood there in shock.

Zenos placed a hand on the brown-haired healer’s shoulder. “Hey. She’s still breathing. Heal her, quick. You’re her caretaker, right?”

“Y-Yeah.” Cress’s cheeks were pale as he held his hands over the dog and chanted, “*Hi-Cure.*” A faint light enveloped the animal’s body, and the bleeding gradually slowed. Cress’s voice, however, was still filled with panic. “I-It’s no use!”

“What? Isn’t stopping the bleeding enough to save her?”

“That’s not what I’m worried about! She’s scarred!” The dog’s skin had indeed closed up, but because of the severity of the wound, a faint, misshapen scar remained. Her long silver fur was torn away in places, exposing patches of skin. “The professor loved her beautiful coat! If he sees this...” He trailed off, slumping onto the cobblestone. “It’s over... All that grunt work, wasted... I’m finished...”

After a moment’s silence, Zenos held out a hand over the dog. “*Cure.*”

“Hey! Special trainee! What are you doing?”

“Casting a healing spell, as you can see.”

“You’re wasting your time. You may be strong enough to take down a zombie king, but there’s no way your magic can reconstruct skin flawless...lyyy?!” With a shriek, Cress inspected Milk all over, multiple times. “Sh-She’s perfect! There’s no scar! Even the fur’s grown back... H-How the hells...”

“Isn’t that what Cure is supposed to do?”

Cress stared at Zenos in dumbfounded silence.

“Also, I took care of her cracked ribs while I was at it. You could continue walking her, but it’s probably best to let her rest for today, just in case,” Zenos said, picking up the dog and heading back toward the entrance hall.

As Milk whimpered sweetly, Cress continued to stare at the other man in utter amazement. “What do you mean, Cure is ‘supposed to do’ that? Guy just says whatever he wants like he’s a damn elite healer...” he muttered in a raspy voice before standing up and running after Zenos. “Wait! Special trainee! Taking care of Lady Milk is *my* job!”

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As evening fell, Goldran returned to his office at the Royal Institute of Healing.

His second secretary turned sharply to greet him. “Welcome back, professor. How was your dinner with Lord Fennel?”

“Well...” Goldran sank into his chair, letting out a long sigh. He owed much to Lord Fennel, a moderate and member of one of the seven great noble families.

Saying the professor had attained his position by riding the coattails of this illustrious noble would've been no exaggeration.

The second secretary leaned in, concerned. "You seem unwell. Was there a problem?"

"What, you think I caused trouble at the dinner with Lord Fennel?"

"N-No! My apologies," the secretary blurted out, bowing his head deeply before leaving the room.

*He's brilliant, but doesn't always know his place, Goldran mused. Certainly better than my first secretary, though. That man starts drinking at noon...*

The professor frowned, nervously tapping the edge of his desk. He'd been invited to dine with Lord Fennel today—an infrequent occurrence. It'd been convenient for him, since he'd been hoping to secure the man's support in the upcoming election for director of the Institute, but the nobleman had asked him a favor over dinner.

*"I would like you to examine my daughter."*

About a week ago, the girl had developed a rash on her cheek. It'd been assumed that the rash would heal on its own, but instead, it'd been slowly spreading. Lord Fennel had somehow convinced his daughter—who typically refused to show her face to anyone—to have it examined.

Goldran's diagnosis: hag tumor. It was a benign tumor that stopped growing once it reached a certain size; while not life-threatening, the tumor resembled an ugly old woman in appearance, hence the name. At the moment, it was about as big as a fingertip, but generally it grew to the size of a fist.

After the examination, Goldran had informed Lord Fennel of the diagnosis, which had greatly distressed the nobleman—notorious among his fellows for doting on his daughter.

The tumor could've been removed with surgery, but by the time it was visible on the surface of the skin, it was already widespread and deeply rooted underneath, requiring extensive tissue removal; facial scars were inevitable.

*"Professor, is there nothing you can do? You've done much for me before. I'm*

*sure you can handle this.”*

Goldran couldn't simply turn down a plea from one of the seven great noble families, especially when he desperately needed Fennel's support in the upcoming election. *“I will make the necessary preparations and return shortly,”* Goldran had promised before leaving Fennel's estate.

But he had no concrete plan.

If done immediately after tumor excision, transferring life force from others into the patient via magic would've greatly aided skin regeneration. Fennel's daughter, however, adamantly refused to allow her face to be seen by many people at once; Goldran had been informed that he'd be allowed one, maybe two assistants during surgery.

While he could've petitioned an elite healer for help, many of them were traveling or wandering and therefore difficult to reach. Not only that, he wasn't willing to let anyone else in on the glory. He had, after all, worked very hard to build the largest faction within the Royal Institute of Healing. Having a nobleman be even more in his debt would surely secure his position as the next director—and as director, he would have the right to become a noble.

“Is there no one I can ask?” he mused aloud. His team had capable members, yes, but even the slightest amount of scarring on the girl's face would've spelled a permanent end to Lord Fennel's support. He had to be careful when selecting his personnel. *Someone who can heal without leaving any scars...*

With a sigh, Goldran stood up. When at a loss like this, seeing his beloved dog always helped.

As he stepped out into the corridor, his red-faced first secretary walked past. Goldran had employed the man because the two were old acquaintances, but Bonds's behavior was becoming increasingly less tolerable.

Suddenly, the secretary spoke up. “Oh yeah. Your dog got hit by a carriage or something.”

“What?!” Goldran's eyes widened, and he grabbed the first secretary by the collar. “Did *you* do this?! It's about time I put you in your place—”

“Wasn't me,” the man protested. “That's slander, y'know. Anyway, the dog's



caretaker treated her on the spot, so she's fine."

Goldran cast a silent glare at Bonds before rushing to his beloved dog's kennel. He hurriedly checked on Milk, but found no signs of an accident. Though at first he suspected Bonds had tricked him, upon consulting another secretary, he'd gotten confirmation that the accident had, indeed, happened. In fact, there'd been witnesses who'd reported seeing Milk covered in blood at the scene. No matter how thoroughly he inspected his dog, however, he saw no trace of any wounds.

If the accident had in fact occurred, this meant Milk had been perfectly healed. Kneeling beside the dog, Goldran murmured, "Someone who can heal without leaving any scars..." Slowly, he stood up, then turned to his nearby secretaries. In a low voice, he commanded, "Bring me Milk's caretaker."

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As the sun set, the western skies slowly turned from crimson to a pale inky blue. Having finished his training for the day, Zenos was on his way back to the dorms when he spotted a familiar figure standing at the entrance to the building. She was clad in the white coat of the Royal Institute and sporting glasses; her blue hair was swaying gently in the evening breeze. "Is something up, Umin?" Zenos asked.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Zenos—I mean, Mr. Xeno," Umin quickly corrected herself. She gave a small nod, then looked around. "Um...would you mind terribly going for a walk?"

"A walk?" Zenos echoed, stepping after Umin.

They followed along a grassy path to the wistful cries of birds in the distance. The Institute's grounds were vast; though Zenos had arrived around two weeks ago, he'd explored less than a tenth of them. The dark-haired healer followed her up a small hill, and as they emerged from the trees, the view suddenly opened up.

"Is something here?" he asked.

"Oh! Not really. I just like the view here."

Zenos gazed silently ahead. The Royal Institute of Healing was located in the

administrative ward of the special nobles' district. The sight of the gently rolling hills and the windows of the grand buildings as they began to light up was indeed beautiful—a stark contrast to the decaying buildings of the slums.

He scratched his cheek, turning his gaze to Umin. “So, is there something you wanna talk to me about?”

“Um, well...” she mumbled for a moment before lifting her face. “It’s just... I’m sorry.”

Zenos gave her a silent, puzzled look.

“Oh, I mean, it’s... I forced you into our internal affairs despite being unable to do anything myself. I’ve been feeling increasingly guilty over it...” Her shoulders drooped. “I keep thinking that if only I were stronger, I could’ve caught Professor Goldran’s attention and we wouldn’t have needed to bother you. I’m really sorry.”

“You wanted to go on a walk just to say that?”

“Um, yes. I know apologies aren’t worth anything coming from me, but...”

“Well, Becker’s paying me a suitable amount for my troubles, so relax. Don’t take it too hard or anything.” He had, in fact, received a substantial advance payment.

“Perhaps so, but...”

“Besides, without this opportunity, I would never have stepped foot into the Royal Institute or found any leads about my mentor. So it’s been beneficial for me too. And I owe Becker for the medicine that saved the slums during the red lung epidemic. So really, don’t sweat it.”

“I really am sorry to be so reliant on you, though,” she insisted, bowing her head apologetically. “If there’s anything I can do for you, please, tell me.”

Umin seemed to be a serious, conscientious young woman. In fact, she was one of the few women around Zenos with any common sense at all. Seemingly struck by a thought, she suddenly asked, “I’ve been wondering... What kind of person was your mentor, Mr. Xeno?”

“You know, I’m actually not sure. He was dodgy, but he taught me to read,

told me about the outside world, stuff about diseases, injuries, magic...a whole lot, really. I'm indebted to him in many ways."

"That sounds like my relationship with Dr. Becker."

"You owe him a debt of gratitude?"

Umin nodded firmly. "When I decided to become a healer, it was Dr. Becker who took care of me. Or, well, ever since his lover ran away due to his obsession with research, it's more like I'm the one taking care of him, but..."

"Why did Becker do that for you?"

"Oh, did I not tell you? Dr. Becker is my mother's younger brother. My uncle."

"Huh..."

Umin sighed, lowering her gaze. "But I'm not great at magic or research, and I've been of no help in the search for Mr. Alfred either... I haven't been able to repay him at all."

"Speaking of which, what are you researching?"

"Umm, simply put, medication handling practices. Like what temperature and humidity are best for storage and such. Mundane, right?"

"Mundane, yeah."

"Oh..."

"Important things are often mundane, though."

"Mr. Xeno..."

"Well, so said my mentor, anyway."

Umin looked up, her lips curling into a small smile. "I brought you here to apologize, and instead here you are, cheering me up. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes you just have to rely on others. I depend on people around me all the time in my everyday life. By myself, I'd hardly be able to get up in the morning."

Umin let out a small chuckle. "You're an interesting person, Mr. Xeno."

"Hee hee hee," came a whisper from nowhere. "Another candidate for a

bride...”

“Huh?” Umin mumbled. “What?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zenos told her. “We’ve been followed.”

“We have? By who?”

“A surprisingly bland finale, however. One star.”

“Stop leaving reviews, you damn wraith!” Zenos snapped.

“Wraith?!” Umin exclaimed. “Where?! Where is it?!”

“Oh, it’s fine. My bad. Forget I said anything,” he assured her, taking a deep breath. It was time to head back, he decided.

Having been around relatively sensible people as of late, Zenos had almost forgotten he was normally surrounded by completely outrageous figures.

Upon his return to the dorms, the dark-haired healer encountered yet another familiar figure—this one a man, his brown hair curling at the tips. It was Cress, caretaker of Professor Goldran’s beloved dog.

Having spotted Zenos, the dog sitter sprinted toward him at full speed. “Special trainee! Bro! My man!”

“What?” *Did he just call me “bro”? “My man”?*

Cress skidded to a halt in front of Zenos and bent down, placing both hands on the ground. “P-Please! You’ve gotta save meeeeeeeee!”

“Uh... What are you talking about?”

“The professor summoned me for some serious shit! It’s bad! Help me, please!” Cress cried out in anguish.

Just moments ago, Zenos had told Umin that it was okay to rely on others. Now Cress, having abandoned all pride and desperately begging for help, seemed admirable somehow.

“The plot thickens. Three stars.”

“Keep your scoring to yourself, bystander!” Zenos grumbled.

Still, from Cress’s unusual behavior, the shadow healer could sense something

major was about to unfold.

## Chapter 6: The Great Noble's Daughter

"I've been asked to treat the daughter of one of the seven great nobles," Cress lamented, looking like he was about to cry as he explained the situation to Zenos in the shadow healer's dorm room. "You've heard of hag tumors, right? Well, apparently Lord Fennel's daughter has one. Don't tell anyone!"

*And yet here you are, telling me the first chance you get,* Zenos mused. *But never mind that.* "Hag tumors are benign, so it's not like it'll kill her to just leave it."

"Yeah, I know *that!* But this is the daughter of a great noble! People in high society socialize a ton. She can't show her face to people with that thing there."

"Surgery, then."

"Like it's that simple! Hag tumors burrow deep and wide. If even just a fraction of it remains, it'll just grow back. And the surgery leaves awful scars, to the point that some textbooks say to just not bother treating them."

"And scarring would be a problem?"

"Obviously! This is *the daughter of a great noble!* If I leave so much as a tiny scar, I'm done for!"

"So...don't leave any scars."

"Dude, talking to you is making me question my damn sanity. Normal healers have a hard time not leaving scars, okay?!"

"Huh..."

Umin, who'd ended up tagging along, spoke up in shock. "Wait, but why would *you* be entrusted with something so important, Cress?"

Cress fiddled with his wavy bangs as he answered proudly, "Well, see, Professor Goldran has finally recognized how truly talented I am!"

She stared at him in silence.

“Fine! I lied, okay? Don’t look at me like that! We’re peers!” he said in a whiny voice, his face practically a revolving door of expressions at this point. Just how unstable were his emotions?

Cress went on to explain that the professor had requested his help after hearing about the incident with his beloved dog.

“And that was Mr. Xeno’s doing, not yours, right?” Umin asked, glaring at her colleague.

“Y-Yeah,” Cress admitted, ashamed. “It was...”

“Hmph. So you’re taking credit, just like you did with the zombie king.”

“N-No! I told the second secretary about the zombie thing! I said it was the special trainee who did it!”

Apparently, however, that information hadn’t been correctly conveyed to Goldran. The second secretary had told the professor the zombie king had been taken down by both Zenos *and* Cress, to save his own face. It’d been that secretary who’d referred the two to Goldran, so reporting that they’d both done something would’ve reflected better on him than being honest and saying Cress hadn’t done anything.

“Then you should explain it to the professor yourself,” Umin retorted. “Tell him how incompetent you are.”

“Hey! Why am I the only one of our peers you treat like this?” Cress protested. “I’m not incompetent! Also, I can’t just tell him now! The second secretary would have my hide!” Cress rubbed his face and both hands on the table. “So please, I’m begging you! I have permission to bring another person! Help me, brooo!”

“I’m not your bro,” Zenos deadpanned, exasperated.

“Welcome! I brought tea,” said Lily as she walked in from the back holding a tray with teacups. Carmilla, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Cress lifted his head and looked at the young girl, puzzled. “Uh, who’s this?”

“This is Mr. Xeno’s little sister,” Umin explained, aware that this was the pretext under which Lily was allowed to live in the dorms with Zenos.

Playing the part, Lily—whose earmuffs concealed the fact she was an elf—nodded. “My brother takes care of me.”

“Huh,” Cress mused. “I didn’t know you had such a cute sister, special trainee.”

“C-Cute...” Lily echoed, gripping the tray as she stared intently at the brown-haired healer. “But I’m saving myself for my brother, so flattery will get you nowhere, Cress!”

“What’s with the attitude all of a sudden? Also, aren’t you guys siblings? This is weird.”

“Don’t get any ideas!” Zenos blurted out in a panic, waving his hands.

Cress rubbed his nose for a moment, then extended a hand to Lily with a grin. “Well, my bro’s sister is my sister too. Nice to meet you, sis.”

“Don’t get any ideas about *that* either,” Zenos snapped.

“I don’t want a brother like you,” Lily said huffily.

“Oh. *Ouch*. Bro, say something...” Cress whined.

“I keep saying I’m not your bro!”

A voice came from the back, saying between chuckles, “Aww, you have a little brother now! How lovely.”

Zenos decided to ignore that.

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Soon the day of the treatment was upon them, hardly affording them any time to prepare mentally.

“Whooooa,” Cress muttered in amazement. “This thing’s amaaazing...” He and Zenos were sitting side by side, riding a four-wheeled magical vehicle powered by a special type of manastone specifically designed for vehicular motion. It was an incredibly expensive item, owned only by a select few nobles of the highest caliber, Cress explained, whispering in Zenos’s ear. “The kind of money this thing costs would be enough for someone to live their entire life without working a day.”



“Huh. That’s impressive.” Of course, it was Zenos’s first time riding one too. The owner, Lord Fennel, one of the seven great nobles, had sent his butler to the Royal Institute of Healing to pick the two of them up.

Out the window, the scenery was filled with luxurious, magnificent buildings as the vehicle approached the heart of the nobles’ special district. “I’ve never been to a place like this before. Just looking at these mansions makes me dizzy,” Cress said dreamily as he looked out the glass. “When I climb the social ladder, I’m gonna come live here too. Right, bro?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m *not* your bro?” Zenos snapped.

“Aw, come ooon,” Cress whined. “We made a brotherhood pledge and everything.”

“I have no memory of that whatsoever.”

“Hey! Pipe down!” snapped Professor Goldran from his seat at the front, next to the driver. Touching his beard nervously, he glared over his shoulder at the two younger healers. “Listen here, both of you. You know the consequences of bringing a single iota of dishonor to my name, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Cress yelped, shrinking in his seat as his face twitched.

Goldran seemed slightly unsettled—quite unusual for the usually composed vice director of the Royal Institute. According to Cress, this operation was critical for the professor’s career. If he was to become the next director of the Institute, he needed to fulfill two conditions: one, he needed to secure the highest number of votes among all candidates in the internal election. Two, he needed to be approved by the advisory committee.

The first condition was practically fulfilled, but the problem lay with the second. Since the Royal Institute of Healing was a governmental institution, the final decision regarding appointing a new director was made by an advisory committee composed of individuals from the ruling class. While the number of votes a candidate obtained during the internal election greatly affected the outcome, it didn’t guarantee a win. There had, in fact, been past instances where someone without the highest vote count had been chosen.

While Lord Fennel wasn’t an official member of the advisory committee, if the

surgery on his daughter was successful, he would certainly hold sway over the committee's opinion of Goldran. Between that and the highest number of votes, the position would be practically secured.

"Failure is not an option," he muttered to himself. "Everything has led up to this..."

Though he'd originally asked Cress and Zenos to prove their abilities on a similar case of hag tumor, a call from Lord Fennel this morning urgently requesting their presence had forced them to skip that step, further adding to the professor's frustration.

Eventually, the vehicle crossed an enormous black gate. A while later, they finally arrived in front of the estate. "Oh man," Cress mumbled as the vastness of the estate knocked the excitement out of him. He paled, overwhelmed. "This is seriously insane."

The group was briefly searched at the entrance before being escorted by a butler to the reception room. A few moments later, a man walked in through the door. His graying hair and perfect posture exuded an aura of nobility. "Ah, professor. We've been expecting you."

Goldran immediately stood. "Lord Fennel. May I ask why the sudden summons?"

"Well, we've encountered a bit of a problem," the nobleman said, the ends of his eyebrows drooping as he took the seat across from the professor.

From behind Goldran, Zenos observed Lord Fennel's face. The other noble he'd encountered—the culprit in a child abduction case—had looked at him like one might look at a worm, but this man showed no such demeanor. Did his reputation as a moderate have anything to do with it? Or was his status simply so high that differences in social standing didn't concern him at all?

"You see, my daughter Charlotte is refusing the procedure." The nobleman sighed, looking troubled. "I briefly explained to her that the growth had to be cut out and removed, but she insists that she will not tolerate any scarring on her face and has locked herself in her chambers."

"I see," Goldran said.

“However, I have full faith that you, professor, can fully cure her without any scarring.” His demeanor was gentle, but Lord Fennel’s words carried a strange gravitas.

“Yes, of course,” Goldran replied quietly.

“Therefore, I would like you to convince my daughter.”

“I understand.” After a brief pause, the professor nodded.

Traversing a corridor laid with red carpet, the group moved to Charlotte’s chambers. Her father reached for the door, but it was locked from the inside and didn’t budge. With no other option, Lord Fennel called out from outside the door. “Charlotte, the professor is here.”

Silence.

“Come now, Charlotte. Won’t you trust the professor and undergo the procedure?”

More silence.

“The professor will take good care of you,” he insisted. “When has papa ever lied to you?”

Suddenly, an answer. “Papa, you promised me an emberfox fur scarf for my birthday, but never gave it to me.”

“Urk.” At a loss for words, Lord Fennel slumped his shoulders and switched places with the professor.

Goldran cleared his throat before speaking. “My lady. I am Goldran, from the Royal Institute of Healing. Could I persuade you to trust me and agree to the procedure?”

“No,” came her prickly reply.

“I’m afraid it won’t heal without surgery.”

“No one is bringing a blade anywhere near my face!” A strong aura of rejection emanated from behind the door. “Surely someone ordered you to disfigure my beautiful features.”

“That’s not—”

“House Giesz, no doubt!” she interrupted. “That vile witch is jealous of my beauty and plotting behind my back! I’m certain of this!” The girl seemed to be suffering from a severe case of paranoia.

Cress, standing behind Zenos, whispered quietly, “Hey, bro?”

“I’m not your bro,” Zenos whispered back. “What is it?”

“I just had the world’s greatest idea. See, my plan was to work my way up the ranks, but there might be an easier way.”

“All right. Let’s hear it.”

“I convince this lady here, treat her face perfectly, and make her fall for me. Then I marry her. Boom, I’m a noble. Flawless plan.”

“Uh, right. Hope that works out for you.”

Cress then bowed his head to Goldran. “Allow me to try,” he said, moving to stand in front of the door. “Umm, Lady Charlotte?”

“And who are *you*?”

“My name is Cress. I’m here as the professor’s assistant.”

“What? And a measly assistant *dares* speak to me? Who do you think I am? My ears are rotting from your prattle.”

At the barrage of high-pitched insults, Cress stammered, “M-My apologies,” then stepped back dejectedly, wiping away his tears and gritting his teeth. “You know what, bro? I’m just gonna make it on my own. Can’t trust women.”

“Well, that was quick.”

Flawless plan indeed.

Looking over at Goldran, Zenos noticed the man’s gaze fixed on him, as if asking whether the shadow healer planned on just standing there and watching. Letting out a small sigh, Zenos stood in front of the door, then knocked twice before speaking. “Uhh, can you hear me?”

“Another one? And who are *you*?”

“Assistant number two.”

“Like I said, a measly assistant—”

“So, about the surgery. If you don’t want it, you don’t need to have it.” The remark elicited a chorus of surprised gasps from all others present. “Anyone would be scared of having a blade brought to their face. That growth isn’t fatal, so if you don’t like the idea, there’s no need to force yourself to go through with it. It’s your decision.”

The girl was silent.

“Just, you know, if you leave it be, it’ll look like an old woman’s face on your cheek.”

A small shriek came from the other side of the door.

“Some people get used to it. Some grow attached, even. Some even nickname it.” As a child in the slums, Zenos had seen several people with hag tumors, some of them so lonely that they’d even come to appreciate their affliction. There were various ways to handle illness, especially when it wasn’t life-threatening. The patient’s wishes should take precedence. “Now then, I’ll be going.”

“Hey! You!” Goldran snapped, grabbing Zenos’s shoulder.

Right at that moment, the door slowly opened, and a girl with bright chestnut curls and fierce upturned eyes peered out. Holding her cheek as if to hide the growth, she glared at Zenos as he turned away. “W-Wait a moment!”

\*\*\*

“Wow,” Cress muttered in amazement as he stepped into the room of Lord Fennel’s only daughter, Charlotte.

A dainty, elegant chandelier hung above the marble flooring that was polished like a mirror. Large windows stretched from the door to the ceiling, offering a view of the vast, verdant gardens. A luxurious canopy bed dominated the center of the room, and the walls were decorated with images of the young lady dancing at what appeared to be balls.

“These are taken with a magic projection device,” Cress whispered to Zenos. “They cost an arm and a leg.”

Sitting haughtily on a sofa, Charlotte glared at them all, still holding her cheek with her right hand. Her bright chestnut curls and slightly upturned, fierce eyes hinted at her strength of will; she seemed to be sixteen, maybe seventeen years old. “So,” she began. “Is it true?”

“Is what true, Charlotte?” her father asked in a loving tone, attempting to appease her.

“That this growth will turn into an old woman’s face if left alone?”

Cress attempted to explain. “Yes, that is true. It’s called a hag tumor—”

Charlotte immediately cut him off. “You’re an assistant. Do not speak. Your breath will pollute my noble room.”

Cress made a noise as he bit his lip, then turned his teary eyes toward Zenos, as though that would help with anything.

Goldran cleared his throat and stepped forward. “It is true, my lady. It’s called a hag tumor, and left untreated, a growth resembling an old woman’s face will form on your cheek within about a month.”

Charlotte’s cheeks turned a shade paler. “Wh-What do I do?”

“The only way to remove it is through surgery.”

“I don’t want anyone cutting my skin.”

“But—”

“I said I don’t want my skin cut! I do not want pain! And I do not want this growth on my face!”

“What a spoiled girl,” Cress whispered quietly so only Zenos could hear.

Lord Fennel approached his daughter in an attempt to soothe her. “Charlotte, the tumor will only grow if left alone. Why not trust the professor and let him handle it?”

“And you don’t mind it if my face gets all scarred, papa?”

“Don’t worry. The professor will surely ensure no scars remain.” Lord Fennel placed great trust in Goldran, it seemed.

His daughter remained sullen. “I want a guarantee.”

“A guarantee?”

“That there will be absolutely no scarring! Otherwise, I refuse!” she snapped, standing up from the sofa and running to the balcony.

Lord Fennel held his forehead in distress. “Charlotte...”

Goldran looked at Zenos, jerking his chin toward the balcony as if ordering the younger healer to go fetch her.

Shrugging, Zenos opened the door leading to the balcony, feeling as though he were playing a game of tag with a child. The balcony was spacious, lined with several birdcages with various species of birds chirping inside. Charlotte, still holding her cheek, sat on a chair in front of the cages, hugging her knees with her left hand. “Do you like birds?” he asked.

Charlotte kept her gaze on the birdcages. “I told you not to speak to me! You’ll pollute the air around me with your breath.”

“This is a balcony. The air won’t stagnate.”

“Hmph! You have quite the mouth on you. Who do you think I—”

“One of them is injured, I see.” Startled, Charlotte looked at Zenos for the first time as he took a small bird out of its cage. “Its feathers are missing. Did a larger bird attack it?”

“I found it in the gardens yesterday. It can’t fly anymore.” Her voice dropped to a quiet whisper. “Like me,” she murmured before speaking clearly once more. “If an old woman’s face grows on my cheek, I won’t be able to wear dresses or dance at balls anymore. Why, no one will speak to me at all. Why do / of all people have to go through this...?”

Zenos looked at Charlotte quietly for a moment as she buried her face in her knees, then said, “Do you want your illness cured?”

“Don’t talk to me anymore! I may have answered you, but that’s no excuse for you to forget your place.”

“I’ll ask again. Do you want your illness cured?”

Charlotte lifted her face and glared at Zenos. “Of course I do! But I don’t want scars either! And I said not to talk to me! Who do you think I am?!”

“A patient.”

The noble girl blinked silently in surprise.

“You’re troubled. You want treatment. That makes you my patient,” Zenos continued. “I don’t care if you’re a royal or a noble or a commoner or poor.”

“What?!”

“I’m a healer. Treating my patients’ illnesses is my job.” He raised his right hand high, and the previously injured bird took flight from his palm.

Charlotte’s eyes widened in amazement. “Huh...?”

Zenos turned his gaze back to her. “This one took flight again. And you want to dance again, right?”

Staring silently at the bird disappearing into the sky, Charlotte clenched her fist. After a moment, she said, “I... I can...” She cast down her eyes hesitantly, her pale pink lips parting timidly. “I can...fly too?”

“If you want to, yeah.”

Charlotte silently followed Zenos back into the room, and Lord Fennel immediately rushed to his daughter’s side. “Charlotte! Have you decided?”

“I’ll do it,” she said quietly, casting a sharp gaze at all present. “But I won’t forgive any of you if there’s even a hint of a scar! My papa will throw you in the dungeons!”

Cress stood there, pale-faced. Beside him, Goldran cleared his throat softly and slowly nodded.





“Professor, I’m leaving my daughter in your capable hands.”

“I won’t let you down, Lord Fennel.” Goldran shook the nobleman’s hand firmly, then closed the door and approached his two assistants.

Charlotte’s room had been turned into an impromptu operating room for the operation on her hag tumor. A white cloth had been draped over a table at the center, on which lay the young noblewoman with her eyes closed, her breaths steady and even thanks to the healing potion she’d taken.

At the Royal Institute of Healing, putting patients to sleep so they wouldn’t be afraid was common practice. Commonly, this was done through magic circles with hypnotic and analgesic effects, but using medicine with similar properties was a convenient alternative. This one had apparently been Becker’s handiwork. Impressive.

After confirming that Charlotte was sound asleep, Goldran glared sharply at the two younger healers. “Now, you take care of this,” he said. “You’d best make sure it’s a success. You know the consequences of failure.”

“Y-Yesh, professor! L-Leave it to ush!” fumbled a pale-faced Cress as he stood at attention, straightening his back. He then turned to Zenos and whispered quietly, his molars chattering with tension and fear. “Wh-What now, bro...?”

“I’ll perform the surgery,” Zenos replied.

“H-Have you done it before?”

“Yeah. I was a kid, though.” He’d performed surgery on hag tumors under his mentor’s guidance back in the slums.

“What? You were a *kid*?”

“Oh, never mind that. Either way, I have experience, so I’ll manage.”

Smiling brightly, Cress clasped Zenos’s hand. “You’re such a bro, bro!”

“I keep telling you I’m not your ‘bro,’” Zenos said, moving to stand beside Cress.

“Hey. Wait. What are you doing?” Goldran asked sharply as he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

“What do you mean?” Zenos replied. “I’m going to perform the surgery.”

“*You’re* doing no such thing,” Goldran retorted, pointing a finger at Cress. “It was you who healed Milk, yes? Her caretaker? You’ll be the surgeon. The one in the black mask can be your assistant.”

Cress faltered. “Wait, no, that’s—”

“What?”

“N-Nothing... Nothing,” Cress mumbled, shaking his head weakly. Goldran’s second secretary had alleged that it’d been Cress who’d healed the dog, so he couldn’t contradict the man now.

“Then begin at once.”

“Y-Yes, Professor...” Downcast, Cress changed into the surgical gown he’d brought, then took the scalpel into his trembling fingers, trying to hold back whimpers.

Zenos stood on the other side of the makeshift operating table. “With a shaky hand like that, you’ll just cut her more than you need to,” he warned.

“I-I know that!”

“I mean, it’s fine. It’s not that hard of a procedure anyway.”

“According to the textbooks, it’s ranked A+ in terms of difficulty...”

Even a fraction of the tumor being overlooked could cause it to recur with a vengeance. Excising too much tissue, however, left too large of a wound and could result in unnecessary nerve damage. Since the surgery wasn’t performed often in the first place, very few surgeons had experience with such a procedure.

Cress hummed softly, looking at the tumor. Goldran snapped impatiently, “Hey! What are you mumbling about?!”

The brown-haired healer flinched. “N-Nothing! I’m very sorry!” Cautiously, he brought the blade closer to the fingertip-sized growth on Charlotte’s cheek. “Let’s see...usually hag tumors take root at the three, seven, and ten o’clock positions...”

“Wait,” Zenos said. “*Diagnosis.*” A white light emanated from the black-haired healer’s fingertips and passed over Charlotte’s face.

“Bro, what was that?”

“I was checking her condition internally. How tumors present varies from person to person, so it’s best not to be too caught up in general theory. This girl’s tumor has roots at two, six, nine, and ten o’clock.”

“You can tell?”

“How are you supposed to perform surgery otherwise?” Zenos held out both hands over Charlotte. “I’ll whisper directions to you to minimize the scarring. Just follow them.”

“Bro...” Cress murmured. “Okay.” He nodded, then cut into the girl’s skin, exposing the black roots of the hag tumor underneath.

As he instructed his fellow healer, Zenos coated the local nerves and blood vessels with protective magic to reduce pain and bleeding, making fine adjustments to the output and range of the magic in accordance with the blade’s movements. For areas that needed extra care, he subtly conjured a small magical scalpel at his fingertips so he could assist. They took their time and removed the tumor’s roots one by one, keeping the wound clean and minutely healing it with magic.

Peering over Charlotte’s head, Goldran spoke up with a satisfied smile. “Hmm. You’re quite skilled, dog sitter.”

Cress’s hand came to an abrupt stop. “This is...”

“What’s up?” Zenos asked.

“The roots are entwined with the nerve...” The last root was extensively entangled with the nerve responsible for controlling facial movements, like knotted thread. It would be very difficult to remove the tumor without affecting the nerve. “We’ll have to cut the nerve in order to fully excise the tumor...”

“Wait,” Goldran said, stopping Cress. “Doing that will alter her features. Nerves are much more difficult to repair than skin, and facial nerves are especially complex and delicate. Surely you know that.”

“B-But if we leave part of the tumor, it’ll recur,” Cress pointed out timidly as the professor silently furrowed his brows. “Could we close the wound for now and try to convince them to allow us to operate at the Royal Institute?”

“You think we can do that at this point?” Goldran retorted sharply. “Leaving part of a hag tumor alone and closing the wound will make it take root deeper and cause it to tangle with the nerve even more. It’ll be untreatable.”

“Th-Then what should we do, Professor?”

Goldran gritted his teeth in silence, the wrinkle between his brows deepening either out of anger at the situation or something else entirely. He took a deep breath, then said, “We don’t have a choice. Cut it.”

“A-Are you certain?”

“Leaving a partial tumor only to have it recur would severely damage my reputation, without a doubt. Removing the tumor completely is our priority.”

“B-But her appearance will change a bit...”

“This might affect my chances in the election, but leaving part of the tumor inside will only result in her being unable to show her face in public anymore. We have no choice but to minimize the amount of damage. Damn it, what a terrible hand I’ve been dealt.”

Cress tilted his head in confusion as Goldran stepped closer, took his hand, severed the nerve, and extracted the tumor. Immediately after, the professor shouted, “You absolute fool! What have you done?!”

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Professor?!” called out Lord Fennel from the other side of the door, where he’d been waiting.

“One of my foolish assistants disobeyed my orders and severed a nerve!” he told the nobleman. “I *told* you not to do that!”

Cress blinked several times. “H-Huh...?”

Lord Fennel didn’t seem to fully grasp the situation, but he could tell something was amiss. His anxious voice echoed from behind the door. “I-Is that going to pose a problem?”

“It’s a major problem,” Goldran confirmed. “Because of this assistant’s reckless actions—”

“Th-Th-That, That’s...” Cress stammered, looking like he might faint at any moment.

“It’s *your* fault, dog sitter! Now we have no choice but to take her to the Royal Institute of Healing tomorrow and perform surgery to repair the nerve with my transference healing magic. It won’t be completely healed, but it’ll be better than it is right now.”

“P-Professor...” Cress’s lips were trembling. In other words, he was taking the fall while Goldran positioned himself as covering for the younger healer’s mistake.

Zenos, calm as ever, approached the panicking Cress. “Don’t worry.”

The other two men turned to look at him.

“The tumor had taken root deeply, so we had to sever a nerve,” he told Lord Fennel. “What’s been severed can be reconnected.”

“Don’t...worry, you say?” the nobleman echoed from behind the door, sounding like he was about to walk into the room. “So my daughter isn’t in any danger, Professor?!”

With narrowed eyes, Zenos looked at Goldran. “That’s right. No danger at all. This wound is quite treatable, and there’s no need for any additional procedures at the Royal Institute. Right, Professor?”

“What did you say?” Goldran asked.

“The girl said she wants to dance again, braved her fear, and trusted us with her care,” Zenos said, looking at the pictures of a dancing Charlotte that adorned the walls. “As healers, we must honor that. Now let’s finish up. Standing around too long is tiring.”

Zenos quickly conjured a scalpel in his hand and removed the remaining bits of the tumor, then cast a healing spell on the severed nerve and skin, coating Charlotte’s face in a white light. Particles glittered as they floated in the air, sparkling and twinkling as though they danced in the sunlight.

“What the—” Goldran muttered softly.

The black-haired healer then leaned in to whisper gently into the sleeping girl’s ear. “You were very brave. The surgery’s done.”

\*\*\*

Charlotte woke with a gasp and sat up in bed about an hour later to see her teary-eyed father standing before her. “Charlotte!” he exclaimed.

“W-Wait a moment, papa!” she said, pushing back the man as he tried to hug her. “I need a mirror, quick!” Panicking, she hurriedly checked her face with a hand mirror. “This is...”

A gasp escaped her lips as she confirmed that she looked like herself once more. The growth had disappeared completely, leaving her the exact same as before it’d appeared. Not even the slightest hint of a scar remained.

“Papa, the tumor—it’s gone, right?”

“Yes,” Lord Fennel replied. “It’s completely gone.”

“I’m...so glad...” she murmured as tears of relief began to spill from the corners of her eyes. “So glad... So, so glad...”

An equally teary-eyed Lord Fennel placed a gentle hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “I am glad too, my daughter. They ran into minor trouble during the procedure, but it was resolved without issue. Professor Goldran healed you perfectly.”

“H-Huh? The professor did...?”

“He’s busy preparing for the upcoming election, so we didn’t stop him from leaving. Of course, I plan on fully supporting his campaign. Now I owe him much, not only for what he’s done for me, but for what he’s done for you too.”

“R-Right,” Charlotte replied, still somewhat unconvinced, though she wasn’t certain why.

A faint voice that didn’t seem to belong to Goldran lingered in her ear. “*You were very brave. The surgery’s done.*”

“Papa, do we know that man’s name?” she asked.

“That man?” Lord Fennel echoed.

“The one in the black mask.”

“Oh, the Professor’s second assistant. Did he do something?”

“N-No, nothing in particular.”

“The butler brought them here. I’ll ask him.”

The summoned butler bowed respectfully. “If I remember correctly, my lady, his name was Xeno,” he said.

“Hmm...”

Charlotte walked out to the balcony. The sky beyond the birdcages was a vivid blue, making her feel like she could take flight at any moment. Looking up at the clear azure skies, she murmured the young man’s name, feeling an odd stirring in her heart. “Xeno...”

*Will I ever see him again?*

\*\*\*

The day after the hag tumor was successfully excised, Zenos and Umin were walking down the corridor of the Royal Institute of Healing’s research wing.

“Thank you for helping, Mr. Xeno,” said the blue-haired healer.

“It’s fine, just...this is a lot,” replied the shadow healer. He’d seen Umin wobbling past, struggling with the weight of several boxes, and decided to help carry some of them. “What’s all this?”

“Dr. Becker’s prototypes. I’m taking them to storage now.”

“Huh. What kind of meds are these?”

“I’m not sure...”

“You don’t know?”

“Professor Becker himself probably doesn’t either.”

“Uh... And that’s not a problem?”

Umin adjusted the boxes in her arms. “Well, he does always say that ‘trial and error leads to new possibilities.’ I just wish he’d think about how difficult it is to



store all this,” she said, seeming slightly pleased despite her grievances.

“Sorry to give you so much trouble,” Becker said as he approached from behind, sporting his usual tousled hair. “You don’t have to carry all these at once, Umin.”

“But I want to store these as soon as possible so they remain in top condition.”

“It’s much appreciated. Especially since this batch is particularly important.”

“You say that for every batch.”

“Do I?” Becker asked, feigning ignorance, before turning to Zenos. “How did the noble girl’s treatment go?”

“Went fine,” the shadow healer replied.

“I suppose I didn’t need to ask,” Becker mused. “You must’ve impressed Goldran.”

“Uhh...”

As they continued chatting, someone came running up to them from all the way down the corridor. “Brooo!” Ah. Cress, sprinting at full speed. Heaving, Zenos’s self-proclaimed little brother came to a stop and said, “The second secretary just told me the news! We’ve been invited to one of Professor Goldran’s dinner parties, you and I!”

“Wow!” Umin exclaimed. “That’s amazing, Mr. Xeno!”

“Congratulations, Xeno,” added Becker.

Umin cast a curious glance at Cress’s somewhat downcast expression. “What’s wrong? Normally you’d be thumping your chest and sneering by now. Are you not happy?”

“No, I am, it’s just...” Cress trailed off awkwardly, probably hung up on the fact he nearly became Goldran’s fall guy during the surgery.

“Being invited means you’re a potential pick to be one of his faction’s leaders in the future, right?” Umin said, trying to cheer up her colleague. “Haven’t you always wanted to advance in your career?”

“Well, yes... But... Yes. I suppose.” The brown-haired healer crossed his arms and nodded several times. “That’s right. Yes, that’s right! Ha ha! And then I’ll be important and get to boss you around!”

“There you go, back to being Cress, the obnoxious guy we all know and definitely don’t love.”

“Hey! Don’t say that! People totally love me, they’re just...a little peeved with me sometimes,” Cress protested, his eyes a little misty, before turning to Zenos. “So, bro! Let’s go together! The dinner party is tonight, so let’s meet up at the lobby in the evening.” With that, he gave an exaggerated wave of his hand and left.

“He’s really taken a liking to you,” Umin mused.

“Not exactly thrilled about that,” Zenos muttered.

“Well, congratulations either way,” Becker said. “I’ve never seen someone get invited to one of Professor Goldran’s dinner parties so quickly. Assigning you to this job was worth the risk.” He nodded proudly, then continued, his tone somewhat emotional. “You’re almost done here, I suppose.”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

A man named Alfred had disappeared after one of Goldran’s dinner parties. After tracing the steps of the missing healer, Zenos had finally reached this point...which meant his work at the Royal Institute of Healing was drawing to a close.

## Side Story II: Meanwhile, at the Clinic...

While Zenos's duties at the Royal Institute of Healing reached their climax, over at the just-shy-of-ramshackle clinic in the ruined city, three demi-human women idly sat slumped around a table, resting their chins in their hands.

"When's the doc coming back?" asked Zophia.

"He said he signed up for a month max, so soon, I think," mused Lynga.

"I'm going to fossilize from all this waiting," mumbled Loewe.

Zophia cast the other two a sharp glance. "By the way, why are you two always here?"

"That's what I wanna know," Lynga countered.

"Indeed. I can house-sit just fine on my own," Loewe declared.

"Instead of loafing around here, why don't you guys go take care of your subordinates or something?" the lizardwoman asked.

"You're just saying that so you'll be alone here and can sneak a sniff of Sir Zenos's pillow," the werewolf retorted.

"What?!" the orc exclaimed. "No fair, Zophia!"

"Don't lump me in with you lot!" the lizardwoman protested.

All three women stood up simultaneously, exchanging sharp glares. The air crackled with tension for a moment before growing calm once more.

"Nah, let's not. No point arguing when the doc's not even here."

"I agree. We'll just tire ourselves out."

"Zenos will chew us out if we get injured in a scuffle."

The three sighed heavily and sat back down. A moment later, the door to the clinic burst open. Their gazes immediately shot to the entrance, where a lone lizardman stood.

“Oh. You’re not the doc,” Zophia muttered. “What’s going on?”

“Boss!” the lizardman cried out. “Zonde’s hurt, bad!”

“Zonde?” Zophia’s brows furrowed at the mention of her younger brother. “He didn’t get into a fight, did he?”

“No, no! He’s been getting along just fine with the werewolves and orcs! There’s been an accident!”

During the golem’s rampage through the slums weeks earlier, many buildings had collapsed. Some, however, had been left partially standing. During the demolition work, one had collapsed, leaving Zonde trapped underneath.

Zophia brought a hand to her forehead and breathed a heavy sigh. “That clumsy idiot... He’s not dead, is he?”

“We managed to rescue him from the rubble, but a broken pillar had stabbed him in the gut...”

The lizardwoman was silent for a moment before giving her subordinate instructions. “The doc’s gonna be back soon, so we just need to buy time until then. Go to the black market and get something to stop the bleeding.”

“Zophia,” Lynga interjected. “I don’t think there’s enough time.”

“I agree,” Loewe chimed in. “We should take him over to where Zenos is right now.”

Hesitation flashed in Zophia’s features. “We can’t. The doc’s working at the Royal Institute of Healing undercover. If I show up there, I’ll just get in the way.”

“I get that,” said Lynga. “I don’t want to get in Sir Zenos’s way either. But this is an emergency.”

“Do *you* think Zenos will think you’re getting in the way, Zophia?” asked Loewe.

Zophia closed her eyes in silence for a moment before standing up with clenched fists. “Damn that stupid idiot,” she muttered. “All right! Get ready to leave! And set aside twice the usual amount for the doc’s pay!”

## Chapter 7: The Night of the Dinner Party

Within the district where citizens were retiring for the night was a place known as the high-end residential area, located close to the nobles' special district. In this neighborhood was a modern-style mansion overlooking a vast garden—and while it couldn't compare to the palaces owned by the seven great nobles, the manor was still undeniably lavish.

A dazzling chandelier illuminated the hall and all attendees with a brilliant light, and extravagantly ornate furnishings spoke of the tastes of the estate's owner, Professor Goldran. It was here that tonight's dinner party would take place.

His second secretary surveyed the attendees. "Does everyone have their drinking glasses?" he asked. "Good. Now then, Professor. A few words, if you would."

"Of course." Goldran stood in front of the group, stroking his beard. "First, an announcement. As rumors have suggested, Lord Shalbart, current director of the Royal Institute, has made the decision to retire at the end of next month. The election for a new director will likely be held soon."

Excited murmurs rippled through the room.

"Our faction is the largest in all of the Institute, so the number of votes won't be a problem. The concern, then, is the subsequent decision by the advisory committee." He paused, swirling the wine in his glass with a look of satisfaction. "Lord Fennel, one of the seven great nobles, has given me his word that he will appeal to the committee in full support of my candidacy."

Applause and cheers erupted among the attendees. The second secretary raised both hands in a grand gesture and added, "In other words, it's practically guaranteed that Professor Goldran will be the next director!"

The second secretary continued, speaking of plans to soon hold an advance celebration for all members of Goldran's faction. Lord Fennel was also expected

to attend.

“Daaamn,” Cress, dressed in his brand-new suit, murmured to Zenos beside him. “Things are getting way too real.” His cheeks flushed. “Bro, this is crazy, bro.”

“Yeah. Also, I keep telling you this, but I’m *not* your ‘bro,’” Zenos replied.

“Whaaat? Sis, you tell him!”

“I don’t want a ‘bro’ like you, Cress,” retorted Lily, who had come along.

“You’re all jerks,” Cress whined.

All invitees were allowed a plus-one, and Lily had insisted on coming, partly because she really wanted to, and partly because she would be helpful for information gathering. She was unlikely to arouse suspicion and was a quick thinker to boot. Having her there meant better results than if Zenos had been alone.

Attending the dinner party were the faction’s executives, their secretaries, and those handpicked by Goldran. They all seemed to have brought their spouses or lovers.

Lily looked up at Cress. “You’re here alone, huh?”

Cress scoffed. “I have too many potential girlfriends to choose from.”

“And they all turned you down. Poor guy...”

“Drive the knife in deeper, why don’t you?” he whined, his eyes filling with tears.

“You didn’t invite Umin?”

“H-Huh? Why would I invite *her*?”

“Hmm...”

“Wh-What?”

“I mean, you’re always picking on her. Carmilla told me boys tease the girls they like.”

“Who the heck is Carmilla? Anyway, we just joined around the same time,

that's all."

"Hmm..."

Averting his gaze, Cress adjusted his hair. "I-It's fine! I have my bro. I'll just stick to him like glue."

"Denied," Zenos deadpanned.

"Oh, you kidder!"

"I'm not kidding!"

Goldran cleared his throat, and the hall fell silent. "The distinguished individuals gathered here today are the chosen members of our faction. You all should be proud. Continue serving me, and a bright future awaits you." The light of the brightly sparkling chandelier reflected off Goldran's glass as he raised it high. "Cheers!" The sounds of clinking glasses echoed all around.

"Did you hear that, bro? We're the *chosen ones*. Wow."

"Good for you."

"Hells yeah! I'm gonna start buttering up the execs right now!" Like the wind, Cress whooshed off toward the executives. He'd seemed quite dejected when Goldran tried to use him as a scapegoat during the surgery, but he'd sure recovered quickly. Perhaps that was part of his charm.

"Well, guess I should get to work," Zenos said.

"Yeah! I'll help," Lily added with a nod as she surveyed the room. "Everyone's here with a spouse or girlfriend. Do I look like your wife?"

"Do you? You *do* know you're supposed to be my sister, right?"

"I *know*!" she protested, puffing up her cheeks a bit.

Zenos had worked to make it to one of Goldran's dinner parties to trace the footsteps of a man named Afred, former deputy head of Becker's lab. Goldran had poached the talented researcher and invited him to a previous dinner party, after which he'd disappeared. What in the world had happened? Solving this mystery was Zenos's final task during his stay in the Royal Institute of Healing.

The dinner was served buffet-style, and the hall was full of tables lined with delicacies the shadow healer had never tried before. He approached several executives, asking casual questions about Afred's behavior during the last party. It'd also been a buffet-style event with everyone moving freely, and no one had paid much attention to the man.

One testimony in particular, however, caught Zenos's attention. "Afred? Yes, I remember him. He was looking after Bonds, who if memory serves was drunk."

"Bonds," Zenos echoed. He remembered the name—Goldran's first secretary.

Since all of Goldran's secretaries were supposed to be present at today's party, Zenos looked around, spotting Bonds at the back of the hall, lounging on a leather couch as if he owned the place and drinking straight from a bottle. Rumors said the man was an oddity—supposedly he held his position due to being an old acquaintance of Goldran's, but seldom did any work and mostly got wasted instead.

"Are you Mr. Bonds?" Zenos asked.

"Yeah," Bonds replied, red-faced and inebriated. "And you were...who, again?" They'd passed each other before, but the first secretary didn't seem to remember. "Sorry. Too many people in the faction to keep track of."

Lily, who stood behind Zenos, grasped the shadow healer's sleeve and said, "My brother's a special trainee."

"Right. Special trainee. I heard something about that," Bonds said, raising his bottle. "So, what's an exec candidate like you want with the likes of me? Go wag your tail at Goldran or whatever."

"I wanted to ask you something," Zenos pointed out.

"Yeah?"

"It's about Afred. He attended the last dinner party, right? Can you tell me what happened then?"

"Afred... Right, the guy from the other lab." Bonds took a gulp from his drink. "Don't remember. Was drunk. I think he got me water, maybe."

"Anything unusual happen?"



"I *don't remember*," Bonds insisted. "Next thing I knew, it was morning."

"I see..." No useful leads, then. Zenos sighed lightly.

"But he was a good dude. The born-and-bred types never talk to me." Zenos figured that might've been due to Bonds's usual behavior, but then the secretary continued, "Goldran told everyone to stay away from me. Says I'm a liar."

Zenos paused in confusion, not fully grasping the situation. Bonds was Goldran's first secretary—a significant position. Yet the professor had told other members of the faction not to associate with him?

"Well, whatever. I can live the good life thanks to him. All hail the great Goldran," he said, exhaling a boozy sigh and letting out a loud, somewhat hollow laugh.

Lily put on her best innocent face. "Mister, why did you become the professor's secretary?" she asked.

"Eh, we've been stuck with each other for a while."

"Stuck how?"

"Well..." he began, but then trailed off and waved his hand dismissively. "Doesn't matter. Quit bothering me."

Zenos and Lily reluctantly left without asking any more questions. He turned to her and said, "That guy's a dead end. Drunk out of his mind."

"I think he knows something, though," Lily pointed out.

"Hmm... But he doesn't seem to remember anything..."

After a moment's silence, Lily took several bottles of wine from the table. "Let's get him a bit more drunk, Zenos."

And when they did—

"Ha ha ha! You're a good girl, aren't you, lass?" Bonds exclaimed, growing more and more cheerful as Lily, sitting next to him, poured more wine.

"Uh-huh," she said. "And then?"

"Right, yeah, so when I was young, I wanted to be a photographer."

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“I know, right?! Amazing!”

Zenos arched an eyebrow. “Lily, what are you—”

“Leave this to me,” she told the shadow healer. “Men get carried away and their lips loosen when a girl gets them drunk and flatters them.”

“And where did you learn that?”

“Carmilla told me.”

“That floaty little...!” What was she teaching this poor, innocent girl?!

Lily subtly repeated her earlier question. “So, mister, why did you become a secretary?”

“Uhh, that’s...” Bonds’s eyes were glazed over, but he was still reticent about the all-important question.

The young elf grumbled. “I guess it’s too much for little ol’ me...”

“Oh, no, you did great, Lily,” Zenos told her as an idea suddenly occurred to him. He then turned to Bonds. “Say, Mr. Bonds? You know how Afred brought you water when you were drunk at the last dinner party? What happened after?”

“Uhh...” Bonds mumbled. “I think... Yeah, he said something about needing fresh air, then went outside...”

“Great idea, actually. We should sober up a bit. Let’s step outside.”

“Right, yeah, that sounds good.”

Supporting the drunken Bonds with his shoulder, Zenos took him to the estate’s courtyard. The sky was completely dark, but the gardens were brightly lit by manastones.

Lily followed after them. “Zenos, what are you doing?”

“I had an idea. At the last party, Afred was looking after Bonds when he was very drunk, yeah? Maybe recreating the same scenario might help him remember something.”

Bonds, however, seemed to be far too drunk to be of any help. Just as Zenos was about to give up, Bonds tripped on the lawn, dropping his wine bottle. Red wine spilled on the grass, looking almost like a pool of blood. The first secretary suddenly began to chuckle, then turned to look at Zenos.

“What’s wrong?” asked the shadow healer.

“Look, Goldran, it’s just like last time,” Bonds said, seemingly mistaking Zenos for the professor and gripping his shoulders firmly. “You’ll be a noble once you become the director of the Institute, yeah?” He snickered. “Look at you, doing such a great job of buttering up Lord Fennel *again*.”

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Elsewhere, three shadows sped through the darkened streets.

Looking over her shoulder, Zophia remarked, “Honestly, I wasn’t expecting you guys to come too.”

“Who else would’ve carried Zonde?” Loewe said. Zophia’s brother, Zonde, was strapped to her back with rope. “An orc’s strength is unmatched.”

“Well, true...”

“Sorry, sis,” Zonde said weakly, barely clinging to life after being pinned under a collapsed building.

“You better be, you moron!” Zophia snapped. “You’ll get what’s coming to you when you’re all better. Just you wait.”

“Yeah... I’ll keep that in mind...”

“So don’t you dare die on me!”

“Yeah...” he muttered, coughing up blood.

“We need to hurry,” Lynga said quickly. “Let’s take the back alleys.”

“And why are *you* here, Lynga?” Zophia asked.

“I think I can be of help.”

“You just want to see the doc.”

“I mean, that too. But I think I can be of more use than your men.”

Zophia had initially planned on bringing more of her men along, but Loewe and Lynga had insisted that a large group would've been too conspicuous, and so it'd been decided that only the three leaders would come. It *was* true that the Royal Institute of Healing was located in an administrative district near the nobles' special district, an area inaccessible without a permit. Infiltrating a place like that was more feasible with a smaller, elite group.

With a sigh, the lizardwoman turned to face ahead once more. "I guess I owe you guys one. We've just gotta make it in time. Come on!"

The demi-humans raced on, carrying the injured lizardman along, heading straight for Zenos.

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"'Buttering up Lord Fennel *again*'...?" Zenos echoed to the heavily intoxicated first secretary—who seemed to have mistaken the healer for the professor—as the night breeze blew over the trimmed grass in the courtyard of Goldran's estate.

"C'mon," Bonds mumbled, his eyes half-closed. "Why play dumb now? You only got to where you are because of that day thirteen years ago, right?"

"What day thirteen years ago?"

"Eh? You forgot?"

"Play along, Zenos," Lily advised quietly from behind him.

Zenos gave her a small nod. "Oh, right. No, I remember. Has it been thirteen years already?"

"You're not old enough to be senile just yet, y'know. No one cared about your research back then, remember? That day changed your life. What with the explosion and everything."

"The day of the explosion... Yes, that's right."

"With Lord Fennel's backing, you made it to professor at the Royal Institute, and now you're gonna be the oh-so-great director. You sure did well for yourself," Bonds said with a snicker.

"Yeah..."

For a moment, it felt like something important was about to come up, but Bonds suddenly fell silent. Not because he'd realized he wasn't talking to Goldran—only because he was drunk out of his mind. He swayed dramatically for a moment, then passed out onto the grass with a flop.

Zenos carried the inebriated man back inside, then asked a servant to show them to a vacant room. He tried talking to Bonds again as the man lay on the carpet, but the first secretary showed no signs of waking up. The occasional sound of laughter could be heard from the main hall.

Lily tugged on Zenos's sleeve. "What do we do, Zenos?"

"He'll be out cold for a while," the healer mused. "I think that's all we're going to get from him." The information was too fragmented to form a full picture, however, and it was unclear how it related to Alfred's disappearance.

"Are we done gathering information, then?"

"Hmm..." Becker had said to do what they could, and they arguably had, but a sense of dissatisfaction over the incomplete picture lingered in the back of Zenos's mind.

"Ah, I see," came a sudden voice from behind the healer.

"Augh!" Zenos yelped, turning around to see a translucent woman floating there. "That scared the crap out of me, Carmilla! Why are you here?!"

The wraith chuckled. "For a laugh, naturally."

"This estate is filled to the brim with healers, you know. What do you think would happen if you were discovered?"

"Hmph. The danger is what makes it exciting."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Zenos said, exasperated. "Also, what's with the smug look?"

"Carmilla," Lily spoke up. "What did you mean? What do you see?"

"Ah, I meant the drunkard's ramblings just now have given me an idea of what transpired."

"Have they?"

Carmilla's expression turned even more smug, and she chuckled. "I may not look it, but during my time among the living, I was a sage of worldwide renown. No mystery could withstand my magnificent intellect."

"Wow," Zenos said. "Really?"

"No."

"No?!"

The wraith grinned and gestured to Zenos as if to soothe him. "But I can wager a guess, to an extent. Thirteen years ago, on the day of an explosion, the life of a mere researcher was changed forever. And, apparently, currying favor with a noble was involved in this turning point."

"That's what Bonds said."

"How does a healer curry favor with someone?"

"Well, generally speaking, by...healing something?"

"That is correct."

Zenos stared off into the distance. "So...we don't know the details, but what you're saying is, thirteen years ago there was an explosion, and Lord Fennel was injured. Then Goldran came in and saved the day."

"Essentially, yes."

"Hmm..." So Lord Fennel felt indebted to Goldran, and from that point on, began to support him in various ways. With the strong backing of one of the great nobles, Goldran quickly rose through the ranks and even positioned himself as the next director of the Royal Institute of Healing. "So what would the issue with that be, then?" If that was the full story, regardless of Goldran's skill or character, there was no way they could intervene.

"Well, if that were all, it would be a beautiful tale, no? And if so, why is it that more people don't know about it?"

Zenos frowned pensively at Carmilla's question. Indeed, it was perfectly conceivable that Lord Fennel was indebted to Goldran, but the particulars were unknown until Bonds had let them slip. "Why, indeed..."

“There must be something that he cannot speak of.”

“Something he can’t speak of?” Lily echoed. “Like what?”

Carmilla shrugged lightly. “If the nobleman was caught in the explosion, he must have sustained extensive injuries. But he was in perfect health when you met him, was he not, Zenos?”

“Yeah,” the healer replied.

“And would such perfect healing be possible?”

“Well, as long as there’s a heartbeat, anything’s possible—”

“Do not answer from *your* perspective. Think about whether Goldran has the skills to do it.”

“Hmm...maybe not. It might be difficult for him.” Goldran was classified as a class-seven advanced healer, but Umin had mentioned he’d gotten the title through influence rather than skill. “So then... Wait, does that mean—”

“I’ve got it!” Lily exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “Thirteen years ago, an explosion happened, and a nobleman was injured. But...” She swallowed nervously. “*Someone else* healed him! And left without saying anything! Then Goldran happened to pass by and told the nobleman he’d been the one to do it!”

Severely injured and dazed, Lord Fennel hadn’t realized someone else had healed him, and had mistakenly thought Goldran was his savior. Lily’s gaze shifted to Bonds, who was snoring on the carpet.

“But Bonds happened to walk by and saw everything! That’s how he blackmailed Goldran!” Bonds had said he’d aspired to be a photographer in his youth. Perhaps he’d taken a picture of someone else treating Lord Fennel—that was why Goldran, unable to ignore Bonds, had appointed him to an important position like first secretary. That way, Goldran could keep an eye on Bonds and ensure he kept his mouth shut.

But... “How does Afred’s disappearance relate to this?” Zenos asked.

Lily hummed and crossed her arms. “Maybe... At the last dinner party, Bonds was drunk too, and accidentally spilled the beans to Afred. And then Afred

realized that he knew Goldran's secret and worried Bonds would remember having told him. So, sensing danger, he went into hiding."

"Or perhaps he has already been eliminated," Carmilla mused.

"I-I don't think so," Lily mumbled, frowning anxiously.

The wraith's lips curled into a small smile. "Worry not, Lily. If the man was *this* inebriated, he would not remember a thing he said. And if so, Bonds has no reason to eliminate this Afred."

"R-Right!"

"You are quite the little sleuth, are you not?"

"I-I could be a detective! Zenos's clinic and Lily's detective agency..." It had all started with the explosion thirteen years ago. There was Goldran, who had pretended to be the noble's savior, and Bonds, who had witnessed it and mooched off of Goldran. And Afred, who had accidentally learned Goldran's secret, had decided to lay low until the dust settled. Lily huffed and raised both hands. "The mystery is solved!"

At that moment, the door to the room suddenly opened, and Cress poked his head in. "Bro! Sis! There you are! I couldn't find you guys! I was worried!" Carmilla, thankfully, had already vanished.

Zenos scratched his cheek. "Sorry. Had to babysit a drunk."

"Let's just leave Mr. Bonds there and go back to the hall! He's always drunk, anyway. Besides, I've got way more important news! I've buttered up some VIPs! I'll introduce you guys," Cress said with a proud thumbs-up.

"I don't like the idea of having a brownnoser for a brother," Lily said, following Cress toward the hall.

"It's okay, sis! I'll teach you the art of socialization. I'm a pro, y'know."

Zenos sighed lightly and was about to follow the two when a voice called out from behind him. "What will you do, Zenos?" asked Carmilla, visible once more.

"About what?" he asked.

"You know what."



“The *other* possibility, then,” he said, turning back toward her.

Carmilla gave a quiet nod. “So you thought of it too.”

Lily’s idea that since Goldran’s healing abilities weren’t up to par, someone else must’ve healed Lord Fennel’s injuries from the explosion thirteen years ago was indeed a plausible theory. However, if that had been all there was to it, Goldran could’ve simply insisted he’d been the one to do it. Bonds had to have something much more damning over Goldran.

“It’s hard to think Lord Fennel would’ve been the only victim of an explosion,” Zenos mused. Other victims being present was a natural conclusion to draw. Goldran being able to administer perfect treatment to all of them, however, was not. Under very specific conditions, he might have indeed been able to—that is, by using the same type of magic he’d used during his rounds a while back. “If Goldran used life transference magic...”

Thirteen years ago, when Goldran happened upon the site of the accident, he’d seen many people groaning in pain, with one of obvious noble appearance among them. He would’ve then realized that taking the opportunity to earn a noble’s favor could change his life—but he couldn’t save the man with his power alone.

There was, however, one other way—transferring the life force from the many dying around him.

Zenos’s fist clenched tightly. “He *chose* a life to save.” Goldran’s words during the interview echoed in Zenos’s mind.

*“Not all lives are worth the same.”*

“Is that a sin?” Carmilla asked.

“Prioritizing is not a sin. But taking others’ lives to save one, *that* is—”

Afred had likely heard Bonds’s story during the last dinner party and reached the same conclusion. And then...he’d disappeared. One possible reason was, as Lily had suggested, that he’d realized he was in danger now that he’d discovered a major secret, and gone into hiding until the dust settled. But there was yet another possibility.

“If there were other survivors from that accident...” Zenos murmured quietly. Indeed, if any were still alive, and had learned the truth of what had happened after thirteen years...

“Revenge?” Carmilla suggested, floating lightly in the air.

Zenos nodded. “It’s possible.”

“But if one were to seek revenge, would it not be better to stay close to the target rather than go into hiding?”

“Hard to say. Maybe he was so furious that he was worried his rage would be too obvious.” Looking out the window into the vast darkness, Zenos murmured, “Afred... Where have you gone?”

Carmilla sighed. “Ah, the doom and gloom is too much for me. I rather dislike doom and gloom.” A ghost, complaining about doom and gloom. “So? What do you intend to do?” she asked again as Bonds snored in the background.

Thirteen years ago, Goldran had happened upon the scene of the explosion. Then, he’d used the life force of other victims to save Lord Fennel, thus climbing to his current position. Afred, now missing, was likely to have been involved in the incident and gone into hiding upon learning the truth.

As he contemplated the gist of events, Zenos answered, “Nothing. I’ll report what I’ve learned at the party to Becker.”

“Oh? Are you certain?”

“I have no solid evidence, and it’s not my job to convict anyone. I’m just a healer.”

“That is true,” Carmilla said with a faint smile.

“Thanks, Carmilla.”

“Whuh?”

“You came to check on me out of worry, right? And now, thanks to you, I have a much clearer picture.”

“Nonsense! I came for a laugh and because it sounded interesting. That is all,” she said, turning her face away in a huff and whooshing up toward the ceiling.

“Consider it amends for the matter of the zombie king.”

“And since when have you been the type to make amends?”

“I was already here for something else. I simply figured I may as well.”

“What ‘something’?”

Carmilla chuckled. “Look around you, Zenos. A magnificent estate such as this must have plenty of fine wine. I will simply help myself to two or three bottles before I depart.”

“Yep. That’s more like you,” he said, watching with a wry smile as she disappeared into the ceiling before opening the door to the hall where the dinner party—and a commotion of some kind—was taking place. “Huh?” he mumbled, frowning slightly.

He hurried over and saw that the attendees and waitstaff were all gathered on the hall’s balcony, seemingly looking toward the mansion’s gates.

“What’s going on?” Zenos asked Cress and Lily, also on the balcony.

“Oh, hey, bro,” Cress said. “Sounds like there’s some trouble outside.”

“Hey,” Lily called out. “Isn’t that Umin?”

“Huh?” Zenos stood beside them and looked toward the gates at the end of the courtyard, where a group of security guards had gathered.

At its center was a bespectacled girl. “P-Please! I just need to speak with Mr. Xeno for a moment!”

“No invitation, no entry,” said a guard.

“Then could you please call him over? It’s urgent!”

“Professor Goldran is in the middle of hosting a party. Come back later.”

Zenos squinted, trying to figure out why Umin was arguing with the guards, when a large shadow behind the blue-haired healer bellowed loud enough to shake the windows. “Help us!”

“Huh?” Lily said, surprised to recognize the tall woman who seemed to be carrying something on her back. “It’s Loewe!”

“Loewe?” Zenos echoed, equally surprised. “The hell is she doing here?”

The tanned woman under the light of the lamps by the gate was unmistakably Loewe, leader of the orcs.

Two more shadows appeared behind her. “D-Don’t be stupid, Loewe!” said one. “What are you doing, yelling like that?!”

“What choice do we have?” Loewe asked.

“Plenty of them! You’re gonna cause problems for the doc! Umin was supposed to ask for him first, and then if that failed, I was supposed to *sneak in* and *secretly* go get him!”

“I actually agree with Loewe,” said the other shadow. “We don’t have time to waste being careful.”

Judging by the shadows’ silhouettes and tone of voice, they were probably Zophia and Lynga.

“Um,” Lily said, “everyone’s here.”

“Yeah,” Zenos muttered, exchanging glances with the young girl. “They sure are...”

“Are those demi-humans?” asked Goldran in a low voice, having just stepped out onto the balcony. “Why are these lowly creatures in my estate? They’re sullyng this auspicious day. Throw them out at once!”

At their master’s command, the security guards lunged at the demi-humans—and were quickly subdued with one swing of Loewe’s fist and a single strike from Lynga’s hand axe.

“Ack! Don’t fight them!” Zophia pleaded in a panic. “We’re just making things worse for the doc!”

“You say that like I killed them,” Loewe said calmly. “I just swatted them away.”

“Same here. Have more faith in us,” Lynga added. “I used the flat end of the axe.”

The orc leader’s gaze then shifted to Zenos on the balcony. “Zenos! There you

are! Sorry, this is an emergency!”

All eyes turned to the shadow healer.

“Uh, who’s ‘Zenos’?” someone asked.

“Is that the special trainee?”

“Wasn’t he a contender to become a top dog in the faction?”

“Wait, he hangs out with demi-humans?!”

As murmurs and whispers began to ripple through the crowd, Zenos coolly asked Loewe, “What happened?”

“Zonde is hurt. Bad,” Loewe explained. “We went to the Institute’s dorms, but you weren’t there. We didn’t know what to do, but then this girl in glasses passed by and told us where to find you.”

“Ah. Yes,” said Umin, who’d been checking on the fallen security guards. She quickly stood and straightened up.

Goldran and Cress each clasped one of Zenos’s shoulders.

“Hey,” the professor said sharply. “What’s this about? What kind of relationship do you have with these demi-humans?”

“B-Bro,” Cress stammered. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

Ignoring the two, Zenos continued, still facing forward, “Loewe, is that Zonde on your back?”

“Yeah,” Loewe confirmed. “He’s barely breathing.”

“I’m so sorry, doc!” Zophia yelled out. She knelt on the ground, her head down as she clenched her fists in the trimmed grass. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to cause trouble for you! But Zonde’s running out of time, and I’ll make it up to you later, I swear, so please—” Her features twisted with desperation as she pleaded, “Please, help him.”

“Let’s go, Lily,” Zenos said.

“Okay!” Lily replied.

The shadow healer brushed off the hands on his shoulders and leaped over

the balcony, landing on the lawn below.

“Wait!” Goldran exclaimed angrily. “You! Are you out of your mind?!”



Zenos did not stop walking, but cast a glance over his shoulder to reply. “No. I’m perfectly sane.”

“Fool! Think about your status! Most demi-humans are poor! Are you seriously thinking of helping them as a member of our glorious faction?! You’ll be expelled!”

“Sure. Go ahead.” His work was mostly done, anyway. Zenos could practically hear Goldran gritting his teeth from here.

“What do you stand to gain from this?! Do you realize what you’re losing by giving up your position as an elite member of my faction?!”

“I’m neither part of the elite nor a member of your faction,” Zenos said, stopping for a moment and turning back to face Goldran. He gazed up at the luxurious manor towering behind the man. “I’m just a healer. Always have been.”

“What...?” Goldran’s features twisted into a demonic scowl. Next to him stood Cress, his own face set in a teary-eyed frown.

“You take care, Cress,” Zenos said to the other young healer.

“This isn’t real, bro,” Cress murmured. “Tell me it’s not real...”

Turning back around, Zenos walked through the gates, followed by Lily, Umin, and the demi-humans. They rushed away and settled on a bench in a plaza by the roadside as Zonde’s breaths grew ever shallower.

“All right,” Zenos said. “Lay him down there.”

“I-I’m...sorry, doc...” Zonde managed with barely a breath left.

“It’s fine. Let me see your wound.”

A piece of wood, presumably part of a column, was stuck in the lizardman’s side, fixed in place with a blood-soaked bandage.

Zophia looked on worriedly. “We weren’t sure what to do, so we left it there. Was that okay?”

“You made the right call,” Zenos told her as he finished casting Diagnosis. “It’s acting as a plug in a major blood vessel. If you’d pulled it out, he’d have bled to



death.”

“I really am sorry, doc. I know you’re busy with your work...”

“It’s fine. I should be apologizing instead for being away so long.”

“See?” Lynga spoke up. “Told you he wouldn’t be upset.”

“Yep,” Loewe agreed. “He’s nothing like that pompous bearded jerk.” She and Lynga both nodded proudly for some reason.

Zenos gripped the piece of wood, slowly easing it out of Zonde’s flank as he held his right hand over the anguished lizardman. “Just hold on a little longer.” A white light flowed into the wound, wrapping around the blood vessels. Making sure other organs and nerves were protected, Zenos accelerated the healing process. “*High Cure.*”

The chant converted an immense amount of mana into healing power. The overflowing radiance converged into several rings, dancing in the night plains like butterflies of light.

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Meanwhile, in Goldran’s estate, Cress stared blankly at the open gates. “Bro... Why...?” he murmured, clenching his fists and heaving a painful sigh. “Why would you do this, bro? We were supposed to do this together...”

Goldran, in a low and dangerous tone, spoke to Cress. “You’re not as much of a fool as he is, are you?”

“I-I’m...”

“I extended him a hand, and he *dared* bite it. His career ends here. I’ll make sure he can’t find work *anywhere.*”

“Yeah... Yes. My bro’s a fool. I mean...” Cress’s hands balled tightly into fists again. “I worked so hard to get a promotion and live in a nice house, surrounded by beautiful women.” That had been the reason he’d cozied up to the special trainee too. His plan had been to use anything and anyone. “I brownnosed, took care of a dog, all for that promotion, and yet—”

That guy was different. He didn’t brownnose. He didn’t flatter anyone. And...he didn’t choose. If healing was needed, he’d provide it, whether it was to

a dog or the daughter of a great noble, all without expecting any favors in return. Yes, that was how...

"I..." Cress paused, a sigh escaping the corner of his mouth. "No one likes me. They call me greedy, and sly, but..." Heat rose from the pit of his stomach, swirling in his throat. With tears streaking his face, he turned to Goldran and shouted, "I'm... I'm a healer too!"

"What?" the professor said, perplexed, as he watched Cress vault over the balcony and land on the grass below.

"My name is Cress Wembley! And as of right now, due to personal reasons, I resign from your faction!"

"What did you just say?!"

"Brooo! Wait for meee! I'll help you with healiing!" Cress shouted as he took off running into the night, all dramatic strides and swinging arms, all the while ignoring the shouts and murmurs behind him.

Breathless, he ran frantically, the fierce pounding of his heart urging him on as he burst through the estate's gates and sprinted across the field. Tired though he should've been, his body felt light; it was as though he could take off any moment on wings sprouting from his very soul.

Then, by the bench in the plaza, he spotted Zenos's silhouette. "Brooo! I'm heeere! I'll help you with heali—"

"Thanks, Zenos," said the no-longer-dying lizardman. "I owe you my life."

"Just pay me the usual and we're good," Zenos replied.

By the time Cress rushed in, waving his arms wildly, Zenos had already finished treating the injured. "Whaaat?!" he screamed, his voice echoing through the night as he collapsed to the ground right then and there. "B-But... What did I run all the way here for...?"

"You're still the same idiot you've always been," Umin noted with a sigh.

"Sh-Shut uuup!" Cress snapped, tears forming in his eyes.

Umin smiled warmly at her colleague. "I heard what you said, though. You're still an idiot, but that was the coolest you've ever sounded."

Cress stared at her, blinking several times and turning bright red before snorting. “Sh-Sh-Shut up! It’s your fault this happened! You’re paying for this!”

“Oh. There’s that unpleasant personality.”

He chuckled. “That’s right! I’m totally unpleasant!”

“Uh, doc, who’s that guy?” Zophia asked.

Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly. “Uhh... He’s like...” The healer smiled. “Well, like an annoying little brother.”



## Chapter 8: Choosing a Life

As dawn broke after the dinner party, Zenos visited Becker's lab and relayed Bonds's drunken testimony.

"I see. So that's what happened," Becker said, crossing his arms and nodding silently for a moment before continuing, "Come to think of it, I do remember Afred saying he was in a major accident as a child. That may have been the one."

"That's..." Umin murmured, trailing off.

Becker slowly shifted his gaze from her back to Zenos. "Professor Goldran is hosting a celebration for his upcoming directorship, isn't he? When is that happening?"

"Tomorrow, I'm pretty sure," Zenos replied. That was what Goldran had said during the dinner party—the whole faction, as well as its supporter Lord Fennel, would participate in a grand celebration in anticipation of his victory.

"It'll be Professor Goldran's crowning moment. If Afred is somewhere plotting revenge, he may act then. I'm planning on attending, under the guise of congratulating the professor."

"So you'll be keeping an eye on things."

"Yes. Afred is an exceptionally talented individual. If he's set his mind to doing something, he can make it happen."

Zenos said nothing to that.

"Honestly, many of the drugs I've developed were only completed thanks to his input," Becker said, scratching his head with a troubled frown as he stood up. "Either way, thank you for the valuable information. This concludes your work here, Zenos. You've done a fantastic job."

"Are you sure?"

"That was the agreement. I'll take it over from here." Becker handed Zenos a

leather pouch containing the agreed-upon fee. “There are still a few formalities to conclude your special trainee program, so would you mind staying for one more day? We’ll discuss your other reward—the information about your mentor—tomorrow.”

“All right, then.” With their conversation finished, Zenos left Becker’s office, closing the door behind him.

A sigh of relief escaped his lips; his work at the Royal Institute of Healing was finally done. A lot had happened, but in the end, it’d all felt surprisingly straightforward. While he was somewhat curious about the outcome of the disappearance case, there was likely nothing more an outsider like him could do.

Umin, who had left the office with him, said, “Well... I’ll stop by your dorm room tonight with food and drinks.”

“Is something else going on?” Zenos asked.

“Of course there is,” she replied, puffing her cheeks slightly. “Your farewell party.”

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As the skies turned to twilight, a modest farewell party was held in Zenos’s dorm room, attended by Zenos, Lily, Umin, and—

“Bro, is it true Professor Becker hired you to investigate a disappearance?!”

“Yeah. It’s true.”

“And you run a clinic in the ruined town and that’s how you know the demi-humans? That’s true too?”

“Yeah. It’s true.”

“And is it true you’re going back tomorrow?”

“Yeah. It’s true.”

“You’re going overboard with the drinking, Cress,” Umin cautioned.

“Shut up! I gotta drink my sorrows away!” Cress snapped, his cheeks flushed with inebriation. He leaned his arms on the table, buried his face in them, and

began to sob. “What am I gonna do when you’re gone, bro? I can’t do a thing without you, bro. Don’t leave me, brooo...”

“That’s a little creepy.”

“What a cruel colleague I have,” Cress lamented. “Don’t you think so, sis?”

“I don’t want a creepy brother,” Lily said.

“My little sister is cruel too!”

Zenos scratched his cheek, watching Cress ramble. “I mean, you’ll be fine. You adapt quickly. You can survive anything.”

“That kinda sounds like a compliment but also not,” Cress mumbled. “Which do you think it is, sis?”

“Oh yeah. By the way, Lily isn’t my sister.”

“Whaaat? No way! Wait, does that mean...she’s not my sister either?”

“That’s never been the case!” Zenos and Lily said in unison, before the young elf gave him an apologetic look and continued, “Sorry for lying to you, Cress. I’m actually...Zenos’s wife.”

“N-No waaay!”

“Uh, that’s not the case either,” Zenos protested.

“Boo,” Lily mumbled.

“This is too much new info. My head hurts,” Cress whined, pressing his hand to his mouth as if nauseous. “And maybe I *did* go overboard with the drinking. I’ve been seeing strange stuff...”

“Strange stuff?” Umin echoed.

“Yeah. Like a ghost behind the pillar over there.”

“A ghost?” her gaze followed Cress’s finger, and her glasses slid down her nose when she spotted a translucent woman with a resentful glare looking their way. “E-Eeek! A wraith! It’s a wraaaith!”

“Ugh. Why did you come out, Carmilla?” Zenos interjected calmly.

“Why would I not?!” she snapped. “That boy is drinking *my* liquor!”

“I don’t think this was yours to begin with.” Carmilla had pilfered the wine from Goldran’s estate, after all.

“U-Um, um, Mr. Zenos?! Th-There’s a wraith!” Umin stammered in a panic as she stood from her chair.

“Oh, don’t worry about her. She’s good, deep down.”

“She’s...good? Deep down? The wraith is?”

“Only *he* dares speak to the great Lich Queen in that tone,” Carmilla said with an exasperated sigh. “Do *not* drink all of that,” she warned, before disappearing into the back. Umin and Cress had seen her, but since they were leaving tomorrow, it wouldn’t be a problem. And the latter passed out drunk either way.

“Well, Mr. Zenos is an exceptional healer, so I suppose it makes sense that exceptional things happen to him,” a slightly inebriated Umin said. After some pointless small talk, the conversation shifted back to the disappearance. “But seriously, Professor Goldran’s background is a massive problem. Can a man like him really become the next director of the Royal Institute of Healing?”

“It’s just a hypothesis,” Zenos pointed out. “We don’t know for sure.”

“True, but...” Umin gripped her glass with both hands. “Just... I wonder what I’d have done, faced with that many injured...” After a moment of silent contemplation, she suddenly looked up. “Oh, I’m sorry! This is supposed to be your farewell party, and here I am, bringing the mood down.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It’ll be...a little lonely without you here.”

“I mean, it’ll just be back to how it was before I got here.”

“That may be so, but...I think Dr. Becker will miss you too.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it. He seemed so delighted whenever he spoke to you. It was like he was with a friend.”

“A friend...”



“Dr. Becker is eccentric, so he doesn’t have many friends. And it’s been a while since he last had a romantic partner.”

“Huh.”

“It’d be nice if he got married, but he gets so caught up in his research... As his niece, I can’t help but worry that he hasn’t settled down yet,” she rambled, then looked at Zenos with a drowsy gaze. “Come by again, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a promise.”

“It is.”

“One you won’t break at all, ever.”

“I get it!”

Satisfied, Umin laid her cheek on the table with a sigh of relief and dozed off, her breaths growing quiet and steady. Lily was already in bed, and Cress was sprawled out on the floor.

Carmilla returned, as though she’d been waiting for everyone to fall asleep. “Hee hee... At last I can drink, free of worries,” she said as she picked up a bottle of wine. Her gaze shifted to Zenos and her brows furrowed slightly. “What are you staring off into space for, Zenos?”

“Oh, it’s just... You know, I was born poor, and my party treated me like garbage.”

“That is indeed what one can expect from this country.”

“But these people didn’t treat me any different. It’s nice to know people like them exist too.”

“They are a minority, I would say. Naive, essentially. They have yet to experience hardship.”

“Still, it’s a little comforting.”

Carmilla took a large gulp of her wine. “Are partings difficult for you?”

Zenos rested his chin on his hand and gazed quietly at the slumbering Umin and Cress before replying, “Maybe. I’ve had more than my share of them.”

“Meetings, partings, and if fate allows, reunions. The life of a human is but a cycle of these. ’Tis how we come to understand the breadth and depth of the world.” She gulped down more of the crimson liquid, then smiled.

“You’re pretty sensible sometimes.”

Carmilla chuckled. “I have not been alive for three hundred years for nothing.”

“You’re dead, though.”

Their last night at the Royal Institute of Healing ticked on, the room filled with the soft sounds of the guests’ breaths.

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At noon the next day, the sunlight reflected brightly off the ballroom floor, so polished it may as well have been a mirror.

The party hall in the nobles’ special district was bustling with numerous members of Goldran’s faction. Though technically this was meant as a rally for the upcoming election for director of the Institute, it was more of an advance celebration of his win.

*Look at all these people*, Goldran thought with a satisfied nod as he looked down at the attendees from a raised stage. *There shouldn’t be any issues*. Other influential factions certainly did exist, but none matched this scale. There was no doubt in his mind that he would win the vote. *And then...*

“Ah, Professor Goldran,” said one of the seven great nobles as he approached with a raised hand.

“I thank you for taking the time to be here despite your busy schedule, Lord Fennel,” Goldran said, bowing his head deeply.

“Oh, please. I owe much to you. It would please me greatly to see you rise to where you belong.”

“You’re far too kind. My deepest thanks,” Goldran said, still facing the floor as a spontaneous smile graced his lips. After the vote, Lord Fennel would speak on Goldran’s behalf to the advisory committee responsible for making the final decision regarding the next director. Thus, it was almost certain that he would

be appointed. *At long last, I've come this far.*

It had all begun thirteen years ago, the day of an accident involving a manastone explosion at the magical tool factory on the outskirts of the city that had victimized both the workers and passersby. By chance, Lord Fennel's carriage had been nearby and gotten caught in the blast.

At the time, Goldran's research had hardly been acknowledged, and he'd been on the cusp of leaving the capital. He'd happened to walk by the carnage shortly after the accident. Amid the screams and groans of the victims, he'd noticed someone clearly of different status than the others.

It was obvious that the man was a noble. In a nation where class reigned absolute, earning a noble's gratitude could change one's life—but the man was gravely injured, and Goldran didn't think he could've saved him with his own healing magic.

He'd been researching transference healing, but at the time, it involved transferring the caster's own life force into someone else. The amount of life force necessary to heal the nobleman's severe wounds would've meant Goldran's own death, rendering the effort meaningless. Given the significant costs to the user, it was no wonder this type of healing magic was considered worthless.

Desperate, he looked to his surroundings for a solution when a thought occurred to him: *Can I transfer someone else's life force?* All around him were people on the brink of death. Individually, they didn't have much life force remaining, but there were many of them—and they wouldn't be witnesses.

Goldran, determined to change his life, made a decision and attempted the spell which, indeed, was successful. He used the life force of the other victims to save the nobleman who, in an unexpected stroke of luck, also happened to be one of the seven great nobles.

After that, with Lord Fennel's backing, Goldran rapidly advanced in his career. His research on transference healing was finally recognized by his peers, and he even rose to the position of vice director of the Royal Institute of Healing.

The only snag in his path was Bonds who, having arrived at the scene shortly after, had used a magical projector to capture an image of Goldran using his

transference healing. An aspiring photographer, Bonds had rushed there hoping for a scoop photo of the explosion. Blackmailed with the image, Goldran had no choice but to offer Bonds the position of his first secretary and ensure the man's livelihood.

That aside, however, everything else had gone smoothly. Now he was about to reach for the top position at the Royal Institute of Healing, which could grant him nobility. Goldran wouldn't stop at being a mere healer—he would finally join the ruling class.

"You've been a great help with the matter of my daughter," Lord Fennel said. "I intend to spare no efforts in supporting you."

"I'm deeply grateful for your kindness," Goldran said, bowing to Lord Fennel despite the slightly bitter taste in his mouth.

It'd been Xeno, the special trainee, and Cress, the dog sitter, who'd successfully performed the hag tumor surgery. Yet now they were no longer members of his faction. It was a shame to lose vaguely useful pawns—but tolerable, especially when his ascent was upon him.

Spotting a familiar figure approaching from the back of the hall, Goldran scoffed and narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Wow, impressive! Quite the turnout, Professor Goldran," said a slender man with tousled hair as he nonchalantly approached Goldran.

"Becker..." The older man scoffed again. "You've got guts, trying to get in the good graces of the next director," he said quietly.

"Well, you could see it that way, if you like," Becker replied with an awkward smile.

"That special trainee was originally your referral, wasn't he?"

"You mean Xeno? He was, yes."

"I had high hopes for him, but in the end, he was utterly useless."

"Right, I heard he got expelled from your faction. Did he offend you somehow?"

"He made it his priority to offer treatment to a bunch of demi-humans who'd

barged into my party. Absolutely unthinkable folly.”

“Huh.”

“I will soon become a noble. I cannot abide members of my faction prioritizing treating the poor. One must consider their status, after all. What manner of education did he receive?”

“I’m curious about that, myself.”

“Surely you understand, Becker, that not all lives are worth the same.” He’d chosen a life to save thirteen years ago, after all, and that choice had allowed him to rise this far.

Becker nodded slowly, pouring wine into Goldran’s glass. “A toast, then, to your bright future.”

“Ha! I see you understand the value of such things quite well,” Goldran said, his lips curling into a small smile.

Atop the stage, Lord Fennel began his opening speech. “I first met Professor Goldran thirteen years ago, when I was gravely injured and at death’s door. He saved my life then—”

Goldran hastily interjected. “Let us keep that story brief, Lord Fennel.”

“Ah, the man himself interrupts. Truly modest of someone about to become the next director.”

Small chuckles arose from the audience, but Goldran was far from amused, his mind swirling. The last thing he wanted was for the events from thirteen years ago to be discussed any more than necessary. Lord Fennel had been dazed from the accident, and had no idea how his life had been saved. If a moderate like him discovered the truth, it could very well change his pristine opinion of Goldran.

“Well, then,” Lord Fennel continued, “let us pass the spotlight onto the main character.”

“My thanks, Lord Fennel,” Goldran said, taking the stage and speaking about his aspirations for the soon-to-be-held election. The eyes of his many faction members were all on him, and sunlight poured down from the glass ceiling,

shining upon him like a divine blessing.

Today, his life had reached its peak.

Goldran raised his glass high and loudly declared, “To our glorious future! Cheers!”

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Meanwhile, in front of Becker’s lab, Zenos and Lily were about to leave, with Umin and Cress there to see the two off.

“Well, then,” Zenos said. “Thanks for everything.”

Umin shook her head. “We’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

Cress let out a sob. “Brooo...”

“Here now, Cress,” Umin scolded him. “How much longer are you going to cry?”

“But... I mean...” he stammered, wiping at his tears.

Zenos scratched his head. “Sorry you had to leave Goldran’s faction because of me.”

“Well...” Cress began, shaking his head slightly. “That was my own decision. It wasn’t your fault, bro.”

“Huh.”

“I wanted to succeed no matter what. But now, I wanna improve my skills, even just a little bit, and be more like you, bro. And being part of the faction and looking after a dog wasn’t gonna help me do that.”

“Hmm,” Umin mused. “You’ve grown a bit, haven’t you, Cress?”

“Shut up!”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine wherever you go,” Zenos assured him.

“Brooo!”

“I think your persistence is top-notch,” Lily told him.

“Sis! Thank youuu!”

“I think maybe that wasn’t meant as a compliment,” Umin pointed out.

Ignoring her interjection, Cress started crying again.

Zenos looked out the window. “Goldran’s party should be starting about now. Wonder how that’s going.”

“Dr. Becker is there, so I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Umin said before suddenly remembering something. “By the way, Dr. Becker said last night he was going to visit Professor Goldran’s first secretary. He said something about confirming the details of the incident thirteen years ago.”

“Huh. Did he find anything out? I mean, I don’t think that guy would’ve told him anything...”

“I’m not sure. He took some liquor with him. Maybe he was planning to loosen the man’s lips with alcohol? I haven’t had the chance to ask how it went... Oh, right!” Umin clapped her hands. “Dr. Becker wrote you a letter about your mentor. He asked me to give it to you.”

“Oh, that’s great. Thanks.” This was the main reward Zenos had been after. His plan had been to talk to Becker later, since the doctor had seemed busy, but this took care of that.

“Now, where did he put it?” Umin mused. “One moment, please.” She took out a key and unlocked the door to Becker’s office, then went inside. After a short while, a surprised “Huh?” came from within.

“What’s wrong?” Zenos asked, stepping into the office.

Umin was standing there, astonished. “I was looking through his drawers, and found this...”

“This is...” A photograph was in her trembling hands, showing dozens of people lying bloodied on the ground. The remnants of a building and a cloud of billowing black smoke painted a hellish scene. “Is this photo of the incident thirteen years ago?”

“It might be. But why is it here?”

Umin had said that Becker had visited Bonds last night. Maybe the doctor had gotten the first secretary drunk, put him to bed, then searched his house?

In the corner of the photo was a younger version of Goldran. In front of him, limp and covered in blood, was Lord Fennel. A magic circle glowed faintly, its light extending toward the other victims. Most likely the photo depicted Goldran using his transference healing.

“Oh! He looks very young here, but that’s probably Afred!” Umin exclaimed, pointing at the center of the photograph, where an androgynous young man with blond hair lay, pale-faced and with his abdomen oozing blood. “So he *is* a survivor of this accident, learned the truth after the dinner party, and is contemplating revenge...”

Zenos remained silent.

Umin, staring intensely at the photo, suddenly pointed to a corner and loudly exclaimed, “Wait, what?! This person right here! That’s...!”

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*What happened?*

Back at the party venue, Goldran held his head and struggled to open his eyes. Above him was the glass skylight, the clear blue sky horribly empty beyond it. He turned his head to the side and saw broken shards and red wine all over.

*Did I collapse?*

No, not just him. Atop the stage, Lord Fennel too lay face up. Goldran sat up with difficulty and saw that every last member of his faction was on the floor, unconscious.

Only one man still stood, with his serene expression and tousled hair.

“Becker...you... What is...this...?” Goldran’s throat felt numb, and the words came with no small amount of difficulty.

“Poison,” Becker told him, his voice bright and clear.

“Poi...son...?”

“That’s right. I mixed it in with your drink before the toast. Poison, medicine... Two sides of the same coin. Making drugs is my specialty, you know.”



“What...the...?”

“This poison slowly dims your consciousness and gradually drains your life. If you don’t do anything, it’ll kill you in about an hour. The one I gave you was a little less potent, but you’ll only have an extra, oh, thirty minutes, maybe.”

“What...are you...planning?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” Becker slowly made his way up the stage. “We’re reenacting the incident from thirteen years ago.”

“You... Why...?”

“See, I’d been suspicious for a while. But now I know for sure what happened, thanks to one outstanding special trainee.”

Goldran’s brows twisted. “Did...Bonds...talk?”

“He was pretty set on *not* talking, actually, so I had to use a little bit of alcohol and a smidge of medicine to make him more pliable. Finding that photo? Now *that* was pure luck. I thought it’d been disposed of long ago.”

“Finding...*what*? I...did dispose...of it.”

“Bet there were two,” Becker mused. “Mr. Bonds gave you one in exchange for guaranteeing his livelihood, and kept the other as insurance.”

“That...bastard.”

“Sounds like you’re not very people-savvy.”

“Don’t act...like you know...everything.”

“Not all lives are worth the same.” That single phrase echoed in the silence of the party hall. “Professor Goldran. You, thirteen years ago, chose a life to save with that belief in mind. The others, you sacrificed.”

“They were...dying...anyway.”

“Perhaps that may have seemed so to you. But among those you chose to forsake was a younger Afred.”

“What...?”

“And my fiancée.”

Goldran's eyes widened in silent shock.

Becker's tone remained nonchalant as he continued, "You have just enough strength left to use your life transference magic. It'll take a considerable amount of life force to completely halt the progression of the poison. So, whom will you sacrifice this time? Whom will you save? Yourself? Your patron, Lord Fennel? The faction members who will vote for you in the upcoming election?" He slowly spread out his arms, and quietly said, "Now then, go on. Choose lives."

"Choose...lives," Goldran echoed hoarsely as he looked up at Becker.

This party had been touted as a faction rally for the upcoming election for director, but in reality, was essentially an advance celebration. And at the pinnacle of glory, the professor had unexpectedly found himself engulfed in a nightmare.

"You...bastard. How could you...poison..." Goldran suddenly raised his head with a gasp. "Right... There must be...an antidote. Give it to me, now. Do that...and I'll make sure your sentence is lighter. Stop this madness—"

"I'm *dead* serious, Professor," Becker interjected coolly, taking a sip of wine from the table. Immediately he choked, coughing a few times.

"What are you—"

"I drank just little enough that I'll stay conscious, but it's more effective than I anticipated. Soon the poison will consume my life too."

"What...the...?"

"Now, this gives you one more option. You can choose to save *me*, believing I have an antidote."

Goldran slammed his fist on the floor. "You think...you can get away...with this...?"

"We don't have time to waste with idle prattle. The more you hesitate, the more the poison will spread, and the less life force they'll have for you to extract." Becker's tone was perfectly flat; he was most certainly not joking.

Suddenly, the ghost of the incident thirteen years ago had come back to

haunt Goldran.

“You...wretch...” the professor managed, placing his palms on the floor and staggering to his feet.

The paralysis effect was powerful, and it would be difficult to get outside and search for help. *But wait*, he thought. *There’s still time. Prioritize. Who to save?* Goldran took a deep breath to calm himself.

*Myself first. If I die, it’s all for naught.* He couldn’t afford to lose his life on the cusp of glory.

*Then Lord Fennel.* Becoming director would give him the qualifications to achieve nobility, but a final recommendation would have still been necessary. The nobleman’s support was essential.

*As for whether to save Becker for the antidote...* No. Goldran had no proof that the doctor even had an antidote, and even if that were the case, he might not administer it. Leaving him to his fate was the only option.

*Which leaves the members of my faction, whom I’ll have to sacrifice.* He looked down at the unconscious attendees from atop the stage, and began to draw a magic circle with trembling hands.

“I see. So that’s your choice,” Becker said.

“It’s...their duty...to serve me,” Goldran replied.

His hand, however, stopped mid-motion. How much life force would he need to overcome the poison? If he reduced his faction’s numbers too much, he might not have enough votes and lose the election to another faction.

Still, he couldn’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. If he died here, it would all be over. He began the incantation to activate the transference healing, sending multiple threads of light stretching toward the backs of his fallen faction members.

“What a pity, Professor Goldran,” Becker said. “I told you, didn’t I? I made *your* poison a little less potent.”

“And that...matters...why?”

“It means that, among those who drank the poison, you have the most life

force left. Using your own life force would result in the most lives saved.”

“We’re not worth...the same. I am...no mere healer...like them,” Goldran spat.

“Not all lives are worth the same, hmm?”

“Coins may all...be coins. But gold...and copper...are not the same. Lives...are no different.”

“So you’re repeating your choice from thirteen years ago. The members of your faction would be quite sad to hear that, I’m sure.”

Goldran scoffed. “It is...natural...to save the lives...of the worthy.”

Becker looked at the professor with pity for a moment, then brought a hand to his mouth, coughing up some of the wine. The liquid on his palm looked just like a bloodstain. “This is—”

Before he had the chance to say anything else, the door to the venue burst open. “Dr. Becker!”

Looking up, Becker saw a girl wearing glasses standing there, panting. “Umin? Why are you here?”

“W-We found the photo in your office,” she stammered. “Your former fiancée was in it, so I had a bad feeling that—”

“What’s happening here?” said a man in a black cloak as he walked in, illuminated by the backlight. “Did you poison them?”

“Zenos,” Becker said. “You came too?”

“Dr. Becker,” Umin lamented grimly. “Why did you do this?”

The doctor’s gaze shifted to Goldran, still kneeling on the stage. “Are all lives worth the same?” he asked quietly. “I’ve asked myself this for the longest time.”

Silence fell upon the venue.

“Thirteen years ago, my fiancée and I were novice healers. Her eyes would sparkle whenever she told me how she had become a healer to save as many lives as she could. To me, she shone brighter than anything.”

Slowly, Becker dragged his feet across the stage.

“When I heard she’d lost her life in an accidental explosion, I was overcome with grief. It showed me that death spares no one, not even a soul as noble as hers. How merciless the divine is.”

He looked up at the sun filtering in through the skylight, his gaze distant.

“Back then, I thought her death had been an accident, so I decided to carry on her will and save as many lives as I could. If the divine didn’t discriminate when it came to death, then I wouldn’t discriminate when it came to life.”

And so he’d developed many different drugs. He’d even distributed them in the slums, saving countless lives in the process.

“That’s right!” Umin cried out. “Dr. Becker, you’ve saved so many lives! So why—”

“However,” Becker interrupted her, “Afred came to me after the last dinner party hosted by Professor Goldran. He told me the professor had been involved in the explosion thirteen years ago. That it hadn’t been just an accident.”

“What? Really?”

“Looking back, he’d probably learned of it through Mr. Bonds’s drunken ramblings. He didn’t give me any details, however, and disappeared right after talking to me. I couldn’t just sit idly by. My fiancée lost her life in that incident.” And then he’d thought, “Could it be that my fiancée’s death wasn’t an accident? That it was someone’s deliberate doing?” A chilling silence enveloped the venue as he continued. “I had no proof, though. Afred was nowhere to be found, and I couldn’t get any detailed information.”

“And that was why you hired me,” Zenos mused.

“Sorry, but yes,” Becker confirmed with a nod. “If you found Afred, good; if not, I’d still hoped you could infiltrate the next dinner party and scout out some information that way. You did far more than I expected.”

Umin stepped forward and raised her voice. “But even so—”

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Umin. But I—”

A loud voice suddenly echoed throughout the room. “Shut uuuuuuuup!”

“You’re...” Becker began, looking at the man standing next to Zenos. “Cress, right?”

Having heard the whole thing, Cress clenched his fists. “Yeah, I get it. If this kinda injustice had befallen my beloved, I wouldn’t just let it slide either. Not that I have a beloved or anything. But what I know for sure is that Goldran over there is a grade-A scumbag.”

“Y-You!” Goldran hissed, a vein throbbing in his forehead. That was about all the spirit he could muster given the poison, however.

“But man...” Cress muttered, his voice strained. “It’s not right, man! It’s not! Poisoning people who did nothing wrong for your revenge plot? That’s not right! Because... Because...!” His eyes filled with tears as his strained cries shook the very air around them. “You’re a healer! Our job is to *save* people, remember?!”

Wordlessly, Becker raised his eyebrows.

“Well said, Cress,” Zenos spoke up, placing a hand on Cress’s shoulder and stepping forward. “So, Becker, remember when you asked me which of the coins scattered all over the floor I’d pick up? It was a dumb question. I mean, duh. I grew up in poverty.”

Zenos stared the elite healer straight in the eyes and grinned.

“I’d pick them all up.”

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“You’d...pick them all up?” Becker echoed, looking over the hall—where many healers from Goldran’s faction lay unconscious—from his vantage point atop the stage. With a somewhat exasperated tone, he continued, “There are so many people suffering from poisoning here. You’re telling me you want to save them all?”

“That’s the plan, yeah,” Zenos confirmed.

“Why? What’s in it for you?”

“Sure, I’m done with the job you hired me for. But see, my farewell party...”

“Huh?”

“That was the first time anyone threw me a farewell party. It’s always been bereavement or exile for me.”

“What are you...?” Becker trailed off, confused.

“If I don’t do anything, you’ll be a mass murderer. And I know someone who wouldn’t want that.”

“Mr...Zenos...” Umin whimpered, close to tears. “Are you helping them...?”

“Normally I’d ask for payment, but I’ll make an exception just this once. Consider this my thanks for the farewell party.”

“Thank...you,” she replied, nodding repeatedly before turning her teary gaze to her mentor and murmuring, “Dr. Becker...it’s not true, right? You wouldn’t do this, right? I refuse to believe that!”

As the poison began to take effect, Becker began to breathe heavily. He silently gazed at Umin for a moment before turning his eyes to Zenos. “You say you’ll save them all, Zenos, but without knowing the composition of the poison, it’ll be hard to cast a precise antidote spell.”

“Really?” Zenos asked.

“What do you mean, ‘really?’ Ah. I see. You plan on using a general antidote spell? That might work for simple poisons, but do you think this one is simple?”

“Will you tell me the composition, then?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you even *know* the composition?”

“Zenos, what are you—”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Zenos interjected. “There’s no time for idle chatter.” He took a deep breath. The faces of the fallen members of Goldran’s faction were turning ashen; the scene, with many lives flickering out, was reminiscent of a certain thirteen-year-old photograph. He held out both his hands, and chanted, “*Cure.*”

As white light overflowed from the shadow healer’s palms, raining down on the venue, Becker asked from where he sat on the stage, his expression

puzzled, “Cure? That’s it? What are you thinking? Cure is a healing spell, but it can’t remove poison.”

“No, it can’t, but it *can* boost the body’s natural recovery.”

“Temporarily. The poison will soon begin to spread again, and—” Becker stopped midsentence as the warm white light Zenos emitted continued to rain down over the entire venue, uninterrupted. “No way.” He swallowed. “You can’t be planning to—”

“I’m no expert in poison, but it doesn’t last forever, right? Its effects wear off eventually.”

A look of astonishment fell upon Becker’s features. “You’re planning on continuously healing all these people until the poison wears off?” he choked out hoarsely.

With his hands still extended, Zenos replied, “It’s a battle of endurance. Poison versus healing magic. And you’d be shocked how tenacious I can be.” Even the most potent of poisons got metabolized in the body sooner or later, losing its effect. So Zenos’s plan was to keep casting Cure until that happened, continuously healing the damage caused by the poison. “I’d love to use regeneration magic, but that takes adjustments on a case-by-case basis, so it’s not feasible for this many people.”

“You’re...really something.”

“Bro!” Cress cried out, rushing to the fallen. “I’ll help!”

“Me too!” Umin added, following suit.

“Please do,” Zenos said. “If the poison was in the booze, they’ll each have consumed different amounts. Focus on the weakest ones.”

“You got it!” Cress replied.

“Understood!” Umin exclaimed.

After silently watching for a moment as the two weaved through the fallen attendees, casting healing spells, Zenos turned to Becker and said, “So, Becker. Your subordinate and a junior healer are cleaning up your mess. You should be grateful.”



“I...should,” Becker agreed, then fell silent.

As time ticked away, Zenos’s healing magic continued to slowly fall on the victims like a gentle rainfall, with Umin and Cress darting hither and thither.

Eventually, Becker spoke up again. “I can hardly believe how long you’ve been casting Cure. That’s not how the spell is supposed to be used.”

“Oh?”

“I knew you were impressive, but this defies all reason.”

“Well, I didn’t get a proper education, so...”

Becker let out a shallow breath and smiled wryly. “You know, Zenos... My fiancée told me she’d become a healer to save many lives. She was a respectable woman, with noble aspirations.”

“Right.”

“I couldn’t forgive Goldran for not saving her, and I couldn’t stand the idea of him then going on to become director of the Royal Institute of Healing. His ideals are the complete opposite of hers. I just couldn’t accept him as the top authority here.”

“Right.”

Becker felt the chill and fatigue slowly fade from his system. “But being here as long as I have makes you start to realize how many obvious disparities exist in this world. Some people are given the best treatment possible, while others can’t even afford the simplest of medicines.”

“Right.”

“There are wonderful people of upstanding character, and then there are people who are the complete opposite of that. Maybe some people aren’t meant to be saved.” Becker’s gaze turned to Goldran, who still breathed heavily. “Are all lives truly worth the same? Maybe I’ve been the one most chained down by that question.”

“Right...”

Becker’s gaze shifted to Umin and Cress next as they frantically moved from

person to person, his eyes almost sparkling. “But...seeing them work so hard to save the lives before them—” Becker’s voice broke for a moment before he continued. “It makes me think that maybe my late fiancée’s pure spirit lives on in them.”

“Yeah...”

Thirteen years ago, had this shadow healer been at the scene, perhaps the outcome might’ve been different. But the past was set in stone. It was the future that...

Becker wiped at the corners of his eyes, then slowly stood up. “Zenos.”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

Breathing heavily now, Zenos grinned. “No need to thank me. I’m just tired as hells, so I’ll be charging extra,” he said, the sweat dripping down from his brow to his chin, then onto the floor.

Becker looked at the faces of the healers lying on the floor. “Zenos, I think this poison uses a special, plant-based toxin as the core component. It acts as a sedative and has several other active ingredients, but it should wear off in a few more minutes... I think.”

“You ‘think,’” Zenos echoed. “I knew it.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Zenos?” Umin asked.

Still facing the fallen crowd, Zenos replied, “It wasn’t Becker who made the poison.”

“Huh?” Umin said in shock. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now, we need to focus on what’s right in front of us.” With this, Zenos cried out, enhancing his spell’s output. A maelstrom of white, healing light fiercely swept through the venue like a storm in spring, its warmth washing away the poison whittling away at the victims’ bodies and even their negative emotions.

“Damn,” Cress muttered.

“Wow...” Umin murmured.

“Goodness me,” Becker mumbled. “Just what kind of man have I invited here?”



The fallen healers began to regain consciousness, one after another, their expressions shifting to surprise as they sat up. The poison's effects had faded, and their bodies' recovery process had overtaken the toxins. Now back to normalcy, the venue was once again brightly lit by the sparkling sun, shining down through the skylight.

But...

"W-Wait a second..." came a faint voice from above.

"Hmm?"

Atop the stage was Goldran, crouched down and pale. "Y-You haven't healed me. What's...going on?"

"Oh," Zenos deadpanned. "My bad. Forgot."

"D-D-D-Don't be ridiculous!" A vein pulsed on Goldran's forehead, but the poison was affecting him greatly, and his words were weak. "It's...an order! I command you...to save me!"

"Order, shmorder," Zenos said. "I'm not part of your faction anymore. Why should I obey?"

"Urk..." Goldran clenched his teeth. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he called out to the newly awakened members of his faction. "You lot! Save me!"

The members, still dazed and in the middle of regaining consciousness, looked at each other in confusion.

"It's poison! I've been...poisoned! All of you, keep casting healing magic on me until the effect wears off!"

A few people began to gather in front of the stage in a panic, but others stopped them. "Wait a minute," one mumbled. "I'm confused too, but... I seem to remember something."

"Yeah," another chimed in. "I felt faint all of a sudden, and couldn't move my limbs."

"And then it was like my life was draining away," added a third.

Several cold gazes fixed upon Goldran atop the stage.

“Professor, weren’t you trying to sacrifice our lives just now?”

Goldran let out a small groan of surprise as a frosty silence descended upon the sunny venue. No one moved; no one *could* move. Everyone remained silent, watching the man crouched on the stage breathe heavily.

With a stiff expression, Zenos turned to Goldran, and quietly said, “Well, there’s their answer. Now what?”

“Ughhh...” Goldran clenched his fist and rasped, “What should I do?”

“Relax. I kinda forgot for a moment there, but I don’t discriminate, you know. Just pay what you owe and we’re good.”

“Wh-What?”

“I’m a *shadow* healer. You want treatment? Pay my asking fee.”

“Your...asking fee.”

Zenos trudged onto the stage and showed Goldran a piece of paper with the total scribbled on it. “I’m quite tired, and I’ll have to push myself even further. So this is what I’m owed.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous! H-How am I supposed to pay this much?!”

“Oh, you can’t? That’s too bad. Let’s just forget this conversation ever happened.”

“W-Wait! Wait, wait! I...understand. I’ll pay! I’ll pay it, so just save me!” Goldran pleaded. With a trembling hand, he signed the invoice.

A man’s voice rang out from behind him. “Professor Goldran. I overheard parts of your conversation. Would you care to explain in more detail later?”

“Lord Fennel...!” At the harsh words from one of the seven great nobles, Goldran’s face turned even more pale, and his shoulders slumped. “Damn it... Damn iiiiiiit!” he cried out in agony, his voice reverberating across the party hall.

In contrast with the professor’s pained howls, Cress gave a thumbs up, then said in a cheery tone, “That’s a wrap, bro!”

“Why are *you* calling it a wrap, Cress?” Umin retorted, thus marking the end of this unprecedented attempt at mass poisoning.

## Epilogue (I)

Around the same time that the poisoning incident in Goldran's party drew to a close, a janitor at the Royal Institute of Healing found a man in the cleaning closet, gagged, with his hands and feet bound. He was an intermediate healer and a member of Goldran's faction.

He told the janitor someone had suddenly attacked him from behind, and stolen his invitation to the professor's party.

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"Zenos. Umin," Becker said from the room behind the thick glass. "You came all the way here just to see me?"

The day after the poisoning incident, Zenos and Umin went to pay a visit to the third office building of the Royal Guard, located in the administrative ward of the special district. It was there that suspects of crimes were temporarily detained and interrogated. The Royal Guard, having received a report of an attempted mass poisoning, had taken both Goldran and Becker into custody; Zenos and Umin had been granted permission to visit the doctor.

Becker, his hair the usual mess, laughed. "It's my first time being interrogated. A pretty fresh experience!" He sat down, his expression turning curious. "It's strange that they let you visit, though, especially considering that it's only the day after the incident and that they're still in the middle of questioning me."

Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Well, I have an acquaintance in the Royal Guard, see."

"An acquaintance?"

"Hello, Mr. Zenos," said the acquaintance in question—Krishna, the young vice commander of the Royal Guard, with her dazzling golden hair and blue eyes—as she walked in.

"Wow," Umin murmured, her breath catching in her throat. "She's so pretty."

Krishna looked at Zenos bashfully. “I am touched you came to see me under the pretense of visiting a man under our custody.”

“Uh, that’s not why I came here today,” Zenos said. “Wait. Why do you look so shocked?” The knight looked like her knees were about to buckle. Noticing this, he continued, trying to make her feel better. “But I’m very grateful that you made the arrangements for me. Thank you.”

As if regaining her composure, Krishna straightened up. “I owe you much, Mr. Zenos. ’Tis the least I could do.”

Becker, looking between the two, asked, “Uh, what relationship do you have, exactly?”

Before Krishna could answer, Zenos turned to the doctor. “We came here today because we have a question for you.”

“A question?”

“So. Dr. Becker...” Umin, seated next to Zenos, began tentatively. “You didn’t really poison anyone, right?” Her clasped hands trembled on her lap, perhaps out of fear of hearing the answer.

Becker had described the *probable* composition of the poison the party attendees had consumed. That meant he hadn’t known what it was exactly—which in turn meant he hadn’t been the one to concoct it. Zenos had said as much during the incident.

After a brief silence, Becker gave Krishna a quick glance, then nodded. “That’s right, in a sense.”

“In a sense?” Umin echoed.

“Goldran took my beloved’s life. I couldn’t allow him to become the next director of the Royal Institute. I wanted to denounce him, but I had no evidence to do so.”

“What about the photo Mr. Bonds had taken?”

“Goldran is the most powerful person in the Institute, backed by one of the seven great nobles. Covering it up would’ve been a simple matter.”

Umin had no answer to that.



“So I devised a plan. I would poison the members of his faction, creating a scenario similar to what happened thirteen years ago. Then, in his panic, he would confess to his past crimes and expose his foolish actions to his followers. That was my original plan.”

Indeed, if Goldran’s actions from thirteen years ago were brought to life, his popularity would have decreased, and his advantage in the directorial election would’ve taken a significant hit.

“B-But,” Umin began, “Dr. Becker, you said you didn’t poison anyone—”

“What I had prepared was a temporary paralyzing agent. It wasn’t lethal. My intention was to push Goldran into a corner by pretending it was poison.”

Despite Becker’s claim that he hadn’t used actual poison, the fact remained that the attendees *had* been poisoned, and their lives had actually been at risk.

“I myself went with the flow and drank the wine, but I thought something wasn’t right. At first, I figured maybe I’d made a mistake when mixing the drug...” Becker closed his mouth for a moment before continuing, “But I hadn’t. Someone *else* had added a different drug to the wine used for the toast. I think —”

“Someone else poisoned the guests?” Umin asked. “Could it be—”

“Afred?” Zenos ventured.

Becker nodded slowly. “Probably. Afred must’ve been watching Goldran from somewhere this whole time. I imagine he quietly infiltrated the party and poisoned the wine. Maybe, just like me, he wanted to recreate the incident from thirteen years ago.”

“Then Mr. Afred was...” Umin trailed off.

“I believe he was at the venue, yes,” Becker confirmed. “He pretended to have drunk the poison, blended in with the numerous collapsed healers, and observed how things unfolded.”

Silence fell over the room.

If the story was true, then Becker had spiked the wine with a nonlethal drug, but Afred had used actual poison—potent enough to kill all of his former

colleagues.

Leaning against the wall, Krishna crossed her arms. “This is confidential, but we have located a member of the faction who claims his invitation was stolen.”

“So this means...” Umin said, rising from her seat. “S-Still, Dr. Becker, you should’ve said something sooner—”

“No,” Becker replied. “I’m just as guilty. I could tell real poison had been mixed in, and still I didn’t take immediate action. The moment I saw Goldran repeat the exact same actions from thirteen years ago, I felt as though nothing mattered anymore. I thought it’d be fine if everyone in that room died, myself included.”

“Dr. Becker...” Umin murmured, her shoulders drooping.

Zenos’s gaze shifted to Krishna. “What happened to Goldran?”

“The man is pitifully haggard, but stubbornly refuses to admit to having done anything wrong thirteen years ago. However...” Krishna waved the photographic evidence Umin had brought. “We have enough evidence that we can likely charge him with a crime.”

“Even though he has a great noble on his side?”

“You think I would back down simply because he has the backing of nobility?”

“No, I guess not,” Zenos said with a grin.

Krishna returned the smile. “Besides, Lord Fennel is fortunately one of the few reasonable nobles. Word has it he will be withdrawing his support for Goldran. The current director of the Royal Institute of Healing, Lord Shalbart, is reconsidering his retirement after hearing of the incident too. Not only that, the fact Goldran tried to sacrifice the lives of his own followers is now widely known. He has lost everything that had supported him: the backing of one of the seven great nobles *and* the votes of his faction members.”

“Wonder if he’s gonna be able to pay me.”

“Worry not. I shall keep the promissory note for payment. You will be paid, even if he is forced to sell his estate for it.”

“How reassuring.”

“If you ask me to strip, Mr. Zenos, I am prepared to do it. However embarrassing that might be...”

“Wait. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I see...” Becker murmured, letting out a deep breath as though a long-held weight had been lifted from him. His expression turned to pure calm.

Krishna lifted her chin sharply. “And worry not about this man. He poisoned no one, and he has done much for you, Mr. Zenos. I shall use my authority as vice commander to secure his release, if necessary.”

“Um, you can be impartial about—”

“Please do!” Umin interjected, bowing deeply to Krishna. “Dr. Becker, I’ll be waiting for you!” she declared, then left the room looking a bit relieved.

As Zenos stood up to follow, Becker called out to him. “Zenos.”

“Yes?”

“Something’s been bothering me.”

Zenos turned around. “About Afred in the photo?”

Becker nodded, a bit surprised. “So you noticed too.”

“Yeah, I thought it was weird.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Zenos?” Krishna asked, tilting her head.

Zenos gestured at the photo evidence, which showed a young Afred after being caught in the explosion. Crimson-red blood spilled from his abdomen, and his face was pale.

Krishna peered into the photo. “So this is Afred, the man presumed to be behind the poisoning incident. I shall remember his face. But what is it that you find odd about this?”

“Goldran used the life force of the victims of this incident to treat Lord Fennel. That’s what the whole incident was about.”

“So I have heard.”

“And as you can see, Afred is badly injured.”

“Yes, I can tell.”

“It’s hard to believe he survived after having even more of his life force taken from him.”

Krishna furrowed her brows. “Perhaps Goldran healed him on a whim?”

“No one said anything about that. There would’ve been nothing in it for Goldran anyway,” Becker countered. “On the contrary; it would’ve been a problem for him if someone survived.”

“But Afred was, without a doubt, a member of your lab, was he not?”

“He was. That’s what I’ve been wondering ever since I first saw that photo.” After a brief silence, Becker continued, his tone heavy, “Who, or *what*, is the Afred I know, then?”

The room fell silent once more.

Becker’s gaze turned to Zenos. “Perhaps this *isn’t* a simple case of payback for thirteen years ago. And since you were the one who thwarted his plan, Zenos, he might come for you next.”

Zenos shrugged and scratched his head. “I’d rather stay out of trouble if possible, but if I ever see that guy, I’ll be sure to collect a fee for the inconvenience,” he muttered, irritated, before leaving the room.

Left behind, Becker and Krishna exchanged awkward smiles. “He’s really something, isn’t he?” Becker said.

“Mr. Zenos is quite the extraordinary character in many ways,” Krishna agreed. “Even if he does not realize it.”

“Maybe his experience at the Royal Institute has helped him understand his position a bit better.”

“One can hope...” Krishna said, crossing her arms. “It truly is quite vexing that he would come out of his way to see you, however. Frankly, I detest you for it.”

“Wow. You really just came out and said it,” Becker noted. “But honestly, he probably didn’t come for my sake.”

“Oh?”

“I imagine it was for Umin’s.”

“Umin? The bespectacled girl who was with Mr. Zenos? Intriguing.”

“Even if Goldran’s faction is dissolved, many of the talented people in it won’t have any problems finding places to go,” Becker pointed out. “But it’s different for her. She’s part of my lab, which is fairly minor, and she’s my niece besides. If I were to be charged with attempted murder, she could lose her position at the Royal Institute. That’s why he came all this way to argue for my innocence.”

“Did Mr. Zenos really wish to help that girl so badly?” Krishna muttered, downcast. “Surely, he does not see her as—”

“He’s picking up all the coins.”

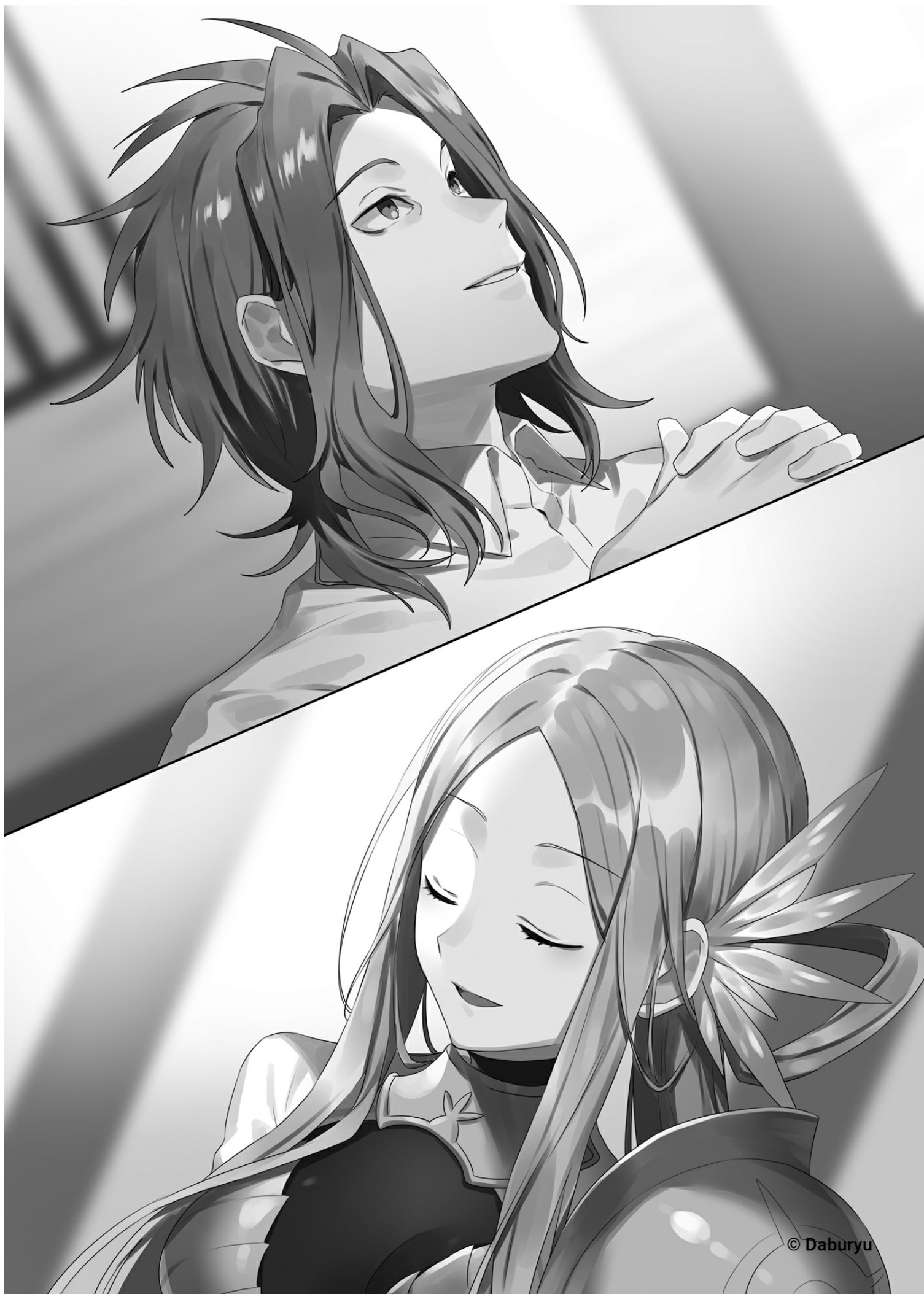
At those words, Krishna lifted her head.

The elite healer continued, gazing into the distance. “That’s what he said when he came into the party venue, that he’d pick up all the coins. And by ‘all,’ he didn’t just mean the unconscious healers, but Umin too. Now, I don’t know how much of it was his actual intention, but he stayed true to his word and saved everyone. Even Goldran, in a way, since the man would’ve died if left untreated.”

“I see,” Krishna replied quietly. “That means you were one of the coins too.”

Becker blinked for a moment, as though caught off guard, before looking thoughtfully at the door through which Zenos had left. “He really is an impressive man.”

“Typically, an interrogator would not easily agree with the words of a suspect, but...” The corners of Krishna’s lips lifted slightly. “With that sentiment, I fully concur.”



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Meanwhile, a figure moved through the forest, distancing themselves from the Royal Institute of Healing.

The figure, fully concealed behind a slate-gray cloak and hood, muttered to themselves. "Once more you get in my way. Fate seems hell-bent on making us cross paths, Zenos." Biting their thumbnail sharply, the figure continued, "How unfortunate. I was looking forward to my little experiment. What do people think in extreme situations? How do they act? If not for your interference, I would've obtained far more intriguing data."

A sudden gust of wind flipped back the hood. The figure gazed down into a puddle at their feet and watched their own reflection, their blond hair swaying in the wind, framing somewhat androgynous features.

"Afred..." the figure murmured softly. "You make a good vessel. I'll keep your company a while longer as I pursue my interests."

All for the sake of their future plans.

Pulling the hood over their eyes once more, the figure blended in with the shadows of the trees and vanished.

## Epilogue (II)

After meeting with Becker, Zenos returned to the research wing of the Royal Institute of Healing to collect the belongings he'd left behind. Umin and Cress saw him off to the main road.

"Thanks for everything, you two," Zenos said as he looked back at the pair, with Lily at his side.

"What do you mean?" Umin asked. "We're the ones who should be thanking you."

"She's right, bro," Cress agreed. Both seemed reluctant to part ways with Zenos.

"Everyone's minds are still hazy, and they can't remember what happened clearly, so no one's realized you're the one who stopped the poisoning, Mr. Zenos," Umin said. "It's so vexing to me."

"Yeah, same. I'd love to tell all those Goldran groupies that they owe you their lives, bro."

"That would attract too much attention, so, uh, please don't," Zenos pleaded. He was still a shadow healer, after all—it'd be better for him to just quietly return home at the end of his special trainee residency. After explaining as much, he took out a piece of paper from his breast pocket. "This letter is all I need."

The letter was from Becker, addressed to Zenos; Umin had found it in Becker's lab earlier. It supposedly contained information about Zenos's mentor, and was the primary reason he'd come to the Royal Institute in the first place.

"All right, Lily. Let's go."

"Okay," Lily replied. "See you, Umin! See you, um, my weird 'brother'!"

"Yes," Umin said, waving. "Thank you for everything."

"Siiis," Cress whined tearfully. "You finally called me 'brother'! I'm so



happyyy...”

Zenos and Lily stepped onto the green, grassy road and began to walk home. Zenos looked over his shoulder one final time, raised a hand to Cress and the still-waving Umin, then looked at the white building of the Royal Institute of Healing, where he’d just spent the past while. Looking up at it, he murmured softly, “Be seeing you, Royal Institute.”

Left behind, Umin and Cress still stood there, even when Zenos was out of sight.

“He really is gone,” she remarked.

“He is...” Cress agreed, sobbing.

“How much longer are you going to cry? Gross.”

“You’re always so mean to me,” Cress muttered, glaring at Umin as he wiped his cheeks. “Also, you’re the one who should be sad. You sure you’re okay with letting him go?”

“What are you saying? A lot of people are waiting for Mr. Zenos. I have no right to hold him back.”

“But you have a crush on him, no?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!” Umin stammered, beet red, as she waved her hands frantically. “What makes you think—”

Cress shrugged lightly. “I can tell. I mean, we’ve known each other since our days as trainees.”

“No, I mean...” Umin muttered awkwardly. “He *is* amazing, so I respect him, but I don’t have *those* feelings for him. It’s just, when I thought Dr. Becker had poisoned everyone, I just went pale and stood there like a fool. I wasn’t able to do anything.” She pressed a hand to her chest, looking down the road stretching before them. “And then Mr. Zenos said he’d save everyone, and kept casting healing magic on them all even when he was too tired to move. I... It’s not fair, you know. Seeing that, what girl wouldn’t...” she trailed off.

“You’ve gotta be more forward with that kinda stuff, you know,” Cress interjected with a somewhat exasperated tone. “Otherwise he’ll never notice.”

"If I could do that, I wouldn't be so worried!"

"Well... Yeah, I guess so," Cress replied simply.

Umin pouted for a moment, then took a deep breath and continued calmly. "But it's okay. Mr. Zenos wouldn't fit into the mold of the Royal Institute. I can't hold him back."

"Seriously? You give up way too easily. You'll never be happy that way."

"S-Sorry."

"I'm not giving up."

"What?"

"Someday, I'll be the one at my bro's side."

"Huh...?" Umin mumbled, her eyes widening behind her glasses. "C-Cress, I didn't know you swung that way."

"I-I don't!" he protested. "I just mean that I want his approval!"

"Goodness. You scared me for a moment," Umin said, letting out a relieved sigh.

Cress gave his cheek an awkward scratch. "So..."

"Yes?"

"Once I'm awesome enough to be at my bro's side, like, maybe you and I could..."

"What was that? You're too quiet. I can't hear you."

"N-Nothing!" Cress exclaimed. He sighed, pressing a hand to the back of his neck, then faced forward. "Bye, bro! Thanks for everything!"

Umin chuckled, then cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Goodbye, Mr. Zenos! Thank you so much!"

The refreshing breeze blowing through the road carried their voices across the blue sky, into the distant mountains and beyond.

## Appendix: Becker's Letter

Dear Zenos,

I sit alone, locked in my laboratory, as I write you this letter. Its contents are somewhat sensitive, you see, and I would prefer that it doesn't fall into anyone else's hands.

First things first, I'd like to thank you for your efforts regarding the matter of Afred's disappearance. Thanks to you, the truth of what happened thirteen years ago has come to light. Tomorrow, I'll be confronting Professor Goldran and giving him a choice during his rally. But that's unrelated to the matter at hand, so I won't go into detail.

To be honest, I was initially hesitant about entrusting you with this task. I had a feeling that, no matter what we did, Afred wouldn't be coming back to the lab. After Goldran's last dinner party, Afred came to me and revealed that Goldran had been involved in the incident thirteen years ago, and that he was a victim. Then he vanished.

He had a different aura about him at the time, very unlike the Afred I used to know. I was taken aback, but he disappeared before I could ask anything. I had many questions for him and wanted to track him down, of course, but I had no intention of asking an outsider for help. What changed my mind was seeing the black cloak at your clinic.

That's right. I remember the cloak's original owner.

Now, then. With all that out of the way, I'll tell you about your mentor.

One thing I should apologize for is that I likely cannot provide as detailed of an account about him as you might expect. Not because I had little involvement with him—rather, despite having had a very close relationship with him.

I'll explain the reason later.

To start: there are currently seven elite healers in this country. Four of them work at the Royal Institute of Healing: myself, the current director Lord

Shalbart, and two others I couldn't introduce you to, as they're both currently away on business. The remaining three are registered with the Royal Institute, but they do their own thing.

I'll save the details for another time, but until not that long ago, there were eight elite healers. So, you may ask, who was the eighth? And the answer is that it was your mentor. One of my few friends.

Even elite healers have their own individual specialties. In terms of raw healing magic skill, however, your mentor was undoubtedly the best of us. Many of the elite healers are oddballs, but he was caring, fascinating, and well-loved. Yet I doubt you heard any rumors about him during your stay at the Royal Institute.

"How come?" you might ask. After all, he was one of very few elite healers, and had many admirers besides.

The answer is that all records related to him at the Royal Institute have been sealed. The reason? He dabbled in a certain type of magic.

You might've heard of this before. There exists magic known as "anathema," or forbidden magic, which humans must never tamper with. Using these spells recklessly is said to bring about various curses that are far beyond human understanding. And if memory still serves, which it might not, the spell he meddled with was resurrection magic. I don't know the details, however.

Perhaps due to the curse, my memories of him are slowly fading. It's frankly terrifying that even I, once so close to him, can't remember his name anymore. My memories of him are fragmented: his unkempt beard, his hearty laugh, the sight of him in his black cloak when I spoke with him last. Even those things I can barely remember.

So, Zenos, if you want to know more details, you should look for his notes. Despite his whimsical nature, he was surprisingly meticulous about his magical pursuits, and it's highly likely he left records about the whole thing.

It might, however, be a hornet's nest that must never be stirred.

From my conversation with you, I suspect he's no longer among us. I should be devastated, but scarily enough, even the sense of loss feels vague to me. It's

frightening. Truly frightening. Since meeting you, I've been wanting to know more details about him too, but something deep within me recoils at that. It feels like knowing more about him would bring about a great calamity.

One must never meddle with anathema.

Perhaps I shouldn't even be discussing this at all, but I trust your judgment as a healer. I leave the final decision to you.

Lastly, speaking with you has been a very nostalgic experience. Even as my memories fade, it still feels like I can sense, somewhere, a trace of your mentor—of the man who was once such a dear friend to me. Like an aura that naturally draws people in.

Zenos, I hope your path as a healer is filled with fortune.

Your friend,  
Elnard Becker

## Side Story III: A Man's Return Home

Under the bright sunlight, a man and woman walked through the city streets.

"Unbelievable," Umin said with a sigh. "You left the papers you borrowed from me at your parents' house?"

"I-I'm sorry, okay? I took them with me to study last time I visited, and just kinda left them there," Cress said hastily, trying to explain. "Don't be so mad. I feel bad, all right? That's why I'm going back there to get them. You don't have to come with. I'll get them back, I promise."

"I need those papers for my current research. I can't afford to have you forget again."

"Yeah, yeah. My bad," Cress muttered apologetically, scratching his head.

Observing his downcast expression, Umin said, "You don't go back to your parents' home often. Shouldn't you be happier about getting the chance to?"

"Why would I? It's cramped, it's dirty, my little brothers won't shut up, and my mom is the scariest person I know..."

"Huh..."

They continued walking side by side along the road, the cobblestone cracked in places. By the road, children were playing in an irrigation channel, splashing water on each other. Cress's childhood home was in the capital's city district, in an area predominantly inhabited by lower-class citizens.

"Hey mom, I'm coming in," Cress called out as he pushed open the weather door.

Immediately, the sounds of running footsteps echoed from the hallway.

"Wow! It's Cress!"

"Cress!"

"Cress is home!"

His three younger brothers, all with similar features, simultaneously jumped on him.

“Hey!” Cress snapped. “You three! Don’t cling to people like that! Cut it out!”

He was struggling to pry his brothers off him when a voice called out from further inside. “Well, look who’s showing his face. And it’s not even a holiday! What’s the occasion?”

A stout middle-aged woman wearing an apron stepped out. Noticing the woman’s curly hair tips, Umin thought she definitely looked like Cress’s mother.

Cress’s lips pursed. “Nothing special. Just had some minor business to take care of.”

“Oh, is that so?” his mother replied. “Did they finally kick you out of the Royal Institute of Healing?”

“N-No! Of course not!”

“I knew it. You were bragging about being in some big-shot professor’s lab, about being set on the path to being important, about the statue they were gonna build of you in town, and this and that, and now look at you. Fired, just like that.”

“I didn’t get fired! And don’t tell people those things!” Cress protested, his face reddening as he raised his voice. Then he looked down for a moment before speaking again, “I quit.”

“Huh?”

“I quit. Goldran’s lab? I left.”

Cress’s mother furrowed her brows slightly. “Are you okay with that? You were so happy about it.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ve got bigger goals now.”

After a brief silence, Cress’s mother smacked his cheeks with both palms.

“Ow! What the heck, mom?!” he exclaimed.

“What do you mean, ‘what the heck’? I don’t see you for a bit, and next thing I know, you look this good.”

“I-I haven’t changed that much!”

“Yeah, you have,” she insisted. “I dunno what happened, but you look like a proper man now.” Her gaze then shifted to Umin, who’d been standing behind Cress the whole time. “Oh? Ohhhhh? Ha ha! So that’s what it is.”

“What are you going on about, mom?”

“I *thought* it was weird for you to suddenly show up here. So you came to introduce your girlfriend to the family, yeah? That must be why you’ve changed.”

“Huh?” Umin mumbled, pointing at herself and opening her mouth in shock. “Huh?!”

Cress waved his hands in a panic. “N-No, mom! That’s crazy talk! She’s just my colleague—”

“You brought her all the way home and now you’re being coy about it? Oh, Cress, look at her! She’s way too pretty for you. Come in, girl, come in! Don’t mind the mess!”

“Um, no, I—” Umin tried to explain.

“Huh?” one of Cress’s brothers interrupted. “Miss, are you Cress’s girlfriend?”

“Wow! She’s so pretty! Good for you, Cress!”

“Let’s all play!”

The three boys all jumped on Umin at the same time.

“Hey!” Cress snapped, struggling to pry his brothers away from her. “I told you three punks not to cling to people!”

Umin smiled awkwardly. “Um... Nice to meet you.”

\*\*\*

After going inside and having a nice chat over some tea, the pair went up to Cress’s room on the second floor. As he took out the papers from a cluttered bookshelf, he asked, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I mean,” Umin mumbled. “They all looked at me so expectantly. How could I have told them it wasn’t true?” She let out a deep sigh, holding her head in her



hands. “Ah, but... Now I feel bad for lying to them in the heat of the moment...”

Cress looked at Umin intently for a moment, then swallowed. “So, uh, in that case... When, y’know, I achieve my goals, can we...make it so it’s not a lie anymore?”

“Huh?”

“Uh, nothing! Never mi—” He stopped midsentence and shifted his gaze to the door. Sets of small eyes were peeking in through the slight crack.

“Cress, aren’t you gonna kiss her?” one of his brothers asked.

“Don’t say anything, stupid!” another protested. “He’ll notice us!”

“Cress is a weenie,” the third remarked. “It’s not happening.”

“You brats!” Cress yelled. “Get the hells out of here!”

His brothers shrieked and ran away, with Cress hot on their tails. As he burst out of the room, his wallet, which he’d left on a corner of his desk, fell to the floor; a small piece of paper fluttered out.

Umin picked it up, looking at the stiff handwriting. It read, “I’ll be a man just like you, bro.”

She sighed. “Mr. Zenos would’ve never kicked up such a fuss. You have a long way to go.” Stepping out of the room, she watched Cress chase his screaming brothers down the stairs. “Well... Both of you do have something in common: annoying little brothers.”

With an awkward smile, she quietly wished him good luck.

# Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of the second volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

On to the afterword! I've always wanted to write something interesting in the afterword...

When I first won an award for best newcomer, I was so excited about writing this section. I mean, writing an afterword meant I was getting a book published, which in itself was an amazing opportunity! Many of my favorite authors write fascinating afterwords, so I was like, "hell yeah let's make the afterword better than the book itself" (whether I succeeded is another matter entirely). But lately, when it comes to writing these, I just find myself hesitating, with my hands hovering in place.

And the reason is because, given the times, I've barely gone outside except for work. Traveling overseas (or domestically, even) isn't feasible. Casual drinking parties aren't feasible. Meeting new people just isn't happening.

In other words, my daily life isn't all that interesting. Therefore, I find myself short of entertaining stories to share in the afterword. The most interesting thing that's happened to me recently was that, wanting to relax, I went to a deserted, rustic zoo in the countryside, and got spat at by an alpaca.

Well, despite the times, there's still freedom in stories! They allow us to travel freely and meet new characters one after the other. In this volume, Zenos goes to a hot spring, has a drinking party with everyone, immerses himself in a new environment and meets all sorts of new people. So I hope that, especially in these trying times, you find joy in the freedom within this story!

Now then, on to acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work in the publication of this

book.

Daburyu-sensei's many illustrations are, as always, stunningly beautiful. I'd also like to express my thanks for the manga adaptation by Ten Junnoichi-sensei! It adds a new dimension to the world of *Brilliant Healer*, and as a reader myself, I'm always looking forward to new chapters.

The support from my web readers has been very motivating! And, above all, my deepest thanks to everyone who purchased the book!

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

## **Author**

**Sakaku Hishikawa**

In volume two, our intrepid shadow healer infiltrates the very headquarters of all healers! I hope you enjoy it!

## **Illustrator**

**Daburyu**

Hello! I'm Daburyu, and just as with volume 1, I was in charge of illustrating this book.

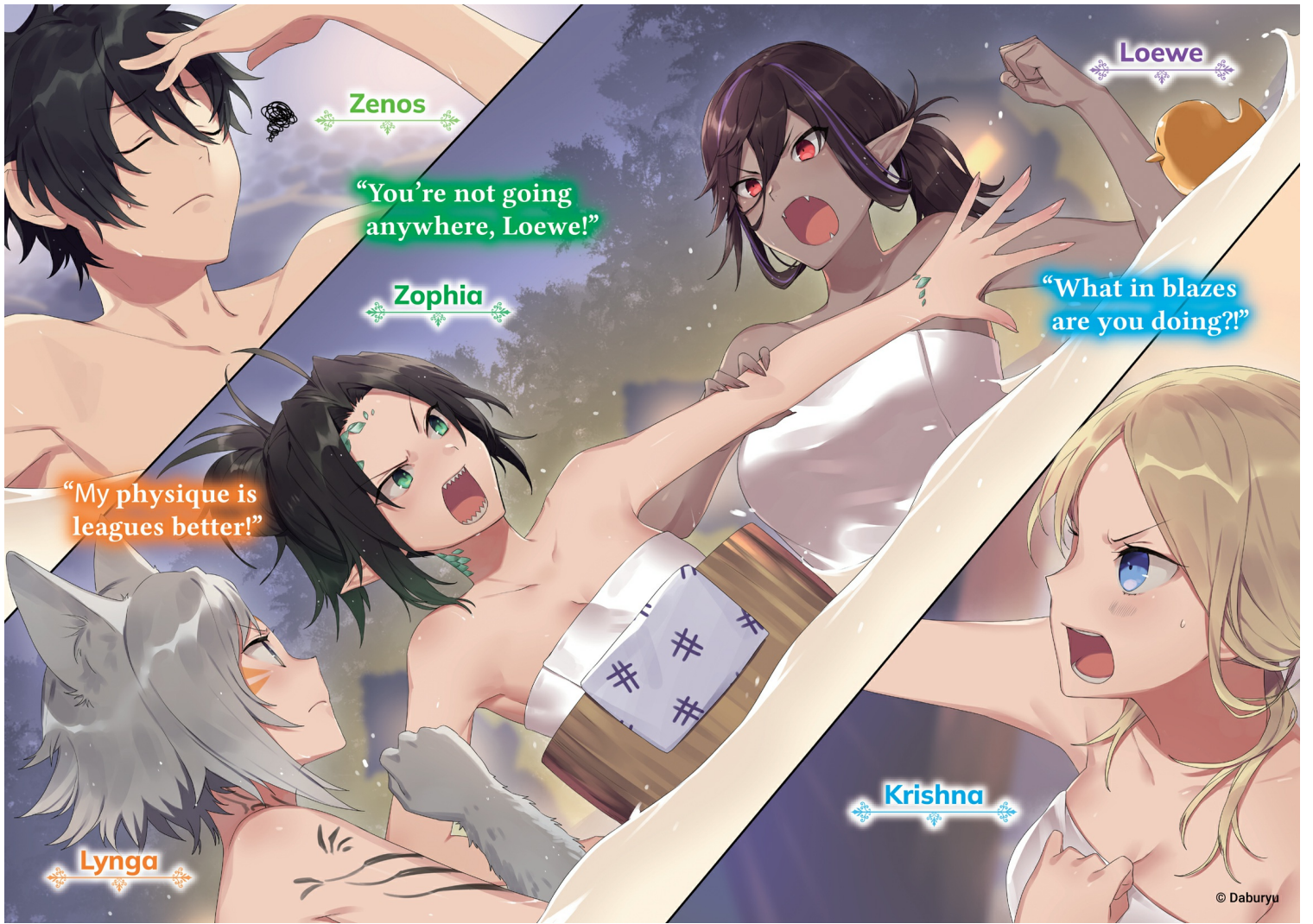
Seeing Zenos and the others made me want to go to a hot spring, so I bought some hot spring salts. They smell great.

**Sakaku Hishikawa**  
Illustrator  
**Daburyu**

The  
**Brilliant Healer's**  
New Life in the Shadows **2**

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Becker

“Wow. This is impressive.”

Umin

Zenos muttered in admiration as he first set foot within the building. It was the Royal Institute of Healing, with its pristine white walls and privileged location in the administrative ward of the special district, where nobles resided.





As Zenos's chant echoed,  
a tsunami of white light engulfed the zombie king,  
sending ripples through the air that violently shook the trees.



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by Sakaku Hishikawa

Translated by Camilla L.

Edited by Ori Starling

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