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Chapter 1: Childhood Dreams

It was an unremarkable village with no name.

In a world terrorized by an entity known as the Demon Lord, the country was filled with anguish and suffering. However, this particular village was so calm and tranquil that all that seemed irrelevant.

On the edge of this peaceful village lay a small hill where two boys were fighting with wooden sticks.

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"Yah!"
"Ah!"
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The red-haired boy had used his stick to knock the blue-haired boy's stick clean out of his hand.

"Heh heh. I win, Yu!" the red-haired boy, Foyle Austin, declared triumphantly.

"Ugh...!" The blue-haired boy, Yu Protargonist, hung his head in frustration.

"That's ten fights out of ten! You really are weak."

"Gah... I lost again."

"Hey! Foy!" cried a voice.

"Uh-oh. M-Mei?!"

A girl approached Foyle with her cheeks puffed out in anger. She had peach-colored hair and was clutching a doll against her cute pink dress. Her name was Mei Hellvin.

"I can't believe you're bullying Yu again! Bullying's bad! Cut it out!"

"I'm not b-bullying him. It's training. We were training."

"You know Yu's not good at fighting. He's not as fit as you are. Are you all right, Yu?"

"I'm okay, Mei," Yu sniffed.

Mei handed Yu a handkerchief that he used to wipe away his tears.

Foyle was unamused by the whole thing. The triumph he'd felt upon winning a moment ago was gone without a trace. "Hah. It's Yu's own fault for being a crybaby. Don't blame me."

"Honestly! There you go, sulking again! Just say you're sorry! Tell Yu you're sorry! You've been bad!"

"It's fine, Mei," Yu said, sniffing. "He's right that I'm a crybaby... But I hate losing! Foyle, give me another chance!"

"You want another fight? You'll never beat me, Yu."

"Yes I will!"

"You really don't know when to give up, do you? Heh heh. But that's what makes you Yu!"

"Stop! Someone's gonna get hurt!" Mei cried.

Insults born out of childish jealousy were quickly forgotten as the boys picked up their sticks to fight again. Their friendship was restored in an instant.

"Ugh... I didn't win even once."

"Haah..." Foyle panted. "Heh heh. It'll be ten years before you can beat me, Yu!"

"Well you are the strongest in the village, Foyle."

Yu still hadn't achieved a single victory. As he fell to the ground, exhausted, he looked at Foyle with frustration. However, there was also admiration in his eyes.

Foyle also panted for breath. Yu's stubborn determination was a force to be reckoned with.

This brought their training to a conclusion for the day. Neither boy had the stamina to keep going.

"Now that we're done training, what'll we do for the rest of the day?"

As the boys began considering other activities, Mei's hand shot up. "Oh, I know! We can go to the meadow and make crowns out of flowers! Or we can

play house!"

"Play house...? Mei always comes up with really complicated situations..."

"You don't have to say it, Yu. I was thinking the same thing," Foyle replied. "Mei, you've gotta understand that we're tired out from training. What we oughta do is read a picture book! And I've got one right here! Tada!"

"That one again?" Mei rolled her eyes.

"Wow!" Yu's eyes lit up with excitement.

Foyle laughed and scratched his nose as he held out the book. "It's *The Hero's Story*. Who'd wanna read anything else?"

"That's the one your grandpa bought, right?! Wish I had it too, but my family doesn't have much money... Let's read it right now!"

"Slow down, Yu! Let's get ourselves comfy first."

"There's no use arguing, is there?" Mei sighed. "Fine, I'll read it too! Make some space for me, Foy."

"I can't move any further. Yu, can you shift over?"

"But then I'll be too far away to see the book."

In the end the three children packed themselves together tightly with Foyle in the center.

"All right, let's start," Foyle said.

They began to read *The Hero's Story*.

The plot was simple. It was set in a world where an evil Demon Lord reigned and commanded demons as well as creatures of his own design—monsters. Together, they formed the Demon Lord Army.

In this world there arose a hero chosen by the holy sword Arianrhod. The hero traveled to various locations with several companions, overcame assorted challenges, and defeated assassins dispatched by the Demon Lord.

It was a tale of friendship featuring multiple showdowns with a human foe known as Angrecious, who repeatedly tried to block the hero's path. The tale concluded with the hero overcoming Angrecious before defeating the Demon Lord and restoring peace to the land.

There was no more to it. The text was simple, with no difficult words that might put off children. But it was enough to stir excitement in Foyle and his friends.

"Wow! Heroes are so cool! I'm gonna be a hero too! I'll defeat bad guys and save people! I'll take on Angrecious if I have to!"

"So you're always telling us, Foy," Mei said. "I'd rather be a mage. I'd learn all kinds of wonderful spells! What about you, Yu?"

"Huh? M-Me?"

"Yes. What do you wanna be?"

"Yeah, I wanna know too," Foyle said.

Yu almost panicked as his two friends stared at him. He nervously pressed his fingertips together. "Y-You won't laugh...? I wanna be a hero," he answered with some embarrassment.

His friends were both stunned at first, but a moment later, Foyle began to laugh.

"Ha ha ha! A crybaby like you? There's no way. You couldn't even defeat Angrecious."

As Foyle continued laughing, Mei came to Yu's defense. "You don't know that."

That caught Foyle off guard. "What? Are you saying Yu's better than me?"

"No, I'm saying he's kind. Heroes don't just have to be strong, you know. They need a bigger heart than anyone."

"Ugh, grrr... Well that makes you and me rivals, Yu!"

"Huh?!"

Annoyed by Mei's words, Foyle picked up his stick once more and issued a challenge to Yu. "There can only be one hero. That means it can't be both of us. Let's settle it with a sword fight!"

"What? Another one?!"

"This is what I mean, Foy," Mei said. "You think you can settle everything by showing who's stronger."

"Oh, shut up. Let's do this, Yu! Grab your weapon!"

"What?!"

Eager to show off in front of Mei, Foyle challenged Yu to another fight. However, the two boys were already so tired that they quickly collapsed, leaving Mei thoroughly unimpressed.

But even as he lost his breath and fell to his knees, Foyle remained determined. "I'm not done. I'll show you what I'm made of, Mei."



That same night, when most villagers were sound asleep, Foyle, Yu, and a few other children quietly crept out of their homes and gathered just outside the nearby forest. Their plan was to visit a small shrine in the forest that was dedicated to the goddess. The children saw it as a way of proving their courage to one another, in the way children often do.

"Hey... Are we really gonna do this?"

"What? Don't tell me you're scared, Yu."

"Course he is! Yu's a crybaby!"

"N-No I'm not! But the grown-ups say the forest's dangerous."

"You'll never be a hero if that's all it takes to scare you," Foyle told him.

"Uhh..." Yu struggled to argue with that.

This was the first time that the other children had heard about Yu's desire to be a hero, and the idea caused quite a stir among them.

"Wait, what? Yu thinks he's gonna be a hero?"

"You gotta be kidding. There's no way that crybaby can be a hero. Right?"

"Ugh..."

The others were laughing at Yu's dream. One after another, they told him he had no hope.

Foyle, however, kept his gaze locked on Yu. "Well? Are you coming?"

"Y-Yeah, I am!"

"You don't have to force yourself," one of the children said.

"Yeah, exactly," another agreed.

"I'm not forcing myself! I wanna go too!" Yu spoke out of determination, pride, or perhaps just a childish desire to argue. But he was insistent.

"I knew you had it in you," Foyle said. "That settles it. We're all going. I'll take the lead, obviously."

Although the other children had laughed, Foyle never doubted that Yu would go with them. But Foyle wanted to be the first one there so he could show everyone just how fearless he was. He was driven by a desire to explore, but there was also another thought that lay at the back of his mind. After this, Mei has to realize that I'm better than him.

Foyle balled his hands into fists as he gave the other children a few words of encouragement. "My brave friends! Let's start the exploration!"

In return came a chorus of "Yeahhh!" followed by one weaker "Yeah..."

With their fists raised high, the children headed into the forest.

It was the first time they'd entered the forest at night. They found it dark and foreboding. They couldn't sense as many living creatures around as during the day, and there was an unsettling feeling in the air that made everyone nervous. Even Foyle couldn't help but gulp.

"Gaaah!"

"Ahh! Stop making weird noises, Yu!"

"B-B-But something long and thin touched my leg..."

"D-Don't say things like that."

"Hold up. Let me shine the lantern on you."

Foyle lit the area around Yu's feet, revealing a long, thin snake slithering across the ground.

"It's just a snake. A tiny one at that. Shows what a baby you are if that's all it takes to scare you!"

"How am I supposed to not get scared by something like that?"

"Listen, you can't let anything scare you now that you're aiming to be a hero," Foyle told him. "Just look at how brave I am!"

Foyle began running ahead, and the other children ran after him in turn.

"Foyle, wait up! Don't go too far! It's dangerous!"

"What's wrong, crybaby? You scared?" one child taunted.

"Yeah, you'd better hurry up or you're gonna get left behind," warned another.

"Look, Yu!" Foyle shouted. "I'm way ahead of you. Heh heh."

The party ventured onward, jabbing at Yu all the way, but they found no trace of the small shrine they were looking for.

The boy who'd claimed to know the shrine's location began looking in every direction. "That's weird. I thought it was around here."

As Foyle grew worried, he started looking around for it too. "Are you serious? Don't tell me you took us the wrong way."

"I can't see it anywhere."

"Wait up, Foyle," Yu cried. "I'm charging in b-bravely. I'm okay. I'm not scared. Waaah?!"

"Yu?!"

Just as Yu gave himself a few words of encouragement and sped up to catch up with Foyle, he lost his footing and then disappeared from view. Foyle shone the lantern on the spot where Yu had tripped, but there was no trace of him.

"Uh-oh! Crybaby Yu must've fallen over the edge!" cried one of the children.

"Now we're in trouble!" another said.

"Everyone stay here while I go look for him!" Foyle ordered. "We can't let ourselves get separated."

Foyle quickly but carefully made his way down the steep incline. It was steeper than most children could manage, but Foyle reached the bottom safely.

"Yu! Are you hurt?!"

"F-Foyle."

As luck would have it, he found Yu quickly. He'd landed in a clearing free from any branches or spiky foliage that might have injured him. Apart from being covered in mud, he was perfectly fine.

Foyle was relieved, but Yu's attention was focused somewhere else. Foyle followed his gaze.

"It's..." Yu murmured as awe filled him.

The sight took Foyle's breath away. "Yeah, we've found it. The goddess's shrine."

They both stared at a statue of the goddess that lay in the shrine beneath a tree.

"So that's the shrine," Foyle said. "Wow! It looks awesome!"

There was another statue of the goddess in the village church that was in much better condition, but this one had a solemn air about it that made it hard to look away. Foyle almost lost track of time as he studied it, but then remembered that the other children were waiting.

"Yu, we gotta go back up. Everyone's waiting."

"Oh, you're right!"

The two boys tore themselves away from the shrine.

Somehow, they made it up the slope. The moment they rejoined the other children, Foyle began bragging that they'd seen the shrine.

"What?! So there really is a shrine to the goddess."

"Yep. And it was Yu who found it, right Yu?" Foyle said.

"Yeah," Yu agreed. "It was beautiful."

"Wish I could see it, but there's no way we're all getting down there," one of

the children said.

"So only you two get to see it?" another said with a tsk.

They were all disappointed to learn they would not see the shrine.

"Well, we found it, so we're heading back to the village now," Foyle declared.

The others didn't want to give up, but none had the courage to head down the slope.

Just as they were about to leave, Yu heard a faint noise that made him cower in fear. "Huh?! Did you guys hear that?"

"What? Another snake?" Foyle asked. "Heh. Let Foyle Austin take on this enemy!"

Foyle shone his lantern in the direction of the sound. What he saw left him speechless. The creature revealed amid the darkness was no snake. It was something huge—three times taller than Foyle—with black fur and sharp claws. They could've mistaken it for a bear at first glance, which would've been frightening enough already, but the creature's strange eyes marked it as something else entirely.

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"P-Purple..."
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In this world, purple eyes always meant one thing: the Demon Lord Army. Only the demons and monsters serving the Demon Lord had such eyes.

The children had found themselves face-to-face with a monster for the first time. It was huge, ferocious, and fiendish.

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"Uh, uh..."

"Eeeeek! A m-monster!"

"Ahhhh!"

"W-Wait! No one move!" Foyle cried.
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The other children, unable to control themselves, scattered in all directions out of fear.

"Roooar!" the beast bellowed.

"Argh!" A boy named Shu began running first, only to be slashed by the beast's claws.

"Shu!!!"

After being thrown aside by the monster and colliding with a tree, Shu lay motionless with crimson blood pouring from open wounds.

Yu turned pale at the sight.

Foyle dropped his lantern and began to panic. "Haah, haah," he panted, clutching his chest as his heart beat so fast he could hardly take it.

What's happening? I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared! The stick in his hand felt like a joke. All the confidence he'd felt had vanished. For the first time in his life, Foyle was consumed by fear. He considered himself lucky that the monster was focused on Shu.

"Yu! Run! We can't fight this thing! We need the grown-ups!"

"N-No!"

"Huh?! What do you mean?"

"Shu's still alive. We gotta save him!"

"But... There's no way!"

The were cries of "Eeek!" and "Ahhhh!" as their companions fled, but Yu stood his ground, despite his trembling knees. He held a stick at the ready as he slowly approached the monster.

The monster turned its head, realizing that some of the children hadn't run away. It was looking in Foyle's direction with bloodshot purple eyes.

"Ah, ahh... Ahhhh!" Lacking the courage to face the creature himself, Foyle turned and ran, leaving Yu behind.

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"Haah. Haah. Haah."

Foyle had been running with every ounce of his strength without ever looking back. His wild sprint, driven by his fear, was quickly draining him of energy.

"Agh!" A tree root at his feet sent him tumbling.

Foyle immediately tried to get back up but his trembling legs refused to support him.

"Haah. Haah. Ahh." I'm scared. That thing was horrible.

His legs were shaking violently. He knew he had to keep running, but his body wouldn't obey. It was then he realized that he couldn't hear the creature's howls behind him.

We got away, he told himself. A moment later, he realized that his friend wasn't by his side.

"Yu!" Foyle yelled.

Yu must have stayed behind. Even though he was weaker than Foyle. There was no way he could save Shu. And yet...

"I... I..." Foyle's legs trembled, his breathing was heavy, and only darkness lay ahead of him.

Can I face that thing again? he asked himself. The image of the creature's purple irises, filled with malice, was burned into his memory. It sent a shiver down his spine as he recalled the sight.

"I'm scared..." I can't. I'm scared. I'm scared. Someone help. I can't beat that thing. I don't want to turn back.

"Yu... You're fighting, aren't you? All by yourself with that horrible monster."

And what does that say about me...? I left Yu behind. I ran away and let someone weaker than me do the fighting.

Foyle couldn't understand how Yu was able to stand his ground without giving in to sheer terror.

"I'm... I'm gonna be the hero! I shouldn't be running! I've gotta save Yu!"

Foyle slapped his own face as he forced his body to obey. He picked up a stick and ran toward Yu.



Eventually, Foyle made it back to the same spot, only to find that the monster

had already been defeated by adult soldiers. The soldiers were wounded, suggesting a tough battle had taken place, but they'd won in the end.

The children who'd run away were there too with the soldiers watching over them, and the boy slashed by its claws was receiving treatment. But that wasn't all.

"Mei? What are you doing here?"

By chance, Mei had noticed when the others were first entering the forest and had informed the grown-ups. Foyle had no way of knowing that this was how help had arrived so quickly. He didn't even question it because something else had caught his attention.

Mei was in tears as she held Yu in her arms. He was in a terrible state. His entire body was covered in wounds, but he'd never let go of his stick.

Foyle watched them from a distance. As the strength left his body, he leaned against a tree for support.

It was obvious from Yu's condition that he really had fought against the monster.

Yu stood up to that horrible thing. And what did I do? I'm supposed to be stronger, but I...I ran away.

"I'm...ashamed of myself!" Hidden behind the tree where no one could see, Foyle cried bitter tears of frustration.

Meanwhile, the statue of the goddess in the nearby shrine shimmered as if it was watching the whole thing.

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A year had passed since the incident. Since we entered the forest. Since Yu had encountered a monster and refused to run.

We'd gotten ourselves in big trouble with the adults, but Yu and Shu both survived. Life went on just as before, only with a little more supervision to ensure we never tried anything so stupid ever again.

As time passed, everyone forgot all about it.

The sighting of a monster was, of course, cause for serious concern. The kingdom dispatched a team to survey the region, but when they failed to find a single trace of any other monsters, their investigation was cut short. With countless areas under threat from the Demon Lord Army, it was unsurprising that the kingdom would be quick to forget about a lone monster that hadn't killed anyone.

I, however, remembered it all clearly. More to the point, I couldn't forget.

My efforts to train were far more serious from that day on. I honed my body and learned swordsmanship from soldiers in the village. Mei worried whenever I got hurt, but I was so desperate to grow stronger that I paid my injuries no mind.

I'd decided I would never run away again. I had to protect those precious to me. I approached my training with such devotion that everyone around me grew concerned. The only time I felt I could relax was while playing with my two friends.

That day, all of the village's ten-year-olds were gathering at our only church. I'd gotten there early, but I found a familiar face already waiting when I arrived.

"Hey, Yu. It won't start for a while yet. You must've gotten here real early. You couldn't wait either, huh?"

He was my precious, longtime friend.

"Hi, Foyle. Yeah, I came straight here because I couldn't relax. Was it like that for you too?"

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep at all last night. It's finally our big day."

"Yep. Our oracle day."

The oracle ceremony.

Priests served Olympia—the benevolent and generous goddess who watched over us. During the oracle ceremony, a priest would listen for the voice of the goddess as she assigned us jobs. Once someone had their job, it couldn't be changed, and their life would be transformed forever. Today was going to be monumental for all of us.

I'd also heard that, in very rare instances, titles were sometimes awarded during an oracle ceremony, alongside the jobs. These were generally given to people destined to accomplish great things while carrying out their job, and were revealed in the form of a divine revelation spoken directly into their mind. The priest would then determine what the title meant and make it known publicly. A title was such a great honor that it would become a second name for the recipient.

Those with a title were truly blessed because they had the potential to learn unique abilities. There was a good chance that the recipient's name would go down in history. But getting a title was so rare that it only happened within the royal capital and other such major cities. There were no stories of titles being awarded to people in a remote village like mine.

"I wonder what we'll be," I said.

"I can't even guess. When the oracle's over, we'll have the jobs the goddess thinks are best for us. We might even get something we didn't think of."

"True. I just hope I don't have to be a mage or something. I'd be useless at that."

"You're not the best at complicated stuff, are you Foyle?"

"What was that? You got something to say?"

I playfully put Yu in a headlock and rubbed my knuckles against his scalp.

"Ha ha. I'm sorry."

"Heh. You'd better watch out."

We both laughed.

"What do you want to be, Foyle?"

"Hah! I wanna be a hero, obviously!" It was the same childhood dream I'd always had. I still remembered every last detail of the heroic tale from the picture book.

"You haven't grown out of that yet, Foy?" said a voice from behind us. "When are you gonna stop being a kid?"

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"Ah!" I let out, startled.
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"Hi, Mei," said Yu.
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Neither of us had noticed Mei's approach. She was wearing a stylish dress and hairpin in honor of the big day. She looked so pretty that I had to turn away and pretend to clear my throat before she noticed my face turning red.

"I wanna be a mage," she said. "Then I can use all kinds of spells to make people happy! I wouldn't mind being a healer either. Especially when I think about how often you two get injured."

"G-Give me a break," I said. "I'm gonna be more careful."

"I'll believe it when I see it. What about you, Yu?"

"Me? Being a hero would be nice, but if that's too much to ask, then a magic engineer."

"Not sure you'll be a hero, but you're good enough with your hands to be a magic engineer," I said.

"He sure is," Mei agreed. "We never could've made that secret base without him."

"Yeah! It's thanks to Yu that the grown-ups still haven't found it."

"It's n-not like I did it all myself!" Yu stammered. "You both worked on it with me."

"Stop acting humble," I said.

"Yeah, you should be more confident," Mei agreed.

"Ugh... You two are embarrassing me."

The three of us were still enjoying our conversation when the church bell rang to announce the start of the oracle ceremony. We were so busy talking that time had passed before we knew it.

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"It's finally time," I said. "Let's go."

"All right."

"Okay."
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I headed into the church with my two friends.

There was a heavy atmosphere inside the building. Parents were sitting on benches to the left and right, each impatiently waiting to hear what job their child would be given. I visited the church regularly, but I'd never felt so much tension or holy presence here.

"I'd like to welcome the young ones among us whose future will be made known today," the village's only priest spoke from behind a pulpit at the back of the church. To his left and right were young men and women known as acolytes. "Let us commence the oracle. As your names are called one at a time, I would like you to step forward so that Goddess Olympia can bestow a fitting job upon you," he said solemnly.

An acolyte called out the first name. "Shu Malur, step forward."

"Y-Yes, sir!" The boy went and stood before the priest. He was one of our friends who'd gone looking for the goddess's shrine with us.

"Relax and give me your hand," the priest said. "Don't worry. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"O-Okay!"

"Now let us begin. Oh, benevolent Goddess Olympia who watches over us, we ask you, what job would best suit this child?"

Shu's body began to glow with faint light as the priest was saying his prayer to Goddess Olympia.

"I have an answer. Your job is carpenter."

"R-Really?!" Shu was delighted. He used to dream of being a warrior, but after being attacked by the monster, he'd started talking about building houses that could keep fearsome creatures out.

"So this is how the oracle works," Yu said. "I'm getting excited!"

"Yeah, me too," I agreed.

The children's names were called one after another. Each child was happy with the job chosen for them.

"Next, Mei Hellvin."

"Oh, that's me!"

Mei jumped to her feet the moment she heard her name. After a quick look back to wave at us, she trotted up to the priest.

Yu and I smiled awkwardly back at her as we watched.

"What's Mei gonna be?"

"I dunno, but I'm sure she'll do it well, whatever it is."

While we talked, Mei's oracle began.

"Ooh!" The old priest had announced each job calmly up to now, but this time he sounded moved. "Mei Hellvin... What a wonderful job! You're a mage!"

"Huh? Huh?! A what? I'm actually gonna be a mage?! Yay! Uh...?" Mei began clutching her head.

"Mei? Is something wrong?" The priest looked alarmed.

"There's a voice in my head. It sounds like a woman. Arch...mage? What?"

"Oh, my. Please allow me a few more moments."

"Huh? Oh, okay."

The priest closed his eyes again, like he was searching for something. Then his wrinkled eyelids sprang open. "There's no doubt about it. Mei Hellvin, you've been given the title of 'Archmage of Water'!"

"What? A title? R-Really?"

"Indeed. And during your oracle no less. You'll be a splendid mage, make no mistake."

Mei began to tremble with emotion. "Archmage of Water" was a title given to mages excelling in water magic, so her success was more or less guaranteed already.

"I did it! I'm gonna be a mage just like I always dreamed!" Unable to contain herself, Mei came running over and hugged us both.

"Uhh?!"

"Wah?!"

Mei was a girl who hadn't spent her childhood training like I had; her body was still soft, and she smelled good. More importantly, she was the girl I liked, so a hug from her was bound to make my heart race uncomfortably fast.

"Ahem. As happy as you must be, there are still children awaiting the result of their oracle. Foyle Austin, you're next." My name had finally been called.

"Y-Yes, sir!" I squeaked while trying to act like the hug from Mei hadn't made me turn bright red.

I waved to Yu and Mei as they wished me luck, then walked up to the priest.

"Let's see what your job will be. Hold out your hand."

I extended my hand as instructed while taking deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

As my body gave off faint light, I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed hard. I don't really wanna be a hero. I hate to admit it, but I ran away when it mattered, and left my friend Yu behind. I've cried over it so much. I don't want more bad memories. I don't wanna be so pathetic anymore. So please, Goddess Olympia, all I want from a job is the power to protect the people I care about.

"Oh, ooooh! Your job truly is hero!" The impassioned old priest shook with happiness and began to cry. He was staring right at me.

His excitement quickly spread to the villagers.

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"Hero? Did he say hero?"

"That can't be right. A hero in our own village?"

"Then the legend's true!"

"A hero...! Foyle Austin the Hero!"

"Let's hear it for Foyle Austin!"

"Foyle!"

"Foyle!"
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"Foyle!" "Foyle!" "Foyle!" "Foyle!" "Foyle!"

The chanting grew louder. Every last one of them was cheering for me.

I knew as well as anyone how much that job meant. Of course, it was my dream. I'd been working tirelessly for this. The problem was, there was a voice in my head telling me something very different.

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"Foyle Austin. Job: Fake Hero."

"Fake? What do you mean fake?"

"Um," I said aloud.

"What is it?" the priest asked.

"Are you sure my job is hero?"

"Yes, there's no mistake. You're a hero, Foyle Austin."

"And, um, what about my title?"
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"Hmm? Oh... You don't have one. But don't you worry, I'm sure you'll get your title before long by accomplishing deeds that go down in history."

The priest was trying to reassure me, but he hadn't cleared up my confusion at all. If he said I had no title, then it had to be true, but the voice in my mind declaring me "fake hero" had been painfully loud. The priest was claiming that my assigned job was "hero," and I had complete trust in him, but both my heart and my head were telling me I was a fake hero. Something wasn't right. My thoughts went around in circles as I tried to make sense of it.

"I realize that what has happened here today is unprecedented, but the oracle isn't finished. We have one child left." The old priest calmly pointed to Yu as he asked the adults to settle down. "Today is special for all of the children. Please save the celebrations until we're finished."

Though there was still a lot of chatter, the cheering died down a little. I was thankful for a moment to think.

As the noise subsided, Yu seized the opportunity to congratulate me. "Congrats, Foyle." He sounded sincerely happy for me.

"Uh..." I couldn't bear to look him in the eye. I knew how badly Yu had wanted to be the hero. I couldn't imagine how he felt toward me at that

moment, or what his emotions were as he congratulated me. I couldn't look at him. I didn't want to see his face.

"Next, Yu Protargonist," the priest called out while I was still searching for a response.

"Y-Yes, sir!" Yu grew stiff with nervousness as he approached the priest.

I felt sure that whatever job Yu got, it was going to be something amazing. Mei and I had both been given impressive jobs, and she'd even gotten a title. I wasn't sure if I'd been given a title or not...but either way, there had to be something special for Yu too.

However, no sooner than I'd made this prediction, it was proved wrong.

"Um, this is..." The priest was concerned as he repeatedly closed his eyes to pray, then opened them again to study Yu's face.

I watched him closely, as did Mei and the rest of the villagers. He grew more and more perplexed, but at last, he announced Yu's job.

"Yu Protargonist... You have no job."

The cheering and chatter abruptly stopped, and the room fell completely silent.

"How can I not have a...a job?"

The uncomfortable silence was in stark contrast to the excited response I'd received. The villagers had had high hopes for Yu, but now they looked at him with disappointment and the disdain shown to the jobless. If someone was denied a job, it meant they'd been forsaken by the goddess.

"You weren't given one. You're unassigned I'm afraid. It's a shame. I've never seen this happen."

"B-But..." Unable to bear it any longer, Yu ran out of the building.

"Yu!" Mei went chasing after him.

I'd been staring at my feet as I tried to process the flood of new information, but I lifted my head and caught a glimpse of Yu just before he disappeared.

The moment I saw him, I realized the truth. There wasn't any rational

reasoning behind my conclusion. I just knew. Yu was the *real* hero. I felt it in my gut, like another divine revelation. Maybe the knowledge really did come from someplace supernatural.

Reeling from shock, I wanted to run after my friends. "Yu!"

"Well then, Foyle. Or should I say, Sir Foyle. Come, let us dispatch word to the royal capital."

The priest and acolytes surrounded me before I had a chance to go anywhere. The villagers then formed an impenetrable barrier ahead of me.

No, wait! My friends are upset. I have to go after them!

But my opportunity to escape was long gone.

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The priest and his acolytes forced me to stay in the temple for quite some time, so it wasn't until the next day that I finally saw my friends again.

I'd been worried about them both the whole time. The old priest told me there was nothing to fret about, but all of his acolytes were too busy congratulating me on my job assignment to say anything reassuring about Yu. All that did was annoy me.

The priest mentioned something about an in-person meeting with the king in the royal capital and explained a little about my duties as the hero, but it all felt like a blur.

My family had also been called to the church. My grandparents were overjoyed. They were the ones who'd raised me because I'd already lost both of my parents. Seeing them smile made me happy too, but I couldn't tell them the truth about the job I'd been given. I had to lie about it.

"Yu! Mei!"

After forcing my way out of the church and the ongoing preparations, I finally joined Yu and Mei. They were beneath a tree at the bottom of the same hill as always.

"Foy!" Mei said.

Rather than greet me like he always did, Yu reacted as if we were strangers. "Oh... Sir Foyle."

"Huh? Who are you calling sir?" I was shocked and a little saddened.

"Yu, no!" Mei scolded him. "That's not nice! If you call him 'Sir' it's like he's not your friend anymore! You think he wants that?!"

"Yeah... She's right. You don't have to treat me any different."

"B-But..."

"No buts! You're both friends! Now make up!" Mei grabbed our hands and forced us to shake. She was a little aggressive about it, but it helped us get over the awkwardness.

"Sorry, Foyle. I shouldn't have—"

"Let's forget about it. I already did."

"Good," Mei said. "You two have to get along."

"Sorry to you too, Mei," Yu said. "And thanks. You're always supporting me."

"Huh? Ah ha ha. Cut it out, Yu."

It was as if the two of them had grown closer in the time since I last saw them. It made me a little uneasy, but I pushed that feeling aside because I needed to ask them something.

"Can I ask you both for a favor? Come with me to the royal capital."

"What? You mean the capital of the whole kingdom? Why would we go?" Yu replied.

"They say I've gotta meet the king. And I've gotta go to the Church of the Goddess's headquarters. And, um... I'm... I'm too nervous to go alone."

"Foy... Of course! I'll go! Yu's coming too, aren't you?"

"But, Mei... An unassigned like me can't—"

"Forget about that!" I declared with my chest puffed out. "I'll stand up for you if anyone complains! There's nothing wrong with you!"

Yu was the real hero. I had to do something to show everyone he existed.

I looked him right in the eye. "Please, Yu. I need you."

"Foyle... Okay. I'll do what I can to help out." Yu gave me a nervous smile.

I felt relieved.

I was naive back then. I decided to take him with me without any thought for how the outside world would treat him. I was overly optimistic about our friendship too. I didn't realize that Yu's attitude toward me was going to change now that he believed I was the hero, or that people would view him very differently since he was unassigned.

I thought that everything I did would be for Yu's sake.

The old fairy tales said that a hero would appear whenever a Demon Lord arose and brought harm to the world. The current Demon Lord had been in power for about ten years, and had recently begun his invasion. Now was the time for a hero to ascend.

Chapter 2: The Hero's Path

The Blast Wave

"Ahhhh!!! The Demon Lord Army!"

People fled in all directions as a swarm of monsters threatened to overrun the town. It was then that five figures stepped forward to repel the invasion.

"Accursed monsters! You won't put a scratch on me! **Gale Slash**." The swordsman swung his weapon, cutting a monster in half.

"Brainless creatures. You're about to learn how powerless you are against me. **Napalm Wave**." When the female mage brandished her excessively decorated staff, everything before her was bathed in flame.

"Please let my magic protect these people! **Defending Geyser**." Mei Hellvin called forth a massive wall of water, separating the monsters from the people.

The party were dispatching the monsters at a rapid pace. When the monsters began to realize they stood little chance, they tried to escape, only to find themselves caught in Yu's traps and unable to move.

"Foyle!" Yu cried.

"Got it! Divine Light Incarnate."

Foyle held a sword, perfectly white and unblemished. It was Arianrhod—the holy sword of legends that successive heroes had used to drive back the Demon Lord Army many times before.

The sword answered Foyle's call with a brilliant burst of white light. With a single swing, Foyle erased all monsters before him.

One of the surviving townspeople raised his head. "Y-You must be..."

"That's right." The red-haired young man who held the holy sword looked upon the townspeople and declared, "I'm the hero, Foyle Austin!"

Nine years had passed since the oracle ceremony. Foyle was now nineteen years old.	



Nine years had passed since that fateful day. I, Foyle Austin, was now living in very different circumstances.

I'd left my village to live in the city of Harmachis where I spent every moment training. This city was the royal capital of the Soleil Sun Kingdom—a nation founded by the first hero and his companions.

There I visited the Chamber of the Holy Sword. It was a place accessible only to those chosen by the Soleil Sun Kingdom, where the holy sword Arianrhod was sealed away. The holy sword was humankind's ultimate weapon, and only a hero could wield it. I'd successfully pulled the sword free.

I'd encouraged Yu to try pulling it out first, but it hadn't budged. It made me wonder whether I was wrong about him. So far, it was still a mystery. I could only assume that his time was yet to come.

I'd gotten taller, my hair was longer, and my voice had deepened. My body had grown muscular soon after I started training with swords instead of sticks. I considered myself agile too. Though if I said so in front of Mei, she would've laughed at me for bragging.

I had also changed how I spoke. My brash attitude was gone. I'd been forced to practice politeness and humility when meeting with royalty and important nobles. That always made me feel as though I was pretending to be someone I wasn't, but social etiquette demanded it. To those around me, I was the hero, and I had to act the part.

After my meeting with the king, I'd gained two new companions in addition to Yu and Mei.

The first was Gladius Pryde. He'd been a wandering swordsman until he entered a tournament in the Soleil Sun Kingdom known as the King of Lions Festival. It was a contest that only the strongest of fighters could even enter, so when Gladius was crowned the final victor, he'd distinguished himself as a first-class fighter. Some even said that his talent rivaled that of the knight who commanded the royal guard.

In terms of raw sword skill, Gladius was even superior to me. Unfortunately,

he was a womanizer who tended to look down on anyone weaker than himself.

Our other new party member was Mary Susie. Born to one of the Soleil Sun Kingdom's most prestigious noble families, Mary was a mage just like Mei, and her title was Archmage of Fire. Her magic was a veritable inferno, and neither monster nor demon could endure the sheer intensity of her flames.

Unfortunately, though I tried not to judge her, she clearly thought she was born better than everyone else just because her ancestors included many generations of mages. She looked down on almost everyone, especially manual laborers. In her mind, common people existed only to serve her.

Together as a party, we'd been defending the populace from the Demon Lord Army. We generally fought well. In fact, we were probably the strongest party humanity had. But that didn't mean we made a good team.

I was far from fond of the prejudiced attitudes held by our two newest party members. They both spoke about jobs as if someone's job was everything. I couldn't complain about their skills though.

Gladius and Mary often got into arguments with Mei over their attitude toward Yu and his unassigned status. I regularly had to get between them. Try as I might, I couldn't change their attitudes.

To make matters worse, Gladius and Mary were both far more interested in showing off their skills than in cooperation. The party wasn't falling apart just yet, but we couldn't go on like this.

Though these problems were never far from my mind, I had yet to think of a solution. And it would soon turn out my concerns were well founded.



One day, my party was gathered in the corner of a particular building.

"As I'm sure you're already aware, our next opponent will be one of the Eight Warlords—the strongest known members of the Demon Lord Army."

Just hearing myself speak the name aloud was enough to make me gulp. It was the name given to the eight demons that commanded the Demon Lord Army. Each one had demonstrated the power to spell demise for a multitude of

towns, or even entire nations.

One of the Eight Warlords, known as Downburst Gryps the Blast Wave, had made the watery city of Ahterdam his base of operations, and its citizens his captives.

"Downburst Gryps is way stronger than any of the demons we've fought up to now," I continued. "I want to make sure everyone understands that. I'd also like to hear everyone's thoughts on how we can beat him."

"That should be simple," Mary said. "You say he's occupying a city? Well then, we can simply encircle and destroy it. He may think that it's his fortress, but it may as well be his prison." Mary was casually suggesting that we massacre the population of the entire city.

I noticed Mei's eyebrows twitch.

"That would harm civilians," I replied. "The people trapped there are waiting for us to save them. I don't want to abandon them."

"Oh, what difference would the deaths of a few commoners make?" Mary said, as if talking about ants about to be crushed beneath her boots. "Unlike us, those people are easily replaceable. We needn't concern ourselves with their fates. After all, each life is valued differently, and some are worth considerably less than others."

"How can you say that?!" Mei leaped up in anger at Mary's coldhearted disregard for human life.

Mei had changed too. Her pink hair now extended down to her waist while gently curving inward. She tied it in a single bunch at the bottom, and the way it swayed whenever she walked was mesmerizing. Even the highest nobles of the Soleil Sun Kingdom praised her beauty without reservation. Though what I found most beautiful about Mei was the way she smiled.

But at that moment, Mei's brow was knitted in anger. When she moved to grab Mary in her rage, I had to raise my hand to stop her.

"We can't do that," I said. "We have orders from the kingdom to reclaim the city. If there are going to be sacrifices, we have to keep them to a minimum. It's a task that only we, the Hero's Party, can handle."

"What a shame," Mary said. "And I don't see how we can liberate the city without any losses."

"I'm with her," Gladius said. "The death of a few weaklings shouldn't matter. If these people weren't so useless, they would've gotten themselves out of there instead of getting captured. They have their own powerlessness to blame."

I couldn't deny that protecting so many helpless people was going to make it hard to fight. But I wasn't ready to give up on them.

"Those people are victims," I said. "They lived ordinary lives until the Demon Lord Army took that away from them. It's our duty to rescue them. I won't accept any strategy that involves sacrificing the city's people."

"But what else can we possibly do?" Mary asked.

"Well..." I trailed off.

Yu nervously raised his hand. "Um, I might have an idea."

Yu was a lot taller than in our childhood days, and he'd gotten muscular too, though not as muscular as me. With his blue hair neatly cut short, he was growing rather handsome. His meek and agreeable nature, however, remained unchanged.

Yu had a determined look in his eyes as he explained his plan to us. Every aspect of it was perfect. We were going to prevent casualties without giving up the opportunity for a surprise attack. It was everything I could've hoped for.

"Why should I put my life at risk for a bunch of weaklings?" Gladius objected.

"Why indeed," Mary agreed. "We shouldn't be placed in harm's way for the sake of people who can't even fight. And who is this commoner to give *me* instructions? He doesn't even have a job."

The plan wasn't going to work without cooperation from both of them, but neither one was willing to listen to anything Yu said. It was all because he was unassigned.

"Let's not argue. Unless one of you has a better alternative, it's a waste of time. Besides, I'm sure you can both see the merits of Yu's idea. If all goes well,

we won't just eliminate Downburst, but all of his demons with him."

"Tsk."

"Pah."

They clearly weren't happy, but they'd have to cooperate as long as I gave my backing to Yu's plan.

"That commoner dares to give orders to a noble like me..." Mary muttered.

"The weakling certainly has a good head for deceitful tricks," Gladius added.

With that, the two finally stopped complaining and began making preparations. But the contempt they felt toward Yu and his plan hadn't faded.

"I don't like those two at all," Mei whispered.

I didn't either. But it would be unbecoming of a hero to complain. There was also a grain of truth in the objections they'd raised. And above all else, I needed their power. In the end, all I could do was knit my brow in a vague show of agreement.

"Yu."

"What is it, Foyle?"

"Your plan's sure to work. That's why we're going to win."

"Oh! Y-Yeah. Of course!"

When I extended my fist, Yu did likewise and fist bumped with me.

"What are you two doing? Let me join in!" Mei placed her hand flat on top of ours.

We looked at one another and smiled.

"Let's do this!" I said. "We're going to save these people from the Demon Lord Army!"

"Yeah!" they both cheered.



The first part of the plan went smoothly.

I caused a distraction while Yu and Mei freed the city's captives and helped them make a quick escape using the waterways that ran throughout the city.

"Damn you! Damn you!!! Humans are pitiful beings, forever cursed to walk across the dirt! How could such a creature make me—the Blast Wave of the Demon Lord's Eight Warlords—stand on the foul ground?! You'll pay for this!"

Powerful gusts, gales, tornadoes—we were assaulted by raging winds of every kind. I needed to focus just to stay on my feet.

Downburst Gryps was the first of the Eight Warlords we'd encountered. He was a massive winged demon resembling an eagle with four limbs. The silver wings on his back normally kept him airborne at all times.

The moment Downburst had realized that his captives were escaping, he lived up to his title of Blast Wave by trying to drive us back with a flurry of wind-based attacks from midair. At first, we'd been helpless in the face of his power, but Yu's plan had left him off guard, creating the opening I needed to cut off one of his wings and send him falling to the ground.

"Yu..."

But Yu's reckless efforts to distract Downburst's attention away from me had left him seriously injured. To create the opening that I'd used to knock Downburst out of the sky, Yu had made himself a target.

Mei was tending to his wounds, but they were deep.

I gripped the holy sword tightly. I regretted accepting a plan that had put my childhood friend in danger, but I was determined not to let his efforts go to waste.

"We've already defeated the Miasma and the Plaguewind!" I cried. "Now it's your turn, Downburst the Blast Wave!"

"Hah! The Three Windscars may be under my command, but your victory against two of my underlings means little! Your trickery might have knocked me from the sky, but I am far from beaten. **Wind Talon**."

"Watch out! Everyone! Get back!"

Downburst fired his projectile attack at me while I was still warning the others. Several pillars that lay directly in the path of his Wind Talon collapsed as it cut them completely in two.

"He cut straight through those?! How sharp is that talon?!"

"Hah! This demon's a joke! He's lashing out in desperation! **Lightspeed Airslash**." With a slash of his sword, Gladius sent out an air-based projectile with the power to cut through whatever it hit.

"You'll be far more manageable now that you're on the ground! **Flame Whorl**." Mary transformed the air before her into a roaring flame that incinerated everything in its path.

They'd attacked their target from opposite sides, but Downburst stared at them both with eyes as sharp as any bird of prey.

"Filthy, pitiful creatures! You won't get near me! Gust Wing."

"Wha-?! Gahh!"

"My magic was just—Ugh!"

With a beat of his one remaining wing, Downburst sent out a blast powerful enough to repel the attacks of both of his opponents simultaneously. Likewise, Gladius and Mei were sent flying backward until they both slammed into pillars and collapsed unconscious.

As Downburst prepared to deal a finishing blow with his talons, I rushed forward. When Downburst saw me coming, he instead turned to block my holy sword.

"I won't let you do that!" I declared.

"You'd defend these weaklings? You have no hope of saving them from me! You'll die and then that contemptible brat will be next! I cannot abide such tricks! He must die for this!"

"Well then, I'll have to defeat you, no matter what!"

"Silence! You'll be the first to die, hero! Wind Talon!"

"Holy Airslash!"

I unleashed my Holy Airslash—a projectile powerful enough to negate his attack. This particular ability was extremely similar to another known as True Airslash, often used by warriors and swordsmen. The holy sword transformed the slash itself into an airborne projectile capable of cutting through any attack unleashed by a demon.

"What?!" I cried in surprise.

Downburst's Wind Talon changed form just as it was about to collide with my Holy Airslash. Like an unpredictable tornado, it swerved around my projectile, catching me completely off guard when it reached me and began cutting my body to shreds.

"Gahh!"

"Fool! Don't think yourself victorious after taking just one of my wings!"

I just barely avoided a fatal hit by using the holy sword as a shield, but even so, the attack left me badly hurt and rapidly losing blood. If this went on much longer, I was going to bleed out before the fight was over.

I can't afford to lose this much blood before the saint who's supposed to heal me shows up!

When a hero took on the Demon Lord Army, a woman known as the saint, capable of healing injuries of any kind, always appeared to aid their quest. So far, a saint hadn't arisen this time around, and I could guess why. I wasn't the real hero.

I tore off my cloak and began tying it around a wound to slow the blood loss. It was a crude fix that wouldn't hold up for long.

"You think I'll let you heal your—"

"Foam Mist."

I'd acted rashly by trying to bandage my wound. If it wasn't for the countless bubbles that suddenly appeared before me, I wouldn't have managed to dodge Downburst's attack.

I knew right away that I had Mei to thank.

"I'll do what I can to help, Foy."

Yu lay injured on the ground, with Mei by his side. It was then that Yu noticed something in the sky.

"Mei... Look up!" he cried.

"Huh?!"

"Damn mage! You'll bother Lord Downburst no longer! **Spiral Slicer**." Another demon was swooping down at the pair from above.

Yu was quick to shield Mei with his wounded body, but the creature's sharp talons stabbed through him and injured Mei regardless.

My blood boiled. "Stay away from them! Holy Airslash."

"What?! Ugh!"

I swung the holy sword to knock the demon out of the air. The demon dodged to the side, but not quickly enough to avoid being hit in the shoulder.

"This damn hero!"

"Stand down, Onyx," Downburst said.

"But Lord Downburst..."

"Worry not. You've done well. You have already created the opening I needed."

"Oh! I see. Hah!" At Downburst's request, the demon took to the sky and disappeared into the distance.

As I tried to figure out what was happening, I felt a gust of wind brush my cheeks. "This wind is..."

"It's futile!" Downburst declared. "You're now incapable of taking a single step toward me! It was a mistake to let yourself be distracted. You shall die a pitiful death crawling upon the ground!"

The sight before me filled me with despair.

"Vidofnir's Cry, I bid you lay waste! Pitiful human creatures, witness true terror! See why they call me the Blast Wave! I reign as king in the skies!"

When tornadoes formed around him, he unleashed a Wind Talon into each

one, giving it the power to slice apart whatever it touched. While I was defending Yu and Mei, he'd been generating an impenetrable barrier of wind around himself.

The raging winds were tearing up the very ground beneath them thanks to the cutting power of the Wind Talon that each one carried. There was no way I could get near him.

But I hadn't given up. I couldn't give up.

I glanced to my side and saw Mei trying to endure the wind as she shielded Yu from its intensity.

Yu was there for me when I needed him. If I'm not there for him, how can I look him in the eye again?

It was Yu's plan that allowed me to knock Downburst out of the air. He'd done it by disguising himself as me to distract Downburst's attention.

Mei had of course been against it, but Yu had insisted.

"I know how stubborn he is. Just like I know I'm not the hero," I muttered to myself.

Hero or not, it had to be me who stopped Downburst. It had to be me who protected everyone.

"But I have to be the hero right now! I'm the only one who can get us through this. So please, Holy Sword Arianrhod! Give me the power—and the courage to defend my friends!"

The holy sword shone brightly. I gripped the hilt tight and charged at Downburst.

"Hah. How foolhardy. Continue onward and die by my cutting winds!"

"Holy Airslash."

My Holy Airslash was immediately swallowed by the thick wall of wind before me. Undeterred, I unleashed the same attack again and again.

Downburst sneered. "Futile. No matter how you struggle, you cannot approach— What?!"

"Arrrghh!" I roared.

Downburst was stunned to see me, covered in bleeding wounds, emerge from a gap amid the raging winds.

"You used the power of your sword to carve a path?!"

"Correct!"

He was able to control the winds because they were an embodiment of his own corrupting essence, but an attack cloaked in divine aura would triumph. My holy sword was the perfect weapon.

But I couldn't cancel out the wind completely. As long as I was focused on breaking through, my Holy Airslash wasn't enough to repel the raging winds assaulting me from every direction.

The Wind Talon-infused tornadoes that I'd failed to destroy had cut me repeatedly, but that was no big deal. As long as I got close enough to attack, nothing else mattered.

"There's only one path left! I just have to follow it! It leads...straight ahead!"

As long as I could defeat Downburst, it didn't matter what happened to my body. I closed in on him as blood poured from my open wounds.

"Grr. My wind barrier must have been imperfect because of my missing wing. Have you lost your sanity?! No matter, I shall strike before you can. Your chances of success are naught! I'll blow you away like mere cotton!"

Downburst had been caught off guard for only a moment. Now he began drawing in the winds that surrounded us. I knew he planned to push me back.

It all came down to one thing: Would I be first to strike? Or would he?

It felt like a long time, but it couldn't have been more than a second. My holy sword shone brightly as Downburst's wind howled. Then came the sound of flesh being cut.

The source of the sound was the wing I'd severed from Downburst when the fight first began. Yu had stabbed it with his sword. It seemed like a pointless gesture that couldn't save us.

"Charge in bravely... Keep going, Foyle!"

"Loathsome creature!"

As meaningless as Yu's gesture appeared, to Downburst, the self-proclaimed king of the skies, there could be no greater insult. He forgot all about me and turned to face Yu.

"Divine Light Incarnate."

"No!!!"

I couldn't waste this opportunity. As I gripped the hilt tight, the holy sword released an intense burst of light. It was Divine Light Incarnate—an ability that only the hero could use. The sword shone with the brightness of the sun, and yet its light was white and gentle.

The barriers of wind surrounding Downburst dissipated. Now there was nothing in my way.

As my opponent was caught off guard, I kept him fixed in my gaze.

"Wretched creatures who crawl the earth! How dare you defy *me*, the king of the skies?!"

"I don't care who you are or what you're king of. If you harm innocent people, I'll take you down! I'm ending this right here, Downburst Gryps the Blast Wave!"

"Gah. Foul hero!"

"Divine Strike."



The holy sword pierced Downburst's tough hide. After thrusting the blade deep, I tore sideways, and his remaining silver wing turned crimson.

"Impossible... It cannot be... You have imprisoned me upon this foul ground... I cannot accept it..."

Downburst's wings were his pride, and without them his spirit was crushed. He collapsed pitifully before me.

The raging wind around him simultaneously subsided until there was no more than a soft breeze.

I took a deep breath before finishing him off.

We'd saved the captives. Everything had gone according to Yu's plan. By working together, we'd been able to bring down one of the Eight Warlords.

The city was on the brink of ruin, but we'd kept human casualties to a minimum. The feeling was bittersweet, but I had to acknowledge Yu's brilliance. His contribution had been so great that I thought he was finally about to earn some recognition.

Yu had no job. He was disparaged as an unassigned. He was constantly the target of discrimination. But surely now he'd done more than enough to overcome the stigma. I felt confident people would finally stop treating Yu so poorly. I truly believed it.

I thought that this time, things would be different.

The Expulsion

Several days had passed since we'd slain Downburst Gryps the Blast Wave. At last, ten years after the Demon Lord Army invasion began, we had finally defeated one of the Eight Warlords.

A great many people in the recovered town had shown us gratitude. The lives lost and the land destroyed would never come back, but we'd freed the townspeople and bolstered their spirits by showing them hope.

"Ouch."

"Am I hurting you, Sir Hero?"

"Kinda, but I can handle it. It's nothing compared to what some people have been through. Ow."

"I'm sorry. This is the best we can do for you until the saint appears."

While the people celebrated, I focused on recovering from my wounds. Without the saint, I had to be treated by a healer, but healers used abilities powered that drew upon their patient's stamina, turning it into a battle against myself. So here I was, groaning in discomfort.

The woman healing me changed the topic in an apparent attempt to take my mind off the pain. "It certainly was impressive, Sir Hero. They say you came up with the plan that saved every resident of Ahterdam."

The pain made me slow to react to what she said. "What?!"



"Yu! Who told everyone that your plan was my idea?! We used your strategy!"

I was astounded to learn that everyone thought that I came up with the plan to free the people during my fight against Downburst. They had it all wrong. It was all thanks to Yu. And yet everyone was giving me all the credit.

Feeling as though I had to do something, I tracked down Yu in an out-of-theway garden where I could give him a piece of my mind.

"Oh, Foyle. What's up? Weren't you being healed?"

"I insisted on leaving to find you! Now explain yourself! Why would you give me the credit for your idea?!"

"Well, I was talking to Mary. She said a coward who hadn't fought alongside everyone else didn't deserve the credit. She told me to stand back."

"And you agreed with her?!"

"Yes. As frustrating as it is, I have to admit that I barely did anything during the fight." Judging by his calm expression, he didn't actually feel the frustration he was mentioning.

Why? You were amazing. Be proud. Hold your head up high!

"That doesn't mean—"

"But let me congratulate you, Foyle! You won another award! You really are something!"

That's when it hit me. I'd finally figured it out. Yu was looking at me with the same eyes as everyone else around me. He'd put me on a pedestal. The people of our village, the priest, and everyone I'd met since being declared the hero had looked at me the same way.

Over time, I'd watched as everyone distanced themselves from me. And now, even my closest friend considered himself far beneath me.

"Knock it off. You of all people shouldn't look at me like that!"

Yu just looked at me in confusion as I turned and ran off.

I had to escape his gaze, but I didn't go back to the healer. Instead, I threw myself down on the bed of the high-class room reserved for the hero.

When an urge to vomit came over me, I used a nearby bucket without getting up.

"Haah, haah."

What can I do? My thoughts raced ahead.

What can I do? What can I do? What can I do? What can I do? I have to do something! How can I fix this?!

"Why, Yu? You're supposed to be the hero. Why let everyone look down on you?!"

I'd spent years by Yu's side, watching and waiting. I thought that some day, he'd awaken as the hero, and I'd be there to hand over the holy sword.

But reality was cruel. Yu still hadn't realized that something was amiss.

We couldn't go on like this. If I let the situation drag out, Yu wouldn't try to be anything more. He'd never awaken as the hero. In my gut, I knew it was true. It was clear from the way he let Gladius and Mary look down on him without a single complaint.

"But why? Oh, I get it..."

The reason was obvious. It was my fault. Yu believed that I was the hero. That I would save the world. But only he could do that.

I'm...nothing. I can't do anything.

"But what should I do? Yu won't believe me if I tell him the truth. Never before have there been two heroes. No one would believe it."

I'd searched historical records and found only one hero at a time. Never had a second, simultaneous hero arisen. History offered no hints for solving my dilemma. I'd considered talking to a priest, but, after remembering my experiences during my oracle ceremony, I knew I couldn't rely on them. The old priest from my village who'd shown some concern for Yu was the only priest I could trust, but he'd already passed away.

Why's this happening? I can't think of a way out.

I was going round in circles, unable to find a solution. It was the same problem that I'd grappled with fruitlessly many times before, but this time I was determined to do something. The question was what.

I remained lost in my own thoughts for some time, with no answer in sight, until a ray of hope presented itself.

Something dropped to the floor with a soft thud. I looked at the source of the noise and saw that a book had somehow fallen off the desk. It was the picture book I'd owned as a child and continued to treasure into adulthood.

"The Hero's Story..."

Upon hitting the floor, it had opened to the page where the hero was fighting the enemy I'd always hated—Angrecious. He appeared repeatedly as the main character's opponent, trying to block his path, but always meeting with defeat. Time and time again, he'd attempt to stop the hero, only to be wounded in the process. He finally fell to the hero before the battle against the Demon Lord. Every child in the village hated Angrecious for his stubborn persistence, as did I. All he ever did was stand in the hero's path.

Angrecious was the antagonist, always making problems for the hero. But he

was also the main character's long-lost elder brother. Angrecious didn't want to see his brother forced to head into battle just because he was named the hero. Unable to accept the cruel hand that fate had dealt his sibling, Angrecious tried repeatedly to make him abandon his quest. Everything he did, he did for his brother. Angrecious finally died by his brother's hand. He played the villain until the end, never revealing the truth. The irony was that the hero had grown stronger with every battle they'd fought.

"I get it," I muttered to myself. "It's what I should've been doing from the start."

A crooked smile appeared on my face. I had to become the antagonist. I had to block Yu's path. That was the key to making him awaken as the hero. I was going to shock Yu into action. Perhaps there was a better solution, but this was all I could think of. I'd gotten so desperate, I was ready to try anything.

"Oh, Foy."

As I was leaving my room, I found Mei outside. She'd changed into a pretty dress and looked like she'd been about to knock.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Why'd you run out of the healing room? It gave me a shock when I didn't find you there. I bumped into Yu while looking for you. He's worried too. He said you spoke with him, and then suddenly ran off."

"Yeah... I wasn't feeling well."

"Really? Here, bend down for a moment."

When I did as she asked, she placed her hand on my forehead.

"M-Mei?!"

"Don't move. Hmm... No fever. Maybe it's just exhaustion? Were you helping people in secret again? I wish you'd tell us. You've got to stop trying to face everything on your own."

"I...wasn't doing anything."

"Well, good. Don't push yourself! You hear me?"

Mei scolded me just like she used to when we were kids. Just looking at her was enough to make me feel better despite my concerns about Yu.

"Mei."

"Hm? What is it?" She smiled. It was the same pretty face I'd known since childhood. I could see my own reflection in her eyes.

No... I'm afraid. I'm scared, I'm scared.

I was afraid of taking that smile from her. Afraid that she'd hate me. Afraid of what she'd think of me. Most of all, I was afraid to hurt my two friends.

But I'd already decided. It had to be done. I was going to find Yu, then I'd crush all his illusions about me and my status as the hero. It had to be done, no matter the cost. Even if it meant destroying the precious friendship that Mei, Yu, and I shared.

"Oh..."

Then it hit me. I realized that I'd been enjoying our situation to some extent. I'd been refusing to move forward because I was comfortable with things as they were.

How awful of me. While innocent citizens were suffering, I'd been looking after my own interests. I'd always considered Gladius and Mary self-centered, but now I knew I'd been no better.

There's no hope for someone like me. It's time to do what has to be done.

"Foy? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah... It's nothing. Can I ask a favor?"

I sent her away on the first errand that came to mind.

Mei was puzzled, but she agreed.

I watched as she walked away.

It was for the best. I couldn't do anything until I'd gotten her to leave. The next step was to call for Yu. I also summoned the other two members of our party.

"What's going on, Foyle? Why the urgent meeting? Oh... You're both here too." Yu spotted me first as he entered the room, and then his smile faded as he noticed the other two.

I'd already told Gladius and Mary what was about to happen, and the pair were grinning with malice.

Yu looked at me once more, his face full of doubt.

I looked back at him, unsmiling, with contempt in my eyes. If you're going to hold a grudge, then so be it. If you're going to hate me, then so be it. I know I'm a terrible friend. You deserve far better, but I'm out of options.

I looked him right in the eye and told him he had to go. "Yu, I'm removing you from the party."

"Huh? F-Foyle, what's going on?"

"Sorry, but I've been meaning to do it for a while now. You're not needed here. Gladius and Mary both agree. We can't have party members who aren't pulling their weight."

"But I've done so much for this party. You can't—"

Gladius cut him off. "What a joke. Are you really such a fool? It's an insult to be in a party with someone so weak and unexceptional."

"Quite right," Mary agreed. "Why should someone who can't even use magic have the honor of being in the Hero's Party? People without jobs have to be shown their place."

Gladius and Mary were both watching Yu, looking at him like he was nothing. They didn't disagree with anything I said. Quite the opposite—they took pleasure in backing me up. As much as I hated it, they were proving helpful.

"As a show of goodwill, I'd like to give you this purse of coins. Use it to start a new life somewhere. Now. There's no reason for you to stay any longer."

"Wait... Foyle, don't I get a say?! Just a moment ago, we were talking like friends!"

"Yes, we were. That's when I realized that it's just as Mary says: there's no place for someone like you in the Hero's Party."

"It should've been obvious," Mary agreed. "We have a duty, and we were chosen for that duty because we're worthy. It makes me sick to have someone so useless alongside us."

"Listen, I know I'm not cut out for this party, but I've always helped out in whatever way I could," Yu argued.

"Anyone could have done the things you've done," I told him. "You've got to understand, Yu, that a person's job is everything."

"Huh?!" Yu's face twisted in despair, anguish, and then resignation.

It's not true. I don't mean any of it! I thought. But I knew I couldn't take it back. This was the path I'd chosen.

My next statement would ensure that my decision was permanent. "I can't stand being around an unassigned any longer, Protargonist!"

It must have been too much for Yu to bear. He walked straight out without picking up the money. All the while, his party members were laughing at him.

I kept my gaze fixed on him as he walked away.

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After learning from the innkeeper that Yu had already taken his belongings and left, I went and stood on a stone bridge to gather my thoughts.

I was still there when an angry voice assailed me. "Foy! What's gotten into you?!"

I knew she would find me.

I turned around. "Oh, it's you, Mei. What is it?"

"What is it?! You drove Yu away, that's what!"

"Sounds like you know all there is to know. He wasn't fit for our party, so I kicked him out. Simple as that."

"How could you, Foy?! It makes no sense! Have you forgotten how much Yu did for us?! You know how hard he worked!"

"It doesn't matter. Someone else can take Yu's place."

That was a lie. I knew how much Yu cared about us, how thoroughly and carefully he'd scouted for enemies, and how well he carried out each task. We'd never find someone better. But I needed to lie to justify my decision.

Mei was furious, but with each word I spoke, she grew quieter, and hung her head lower.

"But...why? The three of us were getting along great just yesterday. I don't get this at all. Foy, please tell me what happened. You're... You're not like this!"

"Nothing's changed. We have a duty to defeat the Demon Lord and protect the populace. We can't hold on to..."

I stopped. I knew there'd be no going back if I finished this sentence. My heart was pounding. I felt my breathing grow heavy. I have to say it. I have to say. Say it!

"...worthless party members."

My voice might have trembled just slightly, but I'd said it. There was no going back now.

A cracking sound rang out. Mei had just slapped me. There was sadness and frustration in her eyes as they filled with tears.

I was overcome by an urge to wipe her tears away, but I was the one who'd made her cry. I clenched my fists, knowing I had no right to comfort her.

"You've changed, Foy. The old you was different. You were a kind leader who cared about everyone."

"I had to grow up at some point, Mei, that's all. I'm still me."

"Liar." Mei's eyes were full of sadness, and there was resentment in her voice. "I'm sticking with Yu. I can't leave him by himself."

"Okay."

"I'm leaving the party. I never did get along with the other two. If you start acting like they do now that Yu's gone, I don't think I can take it. I don't want to be here."

"Okay," I nodded.

I'd expected Mei to leave.

She gave me her final farewell. "Goodbye, Foyle. I always thought you were one of my oldest, most precious friends."

As she passed me by, I whispered softly, "Mei, take good care of Yu."

She turned to look at me in surprise, but I hurried away.

They say first love always ends in heartbreak, but it was hard to take. As I began to run, the pain in my heart was far worse than the stinging of my cheek.

I found an empty alleyway where I could sit by myself.

"Haah... Haah... Heh. Ha ha ha ha... Ugh... Aaahh."

I began to laugh, which quickly turned to sobs, but I wouldn't let myself cry too loudly. This was the path I'd chosen. I knew Yu would do well with Mei by his side. She'd support him and show him the way forward.

As for me... I'd be all right. I was fine. Just fine.

This would be the last time I'd let myself cry. From here on out, I'd be true to my role up until the end.

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Gladius and Mary both had straightforward opinions about the departure of Yu and Mei.

"That incompetent fool obviously was never fit for this party. Strength is righteousness. If the water mage chose to follow that weakling, then she's proved herself a useless woman." To Gladius, strength was everything, and the weak were unworthy of his notice.

"Mere commoners were never worthy of joining the Hero's Party in the first place. Especially that dirt-poor woman. I hate that people like her can be mages too. Oh, but you're an exception of course, Sir Foyle! You're the hope of humanity! The hero destined to defeat the Demon Lord!" As a noble, Mary had only joined our party to elevate her social status.

They were both overjoyed to join the party that would crush the Demon Lord, and both looked down on commoners. Similarly, they'd belittled Yu behind his

back. Both were made sick by the idea of Yu and Mei sharing in our glory as we saved the world.

But I was no better. I was falsely claiming to be the hero. False or not, I had to be the hero for now at least. That was going to require a little acting.

I smiled to hide my true feelings. "That's right. Weaklings can't help the people. It has to be us who saves the world."

A fake smile on my face. Fake emotions in my heart. My power, too, was fake.

I continued to travel with Gladius and Mary, knowing that we'd meet our downfall before long. Until then, I had to keep up the act.

A Fated Encounter

The war against the Demon Lord raged on.

Yu and Mei might have left, but the Demon Lord Army hadn't gone anywhere. And as the supposed hero, I couldn't just stand back as it attacked innocents and destroyed nations. I had to do my duty.

Fighting did little to ease my aching heart. Still, I persevered, needing something to distract me from my pain.

It was during that time that something particularly notable happened. An encounter made on a cloudless night, lit by beautiful moonlight.

We'd arrived in another country that had prepared an extravagant welcome for the hero. To create an excuse to slip away, I'd feigned illness while the celebration was going on. Alone, with the castle to my back, I was training in the forest.

I was far enough away that I couldn't hear the din. Cheering, flirtatious glances, constant talk, pomp and circumstance—I was free from it all here.

The castle looked conspicuously bright from deep within the forest. Its people didn't know whether there'd be a tomorrow; they were inclined to make merry while they could.

I swung the holy sword. I didn't have to worry about being seen because

there was no one else around.

"Whew!" I sighed as I judged the quality of my own swing. "This thing keeps getting heavier."

Ordinarily, only the hero could wield the holy sword. I could use it because my job was, in a sense, "hero." Fake though I was, I had to use the holy sword if I wanted to keep up the act. At first, the sword had proved sharp enough and powerful enough to live up to its reputation, but lately I struggled to cut with it at all, as if the blade had grown dull.

"Holy Airslash... That doesn't work either? I'd better give up on that ability. Man, this is tough."

To make matters worse, I was gradually losing the use of my abilities. I'd been compensating somewhat with practice and skill, but that wouldn't suffice for much longer.

The holy sword's glow was also starting to fade, and I knew the reason. The sword itself couldn't be losing its power. The problem had to be with me. In other words, the sword's rightful owner was rapidly improving. Yu had to be growing stronger.

I'd heard rumors about Yu and Mei forming their own party and saving people in many different regions. They'd also found new friends. Since I couldn't openly show my curiosity, all I had were the rumors. Nonetheless, I'd accepted it as the truth. I knew the time was near.

"Ahhhhh!"

My thoughts were interrupted by a distant scream. I forced my heavy limbs into action and headed toward it.

I ran through darkness until I found a wolflike creature with massive, sharp claws. Though, it was such an unnatural thing that it felt wrong to compare it to any animal.

"A monster?!"

It was one of the monsters that served the Demon Lord. Either it had wandered off, or it was a lone survivor from an exterminated group.

The monster was about to cut a lone girl with its claws. The sight of her helplessness brought back old memories of Yu. My body took action before I'd even realized it.

"I have to make it in time!"

"Ghroooooow!"

As its claws swung down toward the girl, I caught them on the holy sword. The sword couldn't cut like before. My every movement felt dull. I couldn't even use my abilities. But I had to fight!

I glanced at the girl behind me. She was terrified. If I lost to this thing, there'd be no one else to save her. Retreating wasn't an option. I can't abandon her!

"Nghraaaah!" I cried out as I mustered up all of my strength and I pushed away the monster's claws using the holy sword. As it stumbled back, I made a desperate attempt to plunge the sword into its heart. I succeeded, defeating the monster through sheer brute force.

The monster's final act was a short, anguished wail.

"Haah...! Haah...! There was a time when I could've beheaded this thing easily."

Without my abilities, fighting even one monster was a struggle. I felt ready to collapse, but I forced myself to turn to the girl.

"Your ears... Are you...?"

It was quite a surprise. The girl I'd saved was an elf. In recent times, people spoke of them like they were just legends.

Her blonde hair shimmered in the moonlight and her face had a doll-like beauty, but it was her long ears that stood out the most. Everything about her was beautiful.

The girl stared blankly at me until she realized that I'd just saved her. Then she found her voice. "Th-Thank you for saving me! I've heard of a sword that gives off white holy light like yours. Are you the hero, perhaps?" She was looking at my sword—a weapon that only one person could wield.

I was so exhausted that I forgot to keep up the act. "No, I'm just an imposter.

I'll never be the real thing."

"Huh?" She was taken aback.

Realizing that I'd just given myself away, I forced myself to smile and tried to gloss over it. "But you needn't worry about that. You're right, I'm the hero, Foyle Austin. I'm glad you're safe. What's your name?"

"Um, I'm Iris. I'm from the elf village deep within this forest. I got lost while out gathering herbs, then I bumped into that horrible creature."

"I see. Then you'd better hurry back to your village. That thing you just saw was a monster. They're dangerous enough, but there are beasts in this country whose desires are even more twisted. It's no place for a cute girl like you."

"C-Cute...? Uhh." Iris turned red and looked down at her feet.

Her reaction was so adorable that it made me laugh. That made her puff up her cheeks and look away from me in anger. She was an innocent girl whose feelings were easy to read.

"I'll escort you to your village. Can you walk?"

"Um, yes, but the elder says that humans aren't welcome in elven villages."

"Then I'll only go some of the way. You might get into trouble again if I leave you by yourself here."

"Hmph! You don't have to treat me like a child! I'm older than you, you know!"

"Oh, really? Want some candy?"

"Yeah! Oh..." Little Iris's face turned red all the way to her ears.

With a laugh, I gave her a piece of candy, then began walking alongside her.

"If you keep poking fun at your elders like that, you're going to regret it someday. But I'll forgive you since you gave me this yummy candy."

"Oh, thanks. Forgiveness must be part of being a mature lady."

"Of course it is! And that's what I am! A lady! Um... You're the hero, aren't you, Sir Foyle?"

"Keep calling me 'sir' like that and I'll get embarrassed. My name's enough."

"But... Well, all right. I'll call you Foyle. I know I've already said it, but thank you for saving me." This time, Iris bowed her head as she spoke.

She certainly was a polite little girl, but she was making me feel awkward by making a big deal out of everything.

"Honestly, forget about it. Saving powerless people from monsters is just part of my duty as the hero."

"But that monster was so terrifying that my knees gave out just looking at it. Protecting people's one thing, but you didn't have to throw yourself between us like that. Weren't you scared at all?"

Scared...?

I still remembered the day I encountered a monster as a child. The memory was as vivid as ever. Manabeasts and monsters still terrified me just as much. But even so...

"Yeah, I was scared. But someone has to stand up to those things."

A person's job was everything. This was something I had to do. It was part of my role as the fake hero, and I had to take it seriously.

"When someone's given the power to fight those things, the natural response is to use that power to protect others," I added.

"I've never looked at it that way. I always thought that if I was stronger, I'd be able to protect myself."

"There's nothing wrong with that. But as long as I have the power to save those who can't fight for themselves, I want to be there for them. Ha ha. I'm sorry. I sound really full of myself."

"No, I think it's a wonderful outlook."

"Really? Thanks." I scratched my cheek as I tried not to reveal my embarrassment.

"Um, could I ask..." Iris began. "Oh, but you don't have to answer if you think I'm being rude."

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"What sort of place is it outside the forest? I've never been there. The truth is, I wasn't really gathering herbs. I sneaked away hoping to see the outside world, but then that thing—the monster—attacked me." As she spoke, her voice got quieter and quieter and she seemed to deflate.

Now I understood why she was here alone.

"Ha ha. So that's how it is. Sounds like you should've been more careful."

"Hmph. It might sound silly to you, but to me..."

"No, I get it. A long time ago, when I was too young to know better, I sneaked out of my village at night with some friends. We ran into a monster too."

"Were you all right?!"

"We made a little noise, and the adults came running. They sure were mad afterward."

It felt like so long ago. I'd been ashamed of the whole incident ever since. That was what made me decide to become a hero for real, rather than just talking big. How ironic that... No, now's not the time for self-pity.

I looked at Iris, wondering whether she'd seen through me.

Iris was looking back at me. "I wish I had your confidence," she said.

"Oh, whoops. I usually try to sound humble, but this is the real me. I've always gotta rein myself in around important nobles. Will you keep this conversation to yourself? If you promise me, I'll tell you about the outside world."

"Of course! I'd love that!"

I told Iris as much as I could while we walked. All the while, she was nodding her head, and there was the occasional sparkle in her eyes. Seeing her reactions made it fun for me too.

The conversation was lively, and before we knew it, it was time for us to part.

"We're almost there..." Iris said.

"All right."

I couldn't see it, but the elven village had to be somewhere nearby. Perhaps an illusion or some other magic was at work. It just looked like more forest to me, but Iris clearly saw something that I couldn't.

"I'll say goodbye then," I said. "Don't go wandering away from the village alone again."

"I won't. Sorry for causing so much trouble."

"It's no big deal. I had fun talking to you."

Iris saw me grin, and then some realization seemed to come over her. She began hurriedly searching her pockets before finally putting her hand to her head.

"Um! Have this!"

"Hm?"

Iris held a flower in her hand. "I was wearing it in my hair. I just realized that I have to give you something in return. The thing is, I've never left the village before, so I don't have money or anything."

"Thanks. It's more than enough. I'll keep it as something to remember you by."

I stroked her hair where the flower had been. It had a pleasant, sleek texture. Iris leaned into my hand like she was enjoying it too.

"Take care of yourself," I said.

With some reluctance, I took my hand away. I knew I might get emotional if I lingered too long.

As I began walking away, Iris called out to me. "Hey! I'd love to see you again! Promise you'll come visit me!"

I hated to say no to a girl yelling about how much she wanted to see me, but I doubted I'd ever come here again. As much as I want to, it won't be long until I...

That was why I didn't look back and instead simply waved my hand as I continued walking.

For a long time, Iris simply stood there, watching Foyle walk away.

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It had been a month since Yu and Mei left the party, and the time had flown by because we'd been constantly on the move. With my friends gone, there was little to keep Mary and Gladius in check.

The Demon Lord Army was invading a town at that very moment.

"Ahhhh!"

"It's the Demon Lord Army! How have they advanced this far?!"

The horde of monsters had first appeared in the town's slum. We rushed there and began cutting them down as they tried to attack the people.

A monster charged at me, and I dispatched it with a single swing of the holy sword. "Yah!"

"Ughah."

These monsters were weak enough for me to handle despite my fading strength, but there were too many of them. I couldn't protect everyone.

"Run to the church!" I yelled. "It's fortified and free from monsters!"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Gladius! Mary! Focus on the monsters attacking people!"

"Pah," Gladius groaned. "These things are barely a threat."

"What a bother," Mary said. "I'll burn them all away with a dazzling display of fire magic."

"I'll go on ahead! This is my duty as the hero!"

Gladius and Mary were difficult to control, but overwhelmingly powerful. When power was all I needed, I had complete faith in them. I knew I could leave this area in their hands while I went to look for any townspeople who had fallen behind.



Blood sprayed from a monster as it fell to the ground. After looking around

and seeing no more, I stopped to catch my breath.

"Are the townspeople all safe now...?" I asked myself.

"Sir Foyle."

"Oh, Mary? How did things go over there?"

"Those creatures were no match for someone like me. Gladius had no trouble either. He moved on to wreak havoc someplace else. He's quite the barbarian."

"All right. In that case—"

I heard screaming. "Waaaaah! Mommy! Help!"

I looked and saw a little girl with a monster looming over her. She must have tried to hide, only to be found by the monster.

I rushed forward to save her.

"Flames, come forth as a fierce inferno to cleanse the world of this filth. Blaze Fang."

A torrent of flames erupted from Mary beside me, sweeping the monster away. The child it held hostage was caught up in the same flames.

"Mary?! Why'd you attack?! Didn't you see the girl?!"

"Hm? That filthy urchin? The people here are just worthless slum dwellers. What does it matter if a few get burnt?"

"What?! Don't you get it?! You killed someone we were supposed to protect!"

"I don't see a problem. I doubt that child had an important job."

"Mary..."

"Ahhhh! It can't be! Miria! Miriaaa!"

A woman had come running out while we were arguing. She held the charred body in her arms, oblivious to the burns she received. She must have been the girl's mother. Once she was sure that her child was dead, she collapsed in tears.

"The child got in the way. It won't matter; it was just a commoner."

"Mary, how can you..."

The mother, devastated by what she heard, picked up a knife lying on the ground. "You killed my daughter!" she said before running straight toward Mary.

Mary responded by raising her staff.

She's going to burn her too?!

I leaped between them and wrested the weapon from the woman's hand before restraining her.

"Oh, my. Did you just save me, Sir Hero? How gallant. What a hero you are!"

Mary's delight was genuine. The mother, on the other hand, was glaring up at me with hate-filled eyes.

"You're supposed to be the hero! Bring her back! Bring my daughter back!" "I'm..." I'm no hero. I'm just a pretender.

Nearby knights soon heard the woman's cries and rushed over to us. "Sir

Hero, is everything all right?"

"Oh, right on time," Mary said. "This ungrateful scoundrel turned against us and tried to attack me. Execute her at once."

"Of course. Sir Hero, let us handle her."

"Hold on. She was driven mad by the loss of her daughter. Take her someplace quiet to calm—"

Before I could finish, one of the knights had already beheaded the woman.

"Wh-Why would you kill her?!" I said, horrified.

"What are you saying?" Mary said. "Listen, Sir Foyle, the common people can't be allowed to rise up against their noble masters."

"It's as she says, Sir Hero. The life of a mere commoner means little if they've shown disrespect toward your great work. The difference between knights like ourselves and rabble with insignificant jobs is like the difference between heaven and earth."

"But you didn't have to..." I trailed off without saying "kill her."

Neither Mary nor the knight showed the slightest hint of guilt. If anything, they were looking accusingly at me.

What is this? How is this happening?! Aren't heroes and knights meant to protect people? What are we doing? It's like they don't even care that they just killed a mother and daughter!

I looked around me and saw townspeople shooting angry glares at us, as though we were more fearsome than any monster.

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We were in another country this time, in a town transformed into a battlefield, where I was fighting against demon invaders.

"Phew!"

"Graaaah! Accursed hero!" A wolflike demon died cursing me as I cut it in two with the holy sword.

"That's all the demons over here." I looked over at the swarm of demons and monsters that still remained. "Now onto the ones over there."

I was finding it harder and harder to keep moving. It looked like too much for me to handle alone.

I spotted a familiar figure ahead of me. Gladius was leading a group of commoners equipped with nothing but spears.

"Hm? Is that...Gladius? Those people with him shouldn't be..."

It made no sense. Everyone should have been evacuated already. Why are they still here?!

"W-Wait! We're already exhausted!" one man protested. "You can't expect us to fight against a demon without any rest!"

"Enough!" Gladius brought his sword down upon the man.

"Gaaah!"

"The weak should submit quietly! Weaklings are destined to be exploited! Onward! You'll draw the monsters away! If anyone else complains, I'll kill him too!"

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"Ugh... Uwaaah!"
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The mass of commoners charged into the monsters. They stood no chance and many lives were lost, but their efforts created an opening that left a demon exposed.

"Ha ha ha ha! Not a bad show! Now I'll take out the enemy's strongest! I'll have the crowning achievement!"

Gladius abandoned the commoners completely as he charged in with a group of knights. Ordinary people meant nothing to him.

Using the holy sword, I cut down a monster as it tried to feast on the corpses of those who'd just died. Among the dead, I spotted a survivor.

"Are you all right? I'll call for a healer."

"Ah... Sir Hero... Please tell me... Did our deaths mean something?"

"You..."

"For what... Emmy... Ares..."

"Wait! Don't die on me! Hey!"

After muttering two names, the man's body went limp before me. I shook him frantically, but his eyes never reopened.

"Me...the hero...? I can't even save someone right in front of me!"

It was my fault that their lives had been lost. If I could've moved as fast as I used to, I would've saved them all.

The Demon Lord Army was driven back, and I was left standing alone on the mountain of rubble that was once the town.

I'd come to understand the beautiful light that all people carried.

I'd come to understand how foolish and utterly evil people could be.

I'd come to understand these things, but that understanding meant little now. All that mattered was the Demon Lord Army. It was the natural enemy of all living humans. And yet, it was often humans who did the most harm to each other.

I was a fake hero. An imposter who couldn't even save a few people, let alone defeat the Demon Lord. What am I fighting for? Who am I fighting for? I don't know anymore.

I could hear screams. I could hear hatred, sadness, and resentment.

My heart screamed as it was strained to its breaking point. I knew everything would be so much easier if I let my sanity slip away.

The world around me looked ashen gray.

I couldn't go on pretending, letting my anguish grow. I was ready to give in.

But my dark thoughts faded when I noticed that a flower had fallen from my pocket. It brought back memories of Iris and the day she'd given it to me. The flower had landed on the holy sword.

"That's right... I've still got the sword."

Yu and Mei...

I thought of the childhood friends who I treasured above all else. They had to be making smooth progress along the true path of the hero. I hadn't heard anything new, but the gradual darkening of the holy sword's blade was all the proof I needed.

I know they'll come for it. They'll find me.

That made everything okay. I knew I could keep up the act a little longer.

I picked up the flower. It had been through many battles, and yet it remained in bloom, and not a splash of blood had tarnished its beauty. Seeing it reminded me of Iris's smile and eased the burden on my heart.

The creatures that had attacked the town had all been eliminated. I looked at the ruins that remained. This place was filled with the sadness of its inhabitants. I knew that the people here would lack the hope they needed to live on. They had no hope for the future.

Hope was what people needed most. It would be their motivation to go on living. But it was something I could never give.

When the Demon Lord Army brought despair, all I could do was turn despair

to anger. The hatred people felt for me would give them the strength to carry on.

"Listen up! People of this town!"

They were all looking up at me.

"We've defended you against an invasion by the Demon Lord Army! Many of you were sacrificed in the process, but that's just how the world works! Those with inferior jobs exist to support their superiors! A person's job is everything!"

Their family members, friends, and lovers had been just killed. When I dismissed their loss as "just as how the world works," it was more than they could take. They'd forgotten about the Demon Lord Army. I was now the target of their hatred. I'd ignited a fire in their empty eyes. Flames of anger and resentment. That was for the best.

Remember my name! Never forget me! And above all, hate me! Yu's light will shine all the brighter for it!

"As you're no doubt aware, I am the hero, Foyle Austin! I'm destined to defeat the Demon Lord. Rest assured that your deaths were in service of this world, and of me!"

Gladius nodded. Mary smiled. I feigned happiness too.

As the fake hero destined to be defeated by the real hero, I had to play the role of the antagonist—of Angrecious—to the very end.

When you find me, Yu, don't hesitate to kill me.

The Fake Hero's Role

"Sir Hero! Why couldn't you save my mother or father?!"

"Sir Hero, why did you let my house burn down?!"

"Sir Hero, didn't you come here to save us?!"

"Sir Hero, why did you give up on my hometown?!"

"Sir Hero."

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"Sir Hero."

"Sir Hero..."

"Hero."
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"Sir Hero." "Why?" "Did you lie to us?" "You said you'd save us." "How could you?" "But you're the hero." "Don't abandon us." "Stop." "Don't take my daughter from me." "Please save my son." "Please, no." "Spare us." "Help me." "Help me." "Help me." "But you're the hero." "Aren't you the hero?" "If you're the hero..." "A real hero would..." "A hero would have..."

"Liar."

I awoke with a gasp to find the room shaking around me. It took me a moment to remember that I was traveling by carriage.

I was covered in a cold sweat, and my heart was pounding. I put my hands over my face in an effort to calm myself down.

It was just a dream.

Mary was aboard the same carriage. She took her eyes off the jewel in her hand and looked at me. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm fine. The shaking of the carriage woke me up."

"The quality's rather poor, isn't it? Nobles like me were never meant to ride in such things."

"Pah. Nobles complain about everything," Gladius said.

"No one asked for a barbarian's opinion."

"What'd you call me?!"

They were getting into another argument. I was used to it. In the past, they'd both taken out their anger on Yu and Mei. With those outlets gone, they'd turned against each other, and now they couldn't stand each other. I'd normally get between them, but I lacked the energy, still reeling from the nightmare.

"Though what concerns me more than this barbarian is your slow recovery,

Sir Foyle. Your condition seems rather serious. Some people were less than pleased with your performance during our previous battle."

"Oh... Sorry, I'm just tired lately."

"Well, the monsters have been relentless in their assaults. We're constantly being dispatched this way and that. It's quite dreadful. I can barely make time for my skin care routine."

"The cretins of the Demon Lord Army need putting in their place," Gladius said. "Same goes for the good-for-nothings we're protecting. They think they can just hide and wait for us to save them."

"You've shown that beheading two or three cowards as an example to the others is quite effective in dealing with that issue," Mary said. "Commoners just need to be reminded that they exist to serve people like ourselves. Though if I had my way, we'd have ignored this latest plea for assistance."

"We can't do that," I said. "These people don't stand a chance, not even with every knight and commoner helping."

We were heading toward a village that was under attack by a manabeast.

A hero wouldn't normally be sent to dispatch a manabeast, but the request had come from this country's government directly; this manabeast had already proved powerful enough to destroy several other villages.

Manabeasts, much like humans, were naturally occurring, living creatures whose bodies contained magical energy. Monsters were artificial monstrosities created by the Demon Lord. They were different in that they emitted a corrupting essence that was harmful to people and all other living creatures.

When a creature threatened people, however, the distinction didn't matter. I wanted to answer the call for help regardless.

As I held my aching head in my hands, I prayed that the village was still safe.

"What is that?"

"This energy... It can't be!"

"What's going on here?!"

What would come next was far beyond anything we could have predicted. Instead of a single manabeast waiting for us, we were faced with three demons emitting overwhelmingly powerful auras.

One looked like a man with white fur and the tail of a beast. Every part of his body crackled loudly as it emitted electricity.

Another was sitting on a pale blue flower made of ice. Loose black robes covered their small body, making it hard to tell whether they were male or female.

The third was a creature with towering horns. The gigantic body beneath his cloak hinted at his incredible strength.

"Tordön Lloyd the Thunderbolt."

"Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist."

"And Bestreben the Mighty of the Eight Warlords. By order of His Majesty the Demon Lord, you will be eliminated. Hnngh!"

"Nghhh!"

I had no time to dodge as the Warlord Bestreben swung one of his massive arms at me. Instead, I blocked the attack with the holy sword, but it couldn't absorb all of the momentum, and I was sent rolling across the ground.

How can a punch be so powerful?! If I hadn't leaped backward while blocking, the shock would've broken my arm.

As I struggled to my feet, Bestreben towered high above me. The very sight of him was terrifying. "Weak. Feeble. Pitiful. I expected far more from this generation's hero. Behold. Your comrades will soon meet their deaths too. Your hopes of victory are naught."

I glanced at my two party members.

"Gah!!! My arm!" Gladius cried.

"Ha ha ha!" Tordön Lloyd laughed. "What's wrong? Has all the vigor you showed me disappeared already? Yes, you've lost an arm, but what do you expect when you move so slowly?"

Gladius had battled the Thunderbolt up close, only to lose an arm to the plasma sword that extended from Tordön's hand.

"It can't be! It can't be!" Mary cried. "This ice isn't melting in the heat of my flames?! It shouldn't be possible! It's pitiful ice magic! It can't be this powerful!"

"I'm disappointed," Sway Ka Senco said. "You were so confident in your magic that you got my hopes up, but look how your flames pale in comparison to my ice."

Mary had taken on the Ice Mist, but even her powerful fire magic couldn't penetrate Sway's ice barrier. As a fire mage, Mary should've had the advantage, and yet she was losing. I could hear the despair in her voice.

In the clash of two swords and the contest of fire and ice, Gladius and Mary had been playing to their strengths, only to lose regardless. These opponents were far beyond us.

Bestreben sighed with disappointment. "Why is your swordsmanship so pathetic? Are you really the hero? Did you really defeat the Blast Wave? How dull. You're nothing but a pitiful weakling."

He was right. From his perspective, I'd been so slow that I was barely moving at all. But there wasn't a whole lot else I could do. My body was sluggish, I'd lost the use of my abilities, and the holy sword felt heavy. To make matters worse, I had barely been able to get a minute of sleep lately before a nightmare jolted me awake.

I would've liked to tell him all of this, but I would've sounded like a sore loser making excuses.

"I've seen enough. There's no worth in dragging out our fight. Begone, fool." Having completely lost interest, Bestreben swung his huge fist downward with even more force and speed than before.

I was too badly injured to dodge it in time. I'm dead.

"No, not yet!"

I won't lose here. I can't die yet! Not until I've given the holy sword to Yu!

I didn't have to win. I didn't have to avoid serious injury. Nor did I have to

fight fair.

Holy Sword Arianrhod. I know I'm not cut out to be the hero, but give me one good strike, just like you've done before, so I can make it out of this alive!

I ran at Bestreben as I swung my weapon. For just a moment, the holy sword regained its true power and moved faster than Bestreben's fist, allowing me to score a cut on my opponent's cheek.

Bestreben put his hand to the blue liquid flowing from his face then stared at it in astonishment. "Ugh...? This is...blood?"

The attack had taken an extreme toll on my body, leaving me severely weakened. "Haaah...! Haaah...!" I panted before beginning to cough violently.

"It appears you can barely lift your sword. Did you burn up the last of your life force for the sake of that attack? If so, you deserve my praise. You're the first to wound me in so very long."

"Ha ha... Thanks, I appreciate it."

"I called you a pitiful weakling just now. I take it back. You're strong. Your will is strong. As a show of respect, I'll use the full extent of my power to kill you."

The aura that began to emanate from Bestreben was overwhelming. Cold sweat ran down my back and my instincts screamed at me to run.

He must be a real nightmare if he hasn't even gotten serious yet!

"Let's see you endure this! Howling Fist of Destruction, Obliterator."

His attack was so powerful that nothing that came before it could compare. His fist moved with such speed that it created a ferocious gust of wind and was powerful enough to destroy the ground beneath us. Getting hit would mean instant death.

With all my remaining strength, I ran toward him. I must have looked horribly slow in his eyes. He probably thought I was intending to take his attack head-on. But he was wrong. I charged at him, but then suddenly dodged by throwing myself to the ground.

Bestreben's fist slammed down where I'd just been standing. The impact tore through a mountain, rendered the earth asunder, and parted the heavy clouds

above us in two. The shock shook me to my core and reverberated in the pit of my stomach. If I'd been a moment slower, my body would've been reduced to nothing.

"Ha ha... That was close."

"You dare toy with me?!"

"As if I could. I just wish I could've fought you when I was at full strength."

I meant it. During our fight, I'd sensed that he had a warrior's spirit. I wished I could face him in earnest.

"Problem is, there's no way I can die here. There's someone else who has to kill me."

"What?"

That's right. You can't kill me. That's Yu's job.

"You're strong, Bestreben. And I'm using that to my advantage!"

"What are— Ugh?!"

There was a great rumbling sound that kept growing louder. Bestreben's eyes went wide with surprise as he noticed the avalanche of earth rushing toward us like a tidal wave.

"You win the fight! But I was playing a different game!"

Triggering a landslide had been my goal all along. The ground here was unstable. I'd kept goading Bestreben into using his most powerful attack because I knew he could cause the mountain beside us to collapse.

For these Warlords, victory meant killing me. For me, it only meant survival. The difference was in my favor.

"Gladius! Mary! Run!"

I created a smoke cloud that rapidly enveloped the area around us, concealing me as I ran away.

The massive landslide surged toward the place where I'd been standing.



A short while later, the dust had settled.

Sway the Ice Mist had created a wall of ice for protection. Now that it had served its purpose, the frozen shield cracked and crumbled into pieces. "Well, that was pathetic, wasn't it? I never thought the hero would turn and run. What a letdown."

As Sway and Tordön waved away the clouds of dust, Bestreben remained still, thinking about what he'd just heard. There's someone else who has to kill me...? What does that mean?

"Hah," Tordön laughed. "There's no way they'll get far with those wounds. Come on, let's not waste time. We'll track them down and kill them. You heard me. Don't just stand there. After them. Now."

"I'm done," Bestreben replied.

"Huh?"

"I've lost interest." Bestreben simply turned and walked away.

"What? You're defying a direct order from His Majesty the Demon Lord?"

"I suppose I'll head back too," Sway agreed. "I won't get anything out of this. I didn't feel any envy from them."

"Hey, wait," Tordön said. "Damn! Fine, do whatever you want! I'll finish them off myself!"

"Let's leave him to it," Sway said. "Who knew he was so hardworking?"

With a tsk, Tordön watched the other two Warlords walk away. A moment later, he set off in search of Foyle and the others at lightning speed. But try as he might, he'd never find them.



We hadn't gone far from the spot where we'd fought Bestreben and the others.

I knew they'd find us quickly aboveground, so I'd led us through a cave. There'd been no better place to run.

"I think we lost them," I said.

They weren't following us. It was a relief because I had neither the strength nor the will to face them again. It had been the closest of calls.

I'd never dreamed that the Demon Lord might send three of his Eight Warlords after me at once. My existence must have been bothering him more than I realized. He was putting in a lot of effort for a mere fake.

"My arm... My arm was..."

"It can't be. It can't be. It can't be. I don't deserve to be brought so low. I don't deserve this. I don't deserve this."

Gladius and Mary had been muttering similar things to themselves for some time. They were shaking and their eyes were wild. I could see that both were mentally crushed. Even if we made it to safety, we were probably finished as the Hero's Party.

"Oh, I know who's to blame," Mary said. "No one warned us that the Demon Lord's Warlords were there. That commoner soldier should've scouted the region. The moment we get back, I'll see to it that he's executed."

"Damn! Damn, damn, damn, damn! How'd I let this happen to me?! I was my country's strongest swordsman! I'm Gladius, the champion of the King of Lions Festival!"

"Quite right, Gladius! Just look at you! You certainly won't be the strongest swordsman anymore! You'll barely make it as a second-rate fighter!"

"What did you say to me? I saw how powerless you were against that enemy mage! Even the water mage would've fought better than you!"

"Don't you dare compare me to her! Commoners are filth! And you! You might have worked your way up thanks to your sword skills, but you're still a commoner too!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?!"

The pair were at each other's throats. Reality must have been too much for them to bear. Arguing was preferable to accepting their humiliating defeat.

We're so weak. We'd been shown just how inferior we were.

The walk back to the nearest town took several days. All the while, I was

aching from my wounds and gritting my teeth at the realization of our inferiority, while Gladius and Mary constantly bickered.

We eventually arrived to find a group of heavily armored knights waiting for us.

The town's commanding knight stood at the front of the group. "Welcome back, Sir Hero. What became of the village?"

"Sorry. It was already destroyed. And not just that; three of the Demon Lord's Eight Warlords were there. Report it at once."

"The Eight Warlords? That's worrying. I'll report to my superiors immediately."

"Good. I don't know what they're planning, but it's bound to spell trouble."

"Yes, of course."

"Forget that and let us through!" Mary ordered. "And bring me the fools responsible for scouting. It's their fault that we met defeat!"

The knight completely ignored Mary. It was odd. His attitude had been very different before we left the town.

Something's not right here. Why are they all so tense? It's as if they're angry.

"Now perhaps you have something to say for yourself, Sir Hero?" the commanding knight said.

"Yes. I'm sorry I couldn't beat the Warlords."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about."

"Oh? Then I don't know what you're asking."

"Don't you? Then I suppose I'll have to say it. You took us for fools, Fake Hero!"

The knights behind him all readied their weapons at once.

"Who do you think you are?!" Gladius yelled at them.

"Show some respect!" Mary said. "How dare you make threats toward members of the Hero's Party?!"

Mary and Gladius were both bewildered, and the knights were all looking at us with pure hatred. Meanwhile, my feeling was one of relief. He'd just called me "Fake Hero." That could only mean one thing.

"The church announced the result of an oracle," the commanding knight said.

"A True Hero has arisen, and his name is Yu Protargonist! The same man you drove away! And you, Foyle Austin! We know that you're an imposter!"

Soon this will all be over. I smiled, thinking my death was near.



After a narrow escape from the knights, every nation called for my head for the crimes of impersonating the hero and stealing the holy sword Arianrhod. My party was pursued by knights and soldiers alike.

To make matters worse, the people we'd mistreated while masquerading as the Hero's Party were out for revenge. Commoners who'd come to hate us were aiding the efforts to track us down.

Gladius and Mary didn't stick with me for long. "Liar!" was the last word I heard from them. Later, I heard terrible stories about how they'd met their ends.

Not long after losing an arm to the Thunderbolt of the Eight Warlords, Gladius had struggled to defend himself when overwhelmed by an angry mob. He'd died at the hands of people weaker than himself. Many blamed him for the family members they'd lost and had wanted revenge.

Mary's noble status had been enough to ensure her safety at first, but she'd shown no remorse and continued to mistreat commoners. The final straw had been her reaction when her carriage ran over a destitute mother and child. The people were enraged and rebelled against her. To quell the uprising, her family was stripped of all power and she was executed by the guillotine.

These outcomes weren't surprising. The Hero's Party existed to give the common people hope, and its status was the only reason people had looked past the way we mistreated them. Once we'd lost their support, the party was bound to fall apart. Neither Gladius nor Mary had understood this. My one regret was that I'd failed to make either of them see the errors in their ways of

thinking.

Even before I'd been found out as the fake hero, I'd been losing the faith of nations and the people, because even solitary monsters had been a struggle for me as the holy sword's power faded in my hands. Now that I'd been exposed as the fake hero, what little respect the party had was gone. Gladius and Mary had been doomed ever since.

Gladius and Mary weren't exactly good people, but it was I who'd fooled them into accompanying me on my journey. I'd had no defense when they accused me of being a liar. Now that they'd both fallen to the wrath of the people, I was certain to be next.

"Haah... Haah... Ha ha ha. Things can't get any worse than this."

I was on the edge of a cliff with a magnificent view.

I'd been using the holy sword, dulled to the point of being black, to drive back pursuing soldiers without killing a single one. I struggled to stay on my feet as I felt an urge to collapse to my knees.

"I didn't think I'd have to deal with monsters too. How'd they know where I was? Oh well, I'm just glad they didn't hurt the locals."

I'd lost track of how long I'd been fighting. It might have been weeks or a month. The days were all blurring into one.

It had been ceaseless. I'd faced the church's assassins, pursuers dispatched by governments, and demons trying to steal the holy sword. It was no surprise that governments could track me down, but monsters shouldn't have been able to determine my location so precisely. Not that it mattered anymore.

I looked up at the sky as I tried to catch my breath.

"Is that a bird? Ha ha. Is it waiting to feed on my corpse?"

Some birdlike creature was circling above me. I envied it as I watched it move freely through the sky.

"Haah... Haah... Huh?"

I was close to giving in to exhaustion when I saw someone in the distance.

"Oh, he's finally here. He sure took his time... Ha ha."

I resisted the urge to collapse to my knees while waiting for the figure to draw near. It was Yu—the person I wanted to see most.

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"Yu."
"Foyle."
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We were two old friends, reunited after a year apart. Behind him was Mei, looking even more beautiful than she had a year ago. There were also several others with him who I didn't recognize. They were all Yu's companions, no doubt.

This should've been a cause for celebration, but a lot had changed between us. After saying each other's names, the silence between us grew.

"I'm impressed," I finally said. "You've never looked so grand. Your clothes, your stance, and even the air around you. I could've mistaken you for someone else."

"Well, a lot happened. I nearly turned into a recluse after you kicked me out of the party. But then Mei talked sense into me, Christina told me I was the hero, and I gained companions who supported me. If it weren't for them, I would've gone back to the village where we grew up."

I saw a trace of the old Yu as he smiled, but the resolve in his eyes was something new.

"They say I'm the hero, Foyle. I have to save everyone. Would you mind giving me the holy sword? If you hand it over, we won't have to fight."

I was surprised. Yu wasn't demanding the sword, but politely asking for it. He wanted to end this amicably.

"I'm sorry about what happened to Gladius and Mary," Yu continued. "By the time I got there, they were already... But there aren't many bad stories about you, Foyle. Just surrender. I'll make an appeal to the church. I'll tell them you're a good person! So please!"

"Ha ha... You never change, do you?" I said softly.

"What?" Yu didn't seem to hear me.

He was as kind and gentle as he'd ever been. But that wouldn't do. He had to take back the holy sword by force. My role was Angrecious—the antagonist. I had to stand in the hero's path. I was an enemy to be defeated. It's time for the closing act.

"Ha ha ha! I don't think so. I'm the hero! Why would I give the holy sword to a weakling like you? The goddess chose me!"

Behind Yu stood a priestess. "What are you saying?!" she said. "Yu's the True Hero! He's not a fake hero like you!"

"Oh. I was wondering who'd convinced Yu he was the hero. It must've been you."

The priestess squeaked in fear when I glared at her.

Mei stepped in front of the priestess. "Foyle, I won't let you lay a hand on Chris."

"Oh, is that you, Mei? You look even more amazing than when I last saw you." In just a year, Mei had grown exceptionally beautiful.

Mei gulped as she looked at me in my ragged clothes. "Spare me the flattery and give Yu the holy sword. It's his. You didn't have to hang on to it until you got yourself into this state."

I sensed pity in every word she spoke, weakening my resolve. I had to keep talking to suppress my emotions.

"I think not. I'm the hero. Only I'm worthy of holding this sword! If you're going to be stubborn, then let's fight for it, Yu," I pointed the holy sword at him as I spoke. "Just you and me. We'll see who's worthy of being the hero."

He had no reason to entertain my demands, but he accepted. "All right."

Yu's companions immediately grew concerned.

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"Sir Yu!"
"Yu!"
"Brother!"
"Master!"
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I couldn't help but smile. *He found some good companions. Unlike me. I'm kinda jealous.*

After reassuring them, Yu turned to face me. The stage was set.

We stood some distance apart, readied our weapons, then charged at each other.

It would be over quickly. Speed, skill, and technique: Yu had improved in every aspect beyond recognition.

"Brings back memories, doesn't it?! We used to fight with sticks!"

"Yeah... Yeah, we did!"

"Did you forget?! You lost to me every single time. It was Mei who cheered you up when you started crying!"

"I remember! I never beat you even once!"

"So admit defeat right now! And stop calling yourself the hero!"

"I can't do that!"

With a single swing, Yu knocked my holy sword back. I wielded the weapon poorly, unable to live up to my years of training. I was so unbearably exhausted that Yu blurred before my eyes.

He could've easily dealt a finishing blow, but he didn't. He'd come all this way, but he wasn't ready to kill me.

"Stop playing around!" I approached and swung the holy sword with all my remaining strength.

"Wh-What?! Ugh!" Yu blocked my attack at the last second and was left off-balance.

I seized the opportunity to kick him in the stomach.

"Ugh, gah!"

"You think you can go easy on me?" You're too gentle, Yu.

His gentle nature was something he'd have to leave behind. If Yu lacked the determination to defeat me, then he'd stand no chance against the Demon

Lord. I knew better than anyone how terrible demons were.

Yu would have to harden his heart, but I'd spent enough time with him to know that it wouldn't be easy. He was kind—too kind. It was what was good about him, but I'd be forced to continue on as the fake hero until he changed.

I looked over at the priestess who'd told Yu he was the True Hero. *She's the key. This is sure to get to him.*

"I'll bet it was that priestess who told you you're the hero."

"What of it?"

"Did you say her name was Christina? She must be very special if she's trusted to carry out oracles at such a young age. I bet her words carry a lot of weight. She's just what I need! Once she's mine, I'll have a way to restore my reputation!" I sneered at Yu, trying to look vulgar and loathsome.

"Foyle! You wouldn't..."

"Did that make you angry? Well then, come at me! Use some of that anger against me!"

Yu's rage was clear in his eyes. He swung his sword at me, moving faster than ever before, but even so, he must have known it'd be an easy attack for me to block. But this aggressive swing was the chance I needed.

"Ah ha."

"Why...are you...laughing...Foyle?" Yu was stunned.

Mei began to scream. "Noooo!"

I hadn't blocked with the holy sword. I'd let Yu's blade hit my body.

"Foyle!" Yu cried.

"You're really strong, Yu... I mean it."

"We'll heal you!"

"Leave me! It's what I deserve for putting on an act the whole time."

"An act? What are you talking about? Christina, please! Foyle needs help."

"I can't," Christina told him. "Only the saint could treat a wound this deep."

"B-But... Foyle..." Yu's voice grew faint as he said my name over and over.

I was beyond help. Death was the price I'd pay for fooling so many people for so long.

Can I quit the act now? Hey, Goddess. Cast me into hell for it if you want, but please, don't stop me from being honest with my friends in my final moments.

"Yu... You were amazing. You really are the True Hero."

"Foyle, stop talking. We're going to heal you."

"Don't touch me!"

Yu reached out to me but stopped when I yelled.

"It's fine. It's the path I chose."

"Foyle, you can't have wanted—"

"Yu." I cut him off, looking him right in the eye. "I've known it all along. I always knew. You're the True Hero. Do you remember? That day a group of us from the village went out to explore the forest without telling the adults?"

Yu teared up and nodded as he pressed his hand against my wound to slow the bleeding.

"There was a monster. It hurt one of our friends. I ran, thinking he was doomed. I wished I could've saved him. I told myself I was running off to find an adult, but it was just an excuse. You were different. You stood up to that monster with no more than a stick. You fought. I ran. That's all there is to it."

He'd faced a monster he had no chance of beating. Some might have called it reckless. Some might have simply called him a fool. But when a child armed with no more than a stick stood his ground to save his friend, I could only call it courage. That was something I'd always lacked.

Yu's companions had been listening to our conversation. Their eyes were fixed on us as they waited in silence.

I heard someone kneel down. It was Mei. Her entire body was shaking.

"No. It can't be. This can't happen. It can't. Ngh, I'm sorry, Foyle... Foy... You

haven't changed!"

Tears flowed from her eyes, just like when we'd last said goodbye. I wasn't close enough to wipe them away, and I lacked the strength. Just like before, I wanted to comfort her, but was unable to.

Now there was one thing left for me to do.

"Yu, this belongs to you."

"I can't... My hero was always..."

"You'll be fine. Just believe. Believe in me who believed in you. Believe in yourself because I believed in you."

I pushed the holy sword against Yu's chest.

"Yu... You're our light. Carry on my dream. Be the light that guides everyone."

Yu looked back and forth at me and the holy sword repeatedly before he took hold of it. In that instant, the sword shone brighter than it ever had before.



"Well that proves it. You're the True Hero, Yu."

I'd never seen such bright light from the holy sword. It had never shone so brightly for me. I envied him, but at the same time I felt satisfied. I'd witnessed the birth of the True Hero. Humanity was in safe hands.

"I'll leave the world to you, and Mei too."

I pushed Yu away then began staggering backward. Behind me lay the cliff edge.

The sky was clear. The air felt good. My heart felt light too.

"Foyle!"

"Foy!"

"Stay back!" I demanded, causing them both to stop.

This is fine. There's a True Hero now; no one needs the fake.

I was done playing my part; it was time for the antagonist to exit the stage.

Yu, Mei, I'm sorry. Please don't look so sad. Yu, don't go back to being a crybaby. You're the hero now. Get it together. You too, Mei. Smile like you used to. That smile that made me fall in love...

Though I wish... I still wish we could've... I always wanted to be there with Yu and Mei...

I smiled. If they were going to remember me, this was the expression I wanted them to remember.

"Foyle!"

"Foy!"

Yu and Mei's voices grew distant as I lost consciousness and fell over the cliff edge.

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"I'm not letting you die, sir."

"Well that's odd," I said.

"What is?"

"Didn't I die? How am I alive?"

"You didn't die at all. All you did was pass out while looking awfully pleased with yourself."

"Seriously?! Oh man, that's embarrassing."

I covered my face in shame and heaved a heavy sigh. But that only made me feel worse.

A lone girl was watching me, bemused.

I'd been rescued at the bottom of the cliff by none other than Iris—the elf I'd saved once before.

Her hair had grown a little, but she was otherwise unchanged. She was wearing what looked like a green elven dress with a large hood that could probably keep her face hidden.

After I'd fallen from the cliff, Iris had spent three days and nights nursing me while I was unconscious. She'd literally been by my side the whole time. When I'd finally woken up, she'd hugged me out of sheer happiness.

I'd been surprised to learn that I was still alive and couldn't understand how she'd found me. I'd recovered from my embarrassment enough to listen to Iris's explanation.

Iris opened up a newspaper that she must have bought from somewhere.

"According to this article, everyone thinks you're dead. It also says that the holy sword is in the hands of that person they're calling the True Hero."

"Makes sense. But wasn't I fatally wounded? Why am I alive?"

"That's simple. I healed you."

"Hold on a second. Healed me how?"

"Hm? Like this. I charged up power in my hands, then thought 'heal, heal' until you were better."

I'd heard tales of such powers before, but I honestly couldn't believe it.

Healers and priests could heal people, but they couldn't save someone from a fatal wound. Their abilities channeled the patient's own life force, so if someone's heart stopped, or if they'd lost too much blood, such abilities wouldn't be enough to save them. Only one person had that power...

"You're the healing saint?!"

Much like the hero, the saint was one of humanity's ultimate weapons. Saints were women with the power to heal ailments of all kinds and to contain the corrupting essence characteristic of monsters. The divine power that saints could unleash on demons and monsters was also greater than anything a priest was capable of, and similar to that of the hero. And just like the hero, there was only ever one saint at a time.

Yu had been accompanied by a priestess and a warrior, but no one that looked like the saint. The whole time that I'd been the fake hero, the saint had never appeared, but now I was looking right at her.

In contrast to my surprise, Iris was entirely calm. "Oh, is that what it's called? When I was trying to save you, I think I had one of those...oracles? Divine revelations? Whatever it's called, I heard a voice telling me to use the power to save the world or something. Not that it matters."

"That definitely matters."

"It doesn't. I don't care if I'm the saint or whatever. I only wanted to save you."

"I'm grateful, but still..."

It was Yu, not me, who needed her most. The saint could heal his wounds and block the Demon Lord Army's evil powers. Yu would soon be throwing himself into intense battles where he'd stand little chance without the saint.

I straightened myself up then turned to Iris with a serious look on my face. "Iris, the goddess has almost certainly given you the powers of the saint. You have to use them for the sake of humanity. What I mean is... Will you aid Yu and Mei?"

Iris's tone changed as she gave a firm refusal. "Absolutely not."

"Huh?"

What? Isn't this the part where she's supposed to feel a sense of duty and say "But of course!"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Even if I am the saint, I don't see why I have to fight against someone as scary as the Demon Lord for the sake of other people. I'd rather keep away from those horrible things trying to destroy humanity. And that hero you're talking about was the one who hurt you! I saw it with my own eyes! I'll never ever forgive him! And I didn't like that girl who was trying to seduce you! What was with all those curves of hers?! Was she trying to make me look bad?!"

Angry little Iris was just as childish looking as the day I'd saved her. It sounded like she was jealous of Mei's body.

I smiled knowingly as I realized that she was just angry at Yu for wounding me. "You're so kind, Iris."

"What?! What makes you say that? You know flattery won't get you anywhere... Eh heh heh."

"Listen, you're being nice to me because I saved you in the past, right? But everything you know about me is an illusion. I'm nothing but a fake, a fraud, and a good-for-nothing. I'm a fool who stood back while my companions hurt people and convinced myself I was doing the right thing. I'm a selfish weakling who used the holy sword's power for my own benefit. You shouldn't care about someone like me."

It was all true. I'd been deceiving everyone. It had all been part of the job I'd been given, but that didn't change the facts.

I clenched my fists so tightly it hurt. I'd forever have blood on my hands. Redemption was beyond me.

For a short while, Iris said nothing, and I braced myself for a scathing response.

"That's not true at all." Iris smiled warmly. "You might not have been the hero

people were waiting for. People might even say that you're a villain. But I remember how you came when I cried for help. It was *you* who saved me, no one else."

Iris gently gripped my fist with both of her soft hands. Her pure and innocent smile left me too stunned to respond.

"I don't care what anyone says," Iris said. "You're my hero. Thank you for saving me."

"Oh... Ha ha ha. I'm... I'm actually a hero? It's kinda ironic that no one told me so until I'd already lost the holy sword... Wow, when was the last time someone thanked me like this...? Whew."

Overcome with emotion, I put my hands over my face and realized I was crying. Feelings I'd been suppressing up to now came gushing out, and I began to sob loudly, unable to find the words to speak.

Rather than say anything, Iris simply stroked my hair.

I'd always wanted to be the hero, to be someone who could lead others. Instead, I'd been a stepping stone on the hero's path to greatness.

I'd played the role of Angrecious and been just as hated. I'd taken hope away from the people. I'd abandoned those I'd wanted to save. I would forever carry those sins with me.

But the girl in front of me was thanking me. A thousand people might hate me, but at least one person was grateful. I wouldn't find redemption, but it gave my actions meaning.

A short while later I felt better. When I came to my senses, I felt ashamed as I realized I'd been crying into a girl's chest.

"Sorry that you had to see me like that," I said while scratching my cheek in an attempt to hide how red my face had gone.

"I don't mind at all. In fact, I'd like to see more of it. I'm older than you are, so you can come to me whenever you need a lady's comfort."

"Ha ha ha. I'm not sure about that. I might appreciate the same offer from a shapely woman like Mei though."

"Hmph! You shouldn't bring up someone else's name when you're alone with a woman!"

"Ouch."

She'd poked me right where my injury was. Since her power as the saint hadn't fully awakened, all she'd been able to do for now was close the wound.

When she saw me flinch in pain, she panicked and asked "Are you all right?!" with tearful eyes.

I reassured her that I'd deserved it.

"Hmmm. Since I haven't lost my life, I'll have to figure out what to do with it. But the world thinks I'm dead already."

"I expect you'll get beaten up if people find out you're still alive."

"Got that right. Maybe I can live in the forest where I won't be seen."

"As much as I'd love to have you live in the forest with me...is that really what you want to do?"

Iris was staring right at me.

Oh man. I feel like she's looking right through me.

"Well... I still want to save people. But I'm not the hero anymore."

I felt like some part of myself was missing. I made a brief attempt at using some abilities, but besides a sensation of weightlessness, I felt no power from inside myself.

I was already done playing the role of the fake hero. That meant that my job was no longer valid. I'd have to visit a church to be sure, but I felt fairly certain. The idea that I'd been reduced to nothing filled me with anxiety.

So this is how it feels to be an unassigned? I never knew it was so disheartening to be jobless. Did it always feel like this for Yu too?

"Perhaps you can't be the hero since you've lost the holy sword, but the hero's not the only one who can save people. How about being a savior instead?"

"Savior...? I like the sound of that."

Iris's words meant as much to me as any divine revelation. I might not be the hero, but I could still save people. It was a comforting thought.

She's right. If I'm nothing, it means I can be anything. I'm free to choose.

It felt like my heart had just found its rhythm. My worries vanished.

"All right!" I declared. "There's no time like the present. I'm going to head for the nearest town."

"Huh?! You're leaving already?"

"Of course. The Demon Lord Army is terrorizing people at this very moment. There's no time to lose."

"That may be, but you're not fully healed yet."

"Okay, that's true."

"But don't worry. I know a lovable girl who specializes in healing wounds, and she happens to be available. Someone in your condition couldn't ask for someone cuter or more capable!"

"Huh? Um..."

"What I mean is, um, maybe we should... That is, if you need someone by your side for a while, then I could maybe..."

Iris kept sneaking glances at me. She was just as readable as the day we'd first met. It was obvious what she wanted me to say.

I smiled, dropped to one knee, and held out my hand. "How about it? Will you come with me on my quest to save the world?"

Iris smiled and accepted my hand. "Yes! Let's do it together, my hero!"

The tale of the fake hero had reached its end. What followed would be the tale of a man walking the savior's path.



Chapter 3: The Savior

Ouro Village

"All right, that should do it," I said after a few good stretches.

My stiff joints made a series of cracking sounds as my body limbered up once more.

I'd been eager to visit a nearby village the moment I decided on my new path in life. However, I'd only gotten a few steps before realizing that walking made my wounds throb with pain, and so I returned to the cave.

Iris had been preparing my meals and healing me with the saint's power. At one point she'd declared, "I'll wash your body too!" with a rag in her hand and an eager expression. Needless to say, I'd turned that offer down.

After three days spent resting, with Iris tending to my every need, I'd gotten tired of looking at the same cave.

"Are you sure you can walk now, Foyle?" Iris appeared at the cave's entrance carrying berries and honey collected in a lotus leaf.

"Yeah, I feel much better. My wounds aren't going to open up again like they did on the first day."

"It gave me a real shock when that happened. You would've died if I wasn't here to heal you."

"Ah ha ha. Sorry."

"Honestly... Heh heh. I've gathered some berries, so let's eat."

I'd been living on the berries and fish that Iris brought me for several days now. Once in a while, she found mushrooms too. As an elf whose home was the forest, she knew which ones were safe to eat. All this nutritious food had helped me make a swift recovery. I was truly grateful.

As we waited for the fish to cook, Iris asked something that got my attention.

"My name?"

"That's right. If you keep calling yourself Foyle, there's a risk of people realizing who you are. Even if they don't, the name could draw some unwanted attention."

Iris was making a good point. Anyone whose name and hair color matched the wanted posters was going to draw suspicion. All the more so for someone as famous as me.

Foyle the Fake Hero was dead. It was time I abandoned the name. On the other hand, changing it didn't feel quite right because I wanted to treasure the name my parents gave me. But I had to get my priorities straight. If I insisted on keeping the name Foyle, I'd only risk more trouble for Iris and Yu's party.

"You're right. But it's not easy to come up with a new name."

"That's why I've been thinking about it. How about Ayame?"

"Ayame?"

"Yes. We elves are usually named after flowers. Like Iris. My mother and father were named Kinrenka and Shaga after flowers too. Flowers can represent a lot of things. Ayame symbolizes hope, making it perfect for someone who plans on saving a lot of people."

"I see. Ayame...? I like it. It's perfect. From now on, I'll introduce myself as Ayame."

I wasn't giving up the name Foyle completely, but I'd probably have to keep that name to myself from now on. I repeated my new name to myself over and over to get used to it.

Ayame... It's not bad.

It was a little ironic that I'd have a name meaning "hope" after taking hope away from so many people, but Iris must have put a lot of thought into it. I didn't want her effort to go to waste.

"Yes! Yes! Now I'll have a way to prove to everyone how close we are to each other. If there was another elf around, they'd give the game away, but since they're all shut-ins besides me, I'm the only one who knows. Eh heh. Eh heh

The ayame was a species closely related to the iris. Iris would be able to use the association between her name and Ayame's to convince other elves that they shared a deep connection. If any human woman tried to get close to Ayame, Iris could casually mention her connection to him to make the woman back off. Though of course, she didn't tell Ayame any of this. It would be too embarrassing.

Iris couldn't help but smile when she thought about the strong connection between their names. In all places and throughout all ages, young women in love were devious.

"Iris, what are you mumbling to yourself?"

"N-Nothing!"

"Really? Okay then. The next problem is my face. I can change my hair, but I'll still look like the wanted posters. Someone could still recognize me despite thinking I'm dead. I'll have to buy a hooded robe from somewhere."

"Leave it to me! I saw this coming, so I stayed up all night making a whole bunch of wooden masks!"

"Huh? You did? I didn't know elves could make those too."

While I was wondering whether mask making was like knitting a scarf, Iris began pulling masks from her backpack, one after another.

How are there so many?! Is she a professional mask maker?!

"Let's try this first," Iris said. "I like how it turned out. It's made from the fragrant wood of a thousand-year-old tree. My people say that it protects the body from diseases. You can feel its power, can't you? The design's a little experimental; I came up with it myself. What do you think?"

Iris was brimming with confidence as she handed me the mask.

It was, in a word, horrifying. It was decorated with an unsettling black pattern and the whole thing formed a sharp point, kind of like a bird's beak. I'd look way

too suspicious in this.

I somehow stopped myself from recoiling and instead rejected it gently. "No, I think a mask like this would be wasted on someone like me."

"Really...? Then what about this? It's based on the charms used in rituals in certain regions. It's a mask of butterbur leaves with the power to ward off evil magic! Painting the symbols onto the leaves took a lot of work!"

"It certainly looks intense, but aren't these same symbols used in demon summoning rituals? They might raise a few eyebrows."

"Then how about this?! It's made from the wood of black spirit trees from my village. It's said that spirits reside inside the trees. You can sense the power of the sturdy tree it was made from. If I had to give it a name, I'd call it the Hannya mask."

"I think I'd be executed for serving the Demon Lord if I wore that."

"Then how about this?! It'll completely cover the upper half of your face, but it won't hide your warrior's spirit. Once you put this on, you might as well call yourself Mister Bushido!"

"It's the kind of mask I'd wear if I wanted to repeatedly get in someone's way."

I kept trying on masks one after another, with none of them being quite right, as we tried to find the perfect one. Fortunately, Iris had made a lot of them. I didn't mind trying them all as long as she was having fun.

After trying countless masks, I finally made a decision. "This one's probably the safest option."

It featured a simple, floral design and only covered the right side of my face. Covering my whole face would look suspicious, but with this I could claim that it was hiding a scar.

I still worried that my red hair might be an issue, but I had no way of dyeing it at that moment.

"Hmph. But that one hides too much of your handsome face."

"The others are too unusual. They'll make me stand out even more. Sorry

Iris."

Iris still seemed unhappy with the choice I'd made.

I had to rule out some of the masks because they showed too much of my face. Many of the others looked so weird that I'd be arrested for wearing them. The mask I'd chosen struck the right balance.

That just leaves my hair. I can't dye it, so I'll just have to change my hairstyle. That's fine, I'm used to messing around with hair.

"Well...okay. That mask won't just cover your face, it'll also keep your identity hidden."

"What do you mean?"

"The top of the mask... This part. Can you see the carving? The mask's made from the wood of the shroud tree. It's a cowardly tree known for concealing itself whenever aggressive beasts are near. This carving keeps the shroud tree's power active."

"Wow. So no one will know who I am as long as I'm wearing it?"

"It'll help, but it's not perfect. Passersby won't recognize you at all, but it obviously can't hide you from someone who spends a long time with you. That's why the uncovered part of your handsome face is as clear as ever to me!"

"Th-Thanks." I was a little overwhelmed by Iris's sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"Next, there's this. It's a special type of cloak worn by multiple generations of elves. They're tough enough to protect from minor cuts and scratches. I was up all night making this too."

"Oh, nice. If I put the hood up, maybe I won't have to wear the mask." Iris went quiet.

"Oh! I'm sorry! It's not that I don't like wearing the mask! It's great. I'll always treasure it."

I felt a little guilty for upsetting Iris, so I did my best to look happy. With a somewhat exaggerated smile, I put on the cloak.

"Thank you, Iris. You've done a lot for me."

"No, it's nothing. I enjoyed making them anyhow." Iris looked pleased by my reaction.

I had no right to complain after she'd put in so much effort for my sake. It would've been rude to show her anything other than gratitude.

"Thank you. I mean it."

"Ah, uh, um."

I finished getting dressed while watching Iris cover her red face.

"All right. My new life starts right here. It's time to set out on my journey as a savior!"

"Yeah! I know just what to do. There's a place nearby called Ouro Village. I've been there before to buy food and newspapers. We can stop by on our way to the next town."

I decided to accept Iris's plan and head for Ouro Village. "Good idea. Let's set out right away."



I was blinded by strong rays of sunlight as I neared the cave's exit. The sky was clear, and a pleasant breeze was blowing. If I were a poet, I would have a thing or two to say about how blessed I was. It was a fine day for starting a journey.

At long last, I'd be able to help those that I couldn't when I was pretending to be the hero. Whatever challenges lay ahead, I was ready to face them.

With powerful emotions in my heart, I took my first step out of the cave.

My optimism, however, would prove short-lived. My first act as a savior was to get myself arrested for looking suspicious the moment I arrived in Ouro Village.



Now that I was done playing the role of the fake hero, I'd set out as Ayame on the path of a savior.

At the moment, I was in handcuffs in a guard station being questioned by a soldier.

"So what were you plotting when you entered our village?"

"Can we back up a minute? Why assume I was up to something? I've done nothing suspicious."

"Are you serious? You're out here on the frontier wearing that weird mask. You're not an adventurer, so—as much as I hate to say it—you've got no reason to be out here unless you're up to no good."

My questioner was a stern-faced young man. Or maybe you'd call him a boy. At any rate, I was being forced to explain myself to someone younger than I was.

"I'm not making any trouble, I'm just a traveler. The elf—Iris—can vouch for my identity. And I'm good at what I do. I've defeated manabeasts on multiple occasions."

"Oh, really? Then please explain how you're going to slay manabeasts without a weapon?"

I didn't have a comeback. The holy sword had been my only weapon while I was the fake hero. Now that I'd lost it, I was completely unarmed.

For a hero, the holy sword was essential, and any other weapon would pale in comparison. I'd never bothered to keep a backup weapon because it would've just been extra weight to carry. I had kept a small knife with me, but it had long since given out on me in a fight.

I shouldn't have needed anyone to tell me just how suspicious I'd look as an empty-handed man wandering around in a mask. Perhaps I'd gotten carried away and hadn't thought my savior plan through. I felt severely lacking in foresight. As a grown man of twenty, I should've known better.

Wasn't Mei always telling me to stop charging blindly into situations? I should've listened.

"So what are you?" the soldier asked.

"Me? I'm a savior. Though I'm still trying to get started."

"Okay, now I'm sure you're up to something."

"What?! Why are you looking at me like that? I know it sounds hard to believe, but give me a chance!"

He doubted me more with every word I spoke. I was close to being thrown in a cell.

I began wracking my brains, trying to think of some way to convince the youth in front of me, but then the guard station's door opened and a red-faced middle-aged man entered. He was wearing the same uniform as the youth.

"What's gotten into you Latty Boy?" the older soldier said. "You need to loosen up."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that! My name's Latio! I'm a soldier now!"

"Oh ho? Only a month on the job and you think you're a full-fledged soldier already? Nah, you're still Latty Boy." The man began laughing loudly.

He smells. Has he been drinking? I wondered.

After having a good laugh at the youth, he turned to me. "As for you... Ayame

was it? You're free to go. You can enter the village if you want."

"Huh?"

"You're not seriously letting this weirdo into our village, are you?!" Latio protested.

"Settle down. The young lady explained how she found this youngster in the mountains, close to death. They've been together ever since."

That much was true. I really had been close to death when Iris found me. Though it sounded like she'd neglected to mention that I was the fake hero while dramatizing the other details. She must've cooked up a story for me.

"It takes a special kind of human to win an elf's trust," the older soldier continued. "Or at least that's how it goes in fairy tales. I'm sure he's all right. And don't you realize that you might be ticking off the elves?"

"Well... Maybe, but..."

"I hate to think what'll happen if we start messing with elves. You know I'm right, so give me the key."

Young Latio reluctantly handed the key to the older soldier, who then undid my handcuffs.

"Thanks," I said. "I was panicking for a moment there."

"Understandable since you were having accusations thrown at you. Anyway, you're free to enter the village, so you can forget all that."

As the older soldier and I were talking, Latio suddenly leaped to his feet and pointed at me. "Grr... I still don't trust you! I'm gonna arrest you the moment anything bad happens!"

"You sure take your job seriously," I replied. "Don't worry, I don't mean your village any harm."

"We'll take your word for it," the older soldier said. "Here, these are your belongings."

"Oh, thanks. I appreciate the help."

"I mean it! I don't trust you!"

I took my things from the older soldier and then left while Latio was still shouting at me.

As I exited the guard station, Iris noticed me from where she'd been resting against a tree and hurried over. "Oh, finally," she said.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That went horribly, Ayame."

"No kidding. But it's my own fault for being careless. I can't hold it against them."

The soldiers were just doing their jobs. I wasn't about to criticize them for that. If anything, I was grateful that they'd let me go.

"It was the older soldier who released me. What did you do? I doubt your story alone was enough to win him over."

"I was honest with him about our situation, and then he said he'd let you go in exchange for some medicine," Iris explained.

"Medicine? Are you telling me you bribed him?"

"It was a fair exchange. I realized he was suffering from a hangover and offered to help. I definitely didn't do anything immoral."

That sounded like a bribe to me, but I wasn't going to complain right after she'd saved me. I didn't know what I would've done without her.

Elves were often considered legendary beings. They could use all kinds of magic and could even manipulate plant life. They were so powerful that if they were to fight against the Demon Lord Army, they'd probably win.

As creatures that lived in harmony with nature, the Demon Lord Army was their natural enemy. Elves and humans should have been allies since they both shared a common enemy, but elves had always refused to aid humans in their affairs. And not just that: there were tales of elves turning their bows on humans. That was probably another reason the older soldier had been so quick to let me go.

All that said, when I took a good look at the girl in front of me, I found it hard to believe elves were so ferocious. Iris must've been exceptionally gentle for

one of her kind.

"What is it?" Iris asked. "You're staring. Oh! Don't tell me you've fallen in love with me?! Heh heh. That's quite all right, Ayame. You're welcome at any time!" She must've misunderstood something because she stood with her arms wide open, waiting.

"Welcome to do what? Actually, I'd rather not know."

Iris was clearly disappointed when I turned down the invitation.

"He was right about weapons," I said to myself.

"What was that?"

"One of the soldiers, I think his name was Latio. He was asking what use I can be to anyone when I don't have any weapons. I'm totally unarmed right now. All I had besides the holy sword was a little knife, but that got worn down while I was fighting and waiting for Yu to show up. I'm going to need something new, but I've got no money."

"That's all right," Iris confidently puffed out her chest. "I've been raising money in towns and villages by selling herbal remedies. I've got enough to buy you a sword or two!"

First she heals my wounds, then she convinces the soldiers to set me free, and now... Hold on... Am I totally sponging off of Iris? That's a depressing thought. But how is she handling everything so effectively anyhow? I wondered whether Iris had been planning for this situation for some time.

"When I questioned the drunkard soldier about the village, he told me that there's only one blacksmith here," Iris said. "Let's pick out your new weapon from there."

"I must be a real handful..."

"Heh heh. You needn't hesitate to rely on me."

"I promise I'll pay you back."

"Hmph. You should just come to my open arms and let me take good care of you."

The idea of being cared for by someone who looked like a little girl was too embarrassing. I could only respond with a vague smile.

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We found a crude structure that appeared to be the village blacksmith and knocked several times on its ill-fitting front door before entering.

There were no other customers inside, but there were plenty of weapons. Numerous swords were displayed on shelves, each with a coating of dust. Even more weapons were stored in barrels with no sensible arrangement.

It was a big step down from the weapon sellers I'd visited in the royal capital, though it wasn't fair to compare with premium stores like those.

"These all look shabby," Iris remarked.

"Whoa, don't say that out loud. Though I don't see the owner around. I hope he hasn't gone out."

I saw no sign of anyone as I looked around the store. I tried calling out, and the initial response was a series of heavy footsteps coming from somewhere inside.

A man with a thick beard and a cloth wrapped around his head soon appeared. He yawned, then scratched his stomach and said, "What? A customer? Just as I was going to sleep."

"Good evening. Sorry to disturb you," I said.

"You're a customer? I don't get many of those. Welcome to the finest blacksmith in the village."

"The finest? Wasn't this the only blacksmith in the village?" Iris said.

"That makes it the finest, doesn't it? Oh...those long ears... Are you an elf?!"

"That's right! You'd be wise to tremble in fear and offer up one of your swords!"

"Hey, cut that out," I said. "Sorry about my companion."

"I don't mind. But this is a shock." The man took a good hard look at Iris.

"Never thought I'd meet an elf way out here. This is my first time seeing one.

They're not just legends, then? Just goes to show, life's full of surprises, isn't it?"

"Is it really so rare to see an elf like me?"

"You'd better believe it. This village is out on the frontier. We rarely get human visitors, let alone elves. Elves don't even visit the Soleil Sun Kingdom, so I never thought there'd be any here."

"We're on the frontier?" Iris replied. "Well that explains the poor quality of the weapons."

"Don't be rude, Iris," I said.

"It's fine," the blacksmith replied. "It's the truth. I struggle to find materials in a village like this. The little I have is what traveling merchants bring in from time to time. It means I don't actually do much smithing. I spend most of my time sharpening people's carving knives."

"No offense, but shouldn't you call yourself a blade sharpener if that's the case?" I asked.

"Probably. I didn't introduce myself, did I? I'm Fabbro. It's nice to meet you, young man."

"Likewise. I'm Ayame and this is Iris."

Fabbro bowed his head as I took his extended hand in mine. He had the rough palms of a manual laborer.

"You said that traveling merchants visit the village, but what about ordinary travelers?" I asked.

"We don't get those; people heading for the royal capital would rather stop at towns than a little place like this. Only visitors we get are tax collectors once a year. We're in the middle of nowhere, you see. But a government official and some soldiers were here not long back."

"What was that about?"

"They were looking for some charlatan who'd been calling himself the hero.

No one thought much of it since we knew they wouldn't find him way out here.

I heard that he eventually got caught by the real hero. I don't know the details

though."

Sorry, that was me.

Iris gave me a nervous look.

"But we've gone off topic," Fabbro continued. "If you're a customer, then I assume you want something. Well? What are you after?"

"Oh, that's right. Could I take a look at your swords?"

"Don't you need armor too? I can't help but notice there's nothing on your hands."

"I do need gloves, but first I need a weapon. As you can see, I'm not carrying anything. I used to have a sword, but I lost it along the way."

"I know how it happens. I won't make you say whether you broke it or misplaced it. Give me a second."

Fabbro rummaged through one of the barrels, then drew out several swords which he laid down before me. He'd picked out a sword of every type: there was a short sword, a bastard sword, a longsword, a claymore, a rapier, and a greatsword.

"If you're after a sword, then I'm guessing your job's swordsman or something to do with combat? I've picked out the ones that should suit someone with your build. Tell me what you think."

"Hmm." I picked up a crude sword that lacked any decoration. "This looks all right."

The weapon I was holding was an entirely orthodox, unremarkable longsword. Some of the others looked better in quality, but this one was closest to the holy sword in terms of weight and shape. It felt familiar in my hand.

"Are we buying that one, Ayame?" Iris asked.

"I think so. I'd like to try it first though. Is there something I can use for a test swing?"

"Try it on the piece of wood over on that table," Fabbro said. "I'll be using it for firewood, so knock yourself out."

"Ha ha ha. You're having me chop your firewood while I'm at it? Oh, but shouldn't I move it first? I wouldn't want to damage the table."

"Don't worry. It's a robust sword, but you'd need a lot of skill to cut even half way into that log with it."

"Hmph! You don't know how skilled Ayame is! He's defeated all kinds of manabeasts before!"

"Yeah, I'm sure he did. Go on, son. Give it a try. Oh, but don't use any abilities. Obviously those *would* cut the table in half."

"All right. Got it."

I smiled to myself, knowing that I couldn't use any abilities even if I wanted to. Then I held the sword ready in two hands. In an instant, the air around me transformed.

"Uh?!" Even Fabbro felt the change.

I closed my eyes while focusing on the feeling of the sword's hilt against my palms.

The holy sword that marked me as the hero... The job I'd been given... The abilities that came with my job... I'd lost all of these things.

Hero-specific abilities like Divine Light Incarnate and Accel had been the first to go, and then I'd lost even the basic abilities used by everyday warriors and swordsmen.

This was my first time wielding a sword since I stopped pretending to be the hero. With this swing, I'd be putting my true self to the test. It would come from my own body, with no abilities to enhance it. It was with that thought in mind that I swung the sword with all my might.

A moment later, the sword had passed straight through the log and cut the table in two. And it hadn't stopped there—the blade was embedded in the floor.

"Ugh?!"

"Ayame, that was amazing!"

"You've gotta be kidding me." My eyes went wide at the impossible outcome of the sword swing.

"I don't believe it. I've never seen anyone do that," Fabbro said.

I looked at the sword and then at my own hands in wonder. The sword had the same dull gleam as before.

For a while I was dumbstruck by how easily I'd cut into the floor, but then I came to my senses and lowered my head. "I'm sorry! I didn't think I'd cut through the log and destroy the table! I've damaged the building too!"

"No, it was me who told you to take a practice swing there."

"I know, but I shouldn't have gotten so carried away that I damaged the floor. I can pay for it. Not right now, but I will, I promise."

"Ayame, if you need money—" Iris began.

"It's my mistake, Iris. I have to be the one to put it right. I can't put the responsibility on someone else." It made no sense for Iris to pay for damage that I'd caused.

Fabbro looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. "All right. I thought you were just some weird guy tricking this girl into giving up her cash. Well, you might be weird, but you're honest. You are weird though."

"Ah ha ha." I shrugged my shoulders. "Did you have to call me weird three times?"

Fabbro's response was a good hearty laugh.

Just then, a panicked soldier burst into the store. "There's trouble!" He didn't even notice me or Iris as he addressed the blacksmith. "Fabbro! We'll need every weapon you've got!"

"What? What's going on?"

"A manabeast attacked old Billy! He's in bad shape, but he got away with his life. The horse carrying his firewood wasn't so lucky!"

"What?!"

I'd never heard of Billy, but I could tell from Fabbro's reaction that this was a

big deal.

"Billy might not have a combat job, but he knows how to handle a wild boar," Fabbro said. "That beast has to be dangerous if it wounded him."

"Actually, he fell over while running away and landed on a sharp branch."

"It wasn't even the beast?!"

"Um, I'm sorry to interrupt, but where might I find this Billy you're talking about?" Iris asked.

"Hm? He's resting in the guard sta— An elf?!" The guard had been too busy talking to Fabbro to notice us before now. He got a real shock when he saw Iris.

"I overheard your conversation," Iris explained. "Please take me to the wounded man you mentioned."

"Uh, but..."

"Please! If he's badly wounded, then every second counts!"

The soldier wasn't sure what to make of Iris's request, but he agreed. He led us back to the same guard station where I'd been held upon my arrival in the village.

"Please let me through!" Iris cried when we got there.

"Huh? It's you two again!" said a familiar voice.

"Excuse us," I said. "Oh, it's you, Latio. Hello again."

Latio scowled at me. "What are you doing here?!"

"We heard that someone was injured," Iris said. "Where is he?"

"He's over there," a soldier told us. "What? Are you gonna heal him?" He gave Iris a doubtful look. Nonetheless, he led the way.

The wounded man—Billy—was seated and grimacing in pain. A branch had gone right through his leg.

Iris immediately began examining him.

"What do you think, Iris?" I asked.

"The wound's not as bad as it looks. The branch is stopping the bleeding.

Unfortunately, it must've gotten bent out of shape while he was walking on the injured leg. Unless I do something, there'll be splinters left in his blood vessels. Let me heal him."

"Are you sure?" I was asking Iris whether she really wanted to use the saint's powers in front of everyone.

"It would be shameful for a healer like me to ignore some in need of help. But don't worry, I've got an idea," Iris told me. Then she warned Billy, "Here goes."

"Whoa, hold on," Billy replied.

"Brace yourself. It'll only take a second. I know a grown man like you can handle it."

Before Billy had another chance to object, Iris pulled the branch from his leg in one swift movement, and all in one piece.

A gush of blood followed, but Iris quickly began giving him further medical attention. Or more accurately, she was applying the saint's healing powers wherever there was damage. It looked like she was just rubbing a medicinal herb into the wound, but looking closely, I could see she was using her powers. It was easy to miss because she did everything with such skill.

When she was done, she wrapped the wound in a bandage made of plant fibers.

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"All finished. Does it still hurt?"

"Huh? It...barely hurts at all. The wound's healed? Already?!"

"I used a secret elf trick."

"But that doesn't—"

"A secret elf trick."

"Um."

"Secret."
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Iris was covering up her use of the saint's power by refusing to listen to any disagreement.

Fabbro had initially winced when Iris started the painful looking treatment,

but he was the first to speak now that it was over. "Well that's great, Billy."

"Sure is. I thought my leg was done for. Thanks, little lady. Though I'm going to miss that horse."

"Excuse me, my name's Ayame. Were you really attacked by a manabeast?"

"I certainly was." Billy turned pale and began trying to indicate its size with hand gestures. "It was a giant wolf, way bigger than my horse."

The soldiers began muttering to one another.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"How are we supposed to get by with that thing lurking near the village?"

Then Latio spoke up. "Pull yourselves together! We're supposed to defend this village!"

"I know how you feel, Latty Boy, but..."

Latio was getting worked up, but the other soldiers showed no willingness to fight.

"Hmph. This is rather pathetic," Iris told them.

Fabbro grimaced. "You're right, but manabeasts have been rare around here until recently. They've always had everything they needed to survive in the forest around us. Let us give this some thought."

I had my hand to my chin, considering the situation.

Fabbro continued, "If there's a big manabeast nearby, then it might have made our village part of its territory. If we let it think the people here aren't a threat, it'll keep coming closer and closer."

"Manabeasts make troublesome neighbors," Iris agreed. "You'd have to take precautions every time you left the village."

Talk of manabeasts made the soldiers just as fearful as any ordinary villager. Latio was an exception, but I could tell by looking at him that he wouldn't stand much chance against it.

After a brief silence, Fabbro spoke. "You can have that sword for free, and we'll forget about the table. I'll ask for a favor instead. How about it?" He

smiled at me like a villain about to share his plans.



We walked over fallen leaves that crunched beneath our feet. I had no trouble finding my footing—I was used to this sort of terrain. I was wearing a large backpack filled with camping gear that Fabbro had agreed to loan us.

"The minute we leave the forest, we're sent back in. We can't get away from this place."

According to Fabbro, there'd been an increase in manabeast activity here lately, though none had shown aggression toward humans until now.

The latest incident changed everything. Not only had someone gotten hurt, the manabeast was bigger than any sighted before. It fell to me to slay it.

"It does feel a little pointless to visit a village, only to sleep in the forest again," Iris said. "But if you didn't like the idea, why didn't you refuse?"

"I couldn't do that. The villagers won't be able to gather anything from outside the village while this manabeast is nearby. It's all about saving people."

"Wasn't it about repaying your debt to Fabbro?"

"You didn't have to say that."

Iris had just touched on a sore point. She could be merciless at times.

A voice behind us began complaining about our relaxed attitude. "Stop kidding around. We're not out for a stroll here." It was none other than Latio, the soldier who'd questioned me earlier.

"It helps to not be overly tense," I replied. "Why'd you come with us anyhow?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm keeping my eye on you so you can't harm the village."

"But you were there when Fabbro made his request," I said with a shrug.

"That doesn't change anything! I still think you're up to something! I'm keeping an eye on you. That's all there is to it." Latio remained wary as ever.

Latio's difficulty in trusting visitors to this remote region was the result of his fixation on the need to protect his village. It wasn't such a bad thing in itself,

but it was hard to relax with him breathing down my neck the whole time.

"Then perhaps you should deal with the manabeast yourself," Iris told him. "It's your problem, after all. Soldiers like you are there to defend the village. Shouldn't you be able to handle this?"

"I wanted to scout the forest back when more manabeasts started appearing, but the other soldiers stopped me. They said it was too much for me."

"Ahhh." Iris nodded in agreement.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Latio shot back in exasperation.

"Let's all calm down," I said. "If we make too much noise, it might draw in more of them."

The suggestion made Latio grow tense. For all his bluster, manabeasts scared him, which wasn't surprising given his inexperience as a soldier.

He says he's here to keep an eye on me, but I'll bet he just wants to help protect the village, I thought as we continued to walk.

"Manabeasts..." I muttered.

"What's wrong?" Iris asked.

"I'm just thinking, manabeasts and monsters both attack humans, and yet governments don't dispatch anyone to deal with manabeasts. I'm wondering why they're treated differently."

Though they were fundamentally different, both types of creature posed a danger to humans. For some reason, governments were far slower to deal with manabeasts. They generally took no action unless a manabeast was powerful enough to destroy an entire town or village, or if a swarm of manabeasts formed.

I vaguely remembered something about an organization that hunted manabeasts in exchange for payment, but I wasn't really sure.

"Yes, they're handled differently, but for a good reason," Iris explained.

"Some people think that manabeasts are part of the Demon Lord Army, but it's not true."

"Aren't they? Oh right, I remember hearing about that. Something about their bodies being different."

"Yes. A manabeast is just a living beast transformed by the mana inside it. Unlike monsters, they're not motivated to seek out and attack humans. They're only doing what they need to to survive. They don't attack out of malice. It's what separates them from monsters. Though this one could be an exception since it did attack someone."

"Oh... I feel a bit guilty now. I've killed several manabeasts thinking they're always a threat to people."

"Elves are long lived. We know how things were before the demons appeared, and I'm an expert on the topic. I used to tell these things to someone in my village, and he'd always say, 'Wow, Iris, aren't you clever!'"

"That reminds me, I've heard that the Demon Lord Army avoids getting close to elves. It's like they fear elves' power too. They know they'd lose."

"Heh heh. What were the Demon Lord's commanders called...? Warlords? Well, whatever they are, they're nothing compared to us."

"I wonder about that."

Elves certainly had many talents. Iris was a good example of that.

Humans had many stories about elves. It was said that they could transform a town into an inhospitable desert in the span of a single night, or could turn a barren wasteland into a site of lush greenery. These two completely opposite processes were both within their power. A horde of monsters wouldn't stand a chance against them.

But the demons of the Demon Lord Army were far more powerful than the monsters. One particularly notable example was Bestreben. He was powerful enough to erase a mountain with a single punch. I couldn't imagine the destruction he could cause by using that ability somewhere densely populated. As for the Warlords I hadn't encountered, I assumed they posed a similar threat to humanity.

I'd been able to defeat Downburst, I'd seen Bestreben the Mighty, the Ice Mist, and the Thunderbolt, and I'd heard of one more known as the Fortress.

But the rest of the Eight Warlords were completely unknown to me.

If only I'd been stronger, I could have eliminated one out of the trio we'd encountered. No... Wracking my brains over ways to fight the Demon Lord Army is a bad habit from my days as the fake hero. I'm not the hero now. I'll let Yu and Mei handle all that while I focus on saving people in my own way.

"All you two do is talk," Latio said. "Are you serious about finding this manabeast?"

"We're working on it," I replied. "You don't have to keep nagging us."

"I'm not convinced... Your story about defeating a monster was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Ayame doesn't lie!" Iris cried. "He really mghh—"

Worried that we were headed for a full blown argument, I put my hand over Iris's mouth. "That's all right, Iris. I appreciate you sticking up for me, but if you keep interrupting like that, the conversation won't get anywhere."

Okay, now where were we?

"What's up with her? She looks happy."

"Huh?"

"Mhmhmhm." Iris's ears were twitching happily for some reason as I held my hand over her mouth.

Eventually, we reached the spot we'd been aiming for. After a little searching, we found telltale signs of the manabeast's presence, just as expected.

"Ayame, it looks like it was here too," Iris said.

"No doubt about it. Those tracks match the others."

"Judging by how wet they are, it passed through recently. And based on how many tracks we've seen, it comes back here often."

"Okay..." That was enough information for me to make a decision. "All right, this is the spot."

"What? You're finally going to start tracking it for real?" Latio asked.

"That's not what I meant. We're camping here tonight."

"Huh?" For the first time since we'd met, Latio was making a face that actually suited a boy his age.

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The sun hung low in the sky, and it was beginning to get dark.

I pulled some camping gear from the backpack I'd been wearing, and without too much effort, I set it up, ready for us to stay the night.

While Iris collected firewood, I caught a hare that was about to become our meal.

"Would you pass the pepper, Iris? There should be some in that bag."

"Is this it? Here you go."

"Thanks. Plain roast hare wouldn't taste as good."

I sprinkled some pepper over the freshly cooked meat, then took a big bite. The flavor was subtle, but a little pepper really brought it out. It was delicious.

The look in the hare's eyes had made me feel a little guilty, but Iris hadn't hesitated for a moment before cutting its throat. She'd told me, "I've hunted in the forest so many times that I don't think much of it. If anything, it's better to put the hare at peace quickly rather than draw things out." Elves were fearsome, and Iris didn't hold back.

On the other hand, she had taken a moment to pray after killing the hare. That had left a good impression on me.

"Do we really have time to sit back and eat like this?"

"What's that, Latio?" I said. "You're hungry? Come on, it's good food. Why not try some?"

"I don't want it! I've got my own dried food!" Latio took a bite from the small piece of food he'd brought and scowled as he chewed.

"I'm pretty sure freshly roasted meat tastes better than that stuff. Besides, you're entitled to it."

"I am?"

"You did some of the work, didn't you?"

Latio had done his part when we'd set up our camping area, albeit with a lot of complaining.

"I'd feel better if you took some," I added.

"Well...when you put it that way." Latio accepted a piece of hare from me.

"I suggest you accept the food you're offered without arguing next time," Iris said. "You're not a child anymore."

"Sh-Shut up. If anyone's a child it's... Oh, but elves are different. You're probably an old wo—"

"How about I make a sacrificial offering to the forest's plant life?"

"Eek?! I didn't mean it! Oh... This is good." Even with Iris scaring him, the taste of the meat was enough to make Latio relax and smile.

The hare was very tasty and not at all gamey. I was glad I hadn't caught a raccoon dog because I always struggled to eat those.

The breeze was the only sound around us as we chatted to pass the time, but before long we heard something else.

It's finally here?

"You said you'd hunt the manabeast, but you're sitting around eating," Latio complained. "You guys were never serious, were you?"

"We never stopped hunting," I said.

"What?"

"It's a manabeast. We found the tracks it left where Billy was attacked. Then we found a lot of matching tracks here. Some are old and some fresh, so we know it often comes by. There's a high chance we're in its territory. What I'm saying is, sitting here and roasting meat on a fire makes us ideal prey."

No sooner than I'd finished speaking, a creature that had been concealed in the dark undergrowth aimed its first attack at Latio. I reacted swiftly, blocking its claws with my sword to protect him.

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"Eeek?! H-H-Help!"
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"Stay back. You too, Iris."

Latio was so paralyzed by fear that he didn't heed my warning.

Iris looked at him and sighed. "You're certainly a handful... O, mother of the forest, forest kin, and forest spirits. Please lend your hands, hearts, and minds to our defense. **Protective Tree**."

With much creaking and rustling, tree roots rose up from the ground and, together with the branches, formed a mesh that surrounded Latio and Iris.

What just happened? Was that magic? Wait, I don't have time to think about that now.

"Don't worry, Ayame. I'll take care of the awkward little boy."

"Okay... This thing's as big as I expected. I see why it had no trouble taking down a horse."

"Grrraaahh!"

The creature gleaming in the firelight was a wolf covered in black fur with white and gold markings. As I tried to push it back, the creature held its ground like a massive, immovable boulder, but I sensed it was as dangerous as a newly sharpened sword.

"A m-mánagarmr," Latio muttered in terror.

Is that what type of manabeast it is?

"Grrrr!"

Looking at it closely, I noticed that its body was covered in fresh wounds, suggesting it had lost a fight over territory. Injuries aside, it was a formidable-looking manabeast. I felt a sense of the wolf's power as I studied its beautiful patterned fur.

I could feel it resisting me with incredible strength, but I gathered up all of my might and pushed its claws aside before taking a swing at it.

The mánagarmr leaped back, dodging with ease. It then watched me closely, too cautious to approach.

"Haah, haah, grrrraaahhh!"

On closer inspection, I realized it was out of breath. It looked like it might collapse from exhaustion even if I stood back and did nothing. Most likely, it wanted us out of its territory, but it was in bad shape, and we were putting up a fight, so it didn't know what to do next.

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"Ayame!" Iris cried.

"What?"

"Could I try speaking with it?"
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I was a little surprised. "You can talk to it?"

"Yes! Not like I could with a person, but we should be able to understand each

"Yes! Not like I could with a person, but we should be able to understand each other's feelings! I'm an elf, after all!"

I knew beast tamers could understand manabeasts, and it seemed Iris could understand them to some extent as well. I didn't think she stood much chance on this occasion given how openly aggressive the manabeast was, but she sounded determined. I decided I'd let her give it a shot, but of course, I wasn't going to let my guard down.

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"Grrr!"
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"Please, listen to me. Why did you attack a human? I'm sure you had a reason."

"Grraaaahh!"

As Iris tried desperately to communicate with the mánagarmr, it barked angrily as if rejecting her offer to negotiate.

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"Sorry, Iris, but I don't think it's willing to talk."

"All right... Be careful, Ayame."

"I will."
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As Iris stepped back, disappointed, I stepped forward in her place.

I'd thought that the beast was about to lunge at us when it barked, but it hadn't. Instead, it watched me closely, not even glancing away when Iris spoke. It had probably guessed that I was ready to step in the moment it tried to attack

her.

"You're smart... I'd better do this carefully!"

I tried kicking a burning piece of wood out of our bonfire. As expected, the manabeast showed no fear of fire. We continued to stare at each other with the flames burning between us.

"Grrrarrgh!"

"Whoa!"

Enraged, the mánagarmr leaped over the fire and swung its claws at incredible speed. I'd seen it coming, so I jumped back to dodge. It followed up by opening its jaws wide, displaying an array of sharp fangs as it tried to bite me.

Now's my chance!

"Take this!"

I took a fistful of the pepper Iris had given me and released it near its snout. Naturally, I took care not to inhale it myself. The managarmr got a nose-full and sneezed powerfully.

"Grrr?! Graah! Garrahh!"

I wasn't about to miss this opportunity. I swung my sword at its neck in an instant.

"Graah! Grrugh! Grroooh!"

The mánagarmr tried to dodge but failed. In its final moments, it seemed like it was trying to communicate something with its faltering barks, but then it collapsed.

"That thing was huge, and you just..." Latio said in astonishment.

"Ayame!" Iris yelled. "Please don't use up all of our pepper like that! What a waste!"

"It was the only way to create an opening," I replied. "If it had gotten away with only a few fresh wounds, it might've hurt someone else. It had to be a decisive blow. Well, that's our task completed."

"Oh, you're right. Life that returns to the soil, I pray that you'll be at peace." Iris put down a flower as an offering as she said her brief prayer for the mánagarmr.

In that moment, Iris looked beautiful to me. Most people would only feel relief upon seeing an aggressive manabeast slain. Few would stop to pray for it.

"What is it?" Iris asked when she noticed me looking at her.

"Nothing. Just thinking about how kind you are."

A beast tamer or dragon rider might give a burial to a manabeast they'd formed a contract with and might mourn its death, but most people just saw manabeasts as threats. Save for a few species that coexisted peacefully with humans, they were slain whenever the chance arose.

"I'm an elf—nature's arbitrator. I don't consider what evil deeds a creature might have committed while living. Its life will rejoin the cycle. It's only natural to pray that it has a peaceful journey ahead."

"Oh? I like that."

I copied Iris by kneeling by the mánagarmr I'd killed. I prayed there silently for a short while.

Once I'd finished, I touched a wound on the mánagarmr's leg that I hadn't noticed until now.

"What's wrong?" Iris asked.

"It's just... I could tell from how it moved that it was already injured. There are scars on its forehead and legs. If it hadn't been for the leg wounds, it might have been able to dodge my attack."

With healthy legs, it would have moved swiftly and given me a much tougher fight. I'd seen the effects of its wounds well enough to be sure.

But since when could I move so quickly? I wondered. My increased speed wasn't the only change I'd noticed either. Since when was I strong enough to take down a massive mánagarmr without needing a job or any abilities?

"You're saying there's something else out there tough enough to wound this thing?" Latio sounded terrified by the idea.

His question interrupted my train of thought.

"No, that's just one possibility. It could've been a fight over territory, or maybe it had an accident. Or maybe they were old wounds that hadn't healed. Though I couldn't help but think it was distracted by something..."

I was interrupted by the cry of another beast. "Grrraaaaoowww!"

I quickly placed myself in front of Iris and Latio and pointed my sword toward the source. A second creature then emerged from the undergrowth. But it was nothing like what I was expecting.

"Huh?! It's...a pup?"

It was a wolf pup, far smaller than the mánagarmr I'd just fought. For a moment, the pup glared at me, but then it noticed the body. With a whine of despair, it rushed over.



Oh, now I see. The mánagarmr I killed must've been its mother.

I took a step closer.

"I killed your mother. I can't change that, and I won't apologize for it."

"Grrrahh!"

"If I let you go, you'll want revenge on humans. That's why I have to kill you to make sure no grudges remain."

It was a necessity. Unlike the hare we hunted earlier, wolves posed a threat to villages. An orphaned pup would struggle to survive, but if it reached maturity, it was certain to attack the village. I had to prevent future trouble before it began.

With the pup glaring at me, I readied my sword. At the very least, I wanted to make sure its end was painless.

"Ayame! Please wait!" Iris grabbed my sleeve.

"Iris?"

"You're right that his mother harmed someone. Creatures living near humans mustn't do that. But the pup did nothing wrong. He's still innocent, and he can learn."

"Won't he bear a grudge if I let him go?"

"I'll raise him to make sure that doesn't happen. And just look how fluffy he is."

"Fluffy...?"

"Yes. He's so fluffy." Iris looked at me with sparkling eyes.

That's really besides the point...

"Iris, I know this pup hasn't hurt anyone, but how can you be sure he won't hurt people once he grows up?"

"It's fine. I'll raise him well."

"It's not like keeping a cat or a dog."

"But he is a dog. Right, Jamama?"

"You've named him already?"

The pup whined as Iris approached him without any fear. I kept my sword drawn and ready.

"I know you're saddened by the loss of your mother. You must be anxious. But you're not alone. I'll be by your side from now on. I can never make up for the fact that we took your mother from you. She tried to survive by threatening humans. But you've done nothing wrong. I'll take care of you until you grow into a splendid adult. I know it's hard to trust someone who killed your mother, but will you believe me?"

Jamama seemed unsure how to react. Iris was clearly sincere, and her face was full of kindness.

"Don't tell me that earlier..." Iris had mentioned how fluffy the pup was, but maybe it was just an excuse to save his life. It had certainly eroded my willingness to kill him.

For a while, Iris and the pup stared at each other. It was a tense moment. Then Jamama gingerly approached Iris. He'd accepted her. The aggression he'd displayed a moment ago was gone.

Well, I can't argue now. Maybe I shouldn't have given in so easily, but I lowered my sword.

"W-Wait!" Latio protested. "That's the spawn of a dangerous manabeast. You can't take it into the village! What if it kills someone?!"

"Do you really think a little pup like this could kill someone?" Iris asked.

"Well... Maybe not, but..."

"Grahh!"

"Eek! Ah, ugh!" Startled by Jamama's bark, Latio stumbled backward, tripped over a tree root, then hit the back of his head on the tree trunk.

"Oops."

"Oh, wow. He's out cold," I said.

"He's pathetic. And he was too scared to move a moment ago."

"You don't mince words, do you?"

"I'm just stating facts."

Iris picked up Jamama in her arms. She also looked over Latio while she was at it.

"I'll have to be the one to explain this to everyone," I said.

Latio's objections were entirely sensible. Iris had persuaded me to spare Jamama, but I'd have to justify that to everyone else somehow.

Latio remained unconscious as I lifted him up and carried him back to the village.

Later, we went back to collect the body of the mánagarmr. Even when drained of blood, the body was heavy. Still, I'd have to carry it somehow. As I lifted it up, I noticed a large white object float to the ground.

"Hm? Is that a feather?"

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The sun had almost fully set.

I'd left Latio with the soldiers at the village, and Iris and Jamama had returned to the inn.

After briefly visiting the village chief's house to explain what had happened, including the situation regarding Jamama, I'd returned to Fabbro's store.

Fabbro had been busy working somewhere inside, leaving the front area empty just like before.

"Hm? Oh, it's you! Well, that was quick." Fabbro extended a hand and gave me a warm welcome when he saw me.

I shook his hand.

"Couldn't find it? Well, no worries. Tracking down manabeasts isn't easy. At least you're back safely."

"No, I killed it."

"Huh? Are you serious?"

"Entirely serious. The body's outside if you want to see."

I led Fabbro to it. Word must have gotten around because a crowd of people had gathered despite how late it was. Billy, the man whose horse had been killed, was also there to confirm that it was the same manabeast.

"You actually did it..." Fabbro's jaw hung open as he looked at the mánagarmr lying in front of him.

"Wasn't it you who asked me to do it?"

"I thought *maybe* someone with your skills could handle a manabeast, but still, I didn't think you'd slay it this easily. Especially not a managarmr."

"It wasn't easy. If it had been in better shape, I'm not sure this sword would have been enough. I won because I created an opening, and because it was already weakened."

"It has a lot of wounds, doesn't it? You must have made the one on its neck, but the rest aren't sword wounds. These ones are curved, like they're made by talons." Fabbro touched the beast's fur and then seemed to realize something. "I don't know what sort of manabeast did this, but there must've been some big fight over territory."

"I thought so too. By the way, this wolf had a pup. Iris has him, and she's insisting on keeping him."

"What? Isn't it dangerous?"

"He's still small. I wouldn't trust him around a child, but he can't do much harm to an adult."

"But you can't—"

"And if Jamama ever does attack a human...I'll kill him myself."

That wouldn't be negotiable. I couldn't accept the risk of Jamama someday escaping from us and attacking an innocent person. I wasn't going to let a tragedy happen.

Fabbro must have noticed the determined look on my face. He gave in. "Well in that case, I won't argue. You've earned the right to make that choice after killing this manabeast."

"You trust me?"

"I'm saying it's your problem to deal with. I know better than to stick my nose in."

"Sorry. And thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now what about this one? I could make armor for you out of it."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll have to pass. I've decided to give this mánagarmr a proper burial. Jamama's never going to move on from his mother's death if I'm wearing armor made out of her pelt."

Even with all the scratch marks on it, a quality wolf pelt like this one would fetch a high price, or would make fine armor. But I'd already decided to bury the beast. It was a little unfair to Billy, but he'd have to accept just a small but valuable part of the body as compensation for his injury. I wanted to leave it almost completely untouched.

"All right then. Maybe you're right. It was a little insensitive of me to suggest it. Sorry, son."

"No, I'm sorry I couldn't accept your kind offer."

"Let's forget it. You should visit the chief tomorrow and try to get some sort of reward from him instead."

"You think so? I only hunted the manabeast to make up for the damage I did to your store."

"That's another matter entirely. This beast had the whole village worried. We all owe you one. The chief will see that you're paid. Not that this village has much to give."

"I'm not going to demand a large sum. Oh, I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?"

I pulled a single feather from my pocket.

Fabbro eyed it suspiciously. "What's that? A feather? It's huge. Where'd you get it?"

"I found it on the managarmr."

Fabbro's face darkened. "On that massive mánagarmr? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm wondering if it came from the same creature that wounded it. Does it look familiar at all?"

"Afraid not. I've seen plenty of materials collected from manabeasts, but nothing like this."

"Okay."

"But... I can sense something nasty about it."

Fabbro's feeling matched my own. The feather was perfectly normal apart from its large size. But something about it gave me the creeps.

"I can ask a few friends about it," Fabbro suggested.

"I'd appreciate that. It might even explain why you've been seeing manabeasts around here lately."

We'd slain the mánagarmr, but it was only a temporary fix. Unless we understood why it was here in the first place, more could appear later.

"I'm going to head back to the inn," I told him. "Iris is probably fine, but I want to make sure."

"Heh heh. You'd think she was your little sister."

"Ha ha. Don't embarrass me. See you tomorrow."

After parting with Fabbro and arriving back at the village's only inn, I found the innkeeper preparing food for the next morning.

"Welcome back," she said. "If you're looking for your companion, she's in the room upstairs."

"Okay, thanks."

I headed up to the second floor where I heard a rapid series of footsteps coming from the end of the corridor.

"Wait! Stop right there!"

"Oh, Iris - Whoa?!"

Iris came running out.

My face contorted in shock as she came into view.

She was naked. Completely naked.

There was nothing at all covering her smooth, youthful skin, and her damp hair was captivating in a way that completely mismatched her childish looks.

"I've caught you! Don't go running out like that!"

Jamama whimpered in Iris's arms.

"Stop struggling. I need to get your dirty fur clean. It's resin soap—a secret elf trick! It'll make your skin smooth and keep your hair soft! Um... Ayame?"

Iris had finally noticed me.

Uh-oh. When I saw Mei naked once, she screamed and wouldn't come out of her room. Then she punched me in the jaw and I didn't wake up until the next morning. I just know she would've beat me up in an alleyway somewhere if Yu hadn't intervened.

Iris came striding toward me.

I knew it. Now she's going to... Wait, what?

"Welcome back Ayame. What's wrong?"

"Why are you so calm?!"

I was getting nervous, but Iris was just a little confused.

"Calm about what?"

"You're...naked."

"Oh, that? Heh heh. What an innocent reaction, Ayame. I don't mind letting you see me. After all, my body's *perfect*! I've got nothing to be ashamed of! I'm beautiful!" With a smug look on her face, Iris puffed out her small chest.

She certainly did have a slender figure and clear, smooth skin. That combined with her blonde hair made her look like a doll. Still, she lacked anything even close to adult attractiveness. Her body was decidedly childlike.

"Well, you do look cute overall. You can be proud of that. But that's all the

more reason not to walk around naked! If anyone sees us, they'll think I'm a criminal!"

"Awww... Then come take a bath with—"

"No way!"

With my hand on Iris's back, I pushed her into our room and then closed the door behind her. Then I leaned against the door and let my back slide down until I was sitting on the floor.

With one hand, I covered the side of my face that wasn't already hidden by the mask.

"Do elves have completely different ideas about decency? From what I've heard, they value modesty above all else... But then how can Iris... Is this just what she's into? No, that's..."

I began to have some serious thoughts about teaching Iris what was socially acceptable.

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A little later, Iris informed me it was safe to come in, so I entered the room. I was still a little wary, but thankfully, she'd put on her pajamas, ready for bed.

"Ahhh. How soft."

"Raow."

Iris had a look of ecstasy on her face as she took a moment to enjoy Jamama's freshly dried fur.

Jamama relaxed and narrowed his eyes, apparently not minding at all.

"Eh heh heh. So soft. Soft and squishy, squishy and soft."

"Is it really that good?"

Seeing Iris's delight as she repeatedly buried her face in Jamama's stomach and petted him made me curious. I couldn't resist reaching out to touch him myself.

"Grrah!" Jamama swatted my hand away with his paw. To drive the point home, he then stared at me like a wild animal.

"Wow, you're not very friendly."

"What can you expect? You're the one who killed his mother. He accepted your explanation, but he didn't like the way you said it."

"Facts are facts. I'm not going to lie about it."

I've had enough of lying. I'm not lying ever again. I smiled, feeling a little amused at myself.

Iris looked at me closely and then stood up. "Oh, all right. Since Jamama won't let you touch his fur, I'll let you touch my hair instead."

"Wait, that's a whole different topic."

"Let me reassure you, my hair is as fine as silk moth fiber."

"Is that different from regular silk? What's a silk moth, anyhow?"

"A relative of the silkworm."

I've never heard of silkworms either.

With Jamama still in her arms, Iris sat down on my lap without giving me a chance to argue. Then she pushed the back of her head against me with an "mmh."

It would've been rude to refuse at this point, so I put my hand to her hair. It was sleek and smooth. The feeling brought back memories of when I'd touched it once before. Then I realized that her hair was still a little wet.



"Iris, you didn't dry your hair properly."

"Didn't I? I must have been so engrossed in drying Jamama that I forgot. Oh well, I'll let it dry naturally."

"You can't do that. You've got beautiful hair and you should look after it. Do you have a comb or something?"

Iris handed me a pouch. "There should be one in here."

I also found a towel in there that I used to absorb the remaining moisture while running my fingers through her hair to undo any knots. Then I used the comb. Iris swayed back and forth like she was enjoying it.

"You're good at this, Ayame. I've never had anyone but my mother comb my hair, but you're at least as good as her."

"Ha ha. Thanks. I got a lot of practice getting knots out of Mei's hair when we were kids. I'm used to this."

"Mei...?"

"Oops."

Uh-oh. I shouldn't have said that. I couldn't see her face, but I could sense she was mad.

I broke into a cold sweat as Iris puffed up her cheeks in anger.

"Why? Why?! Why always talk about girls from your past when you've got me right here?! Overwrite memories of her hair with memories of mine. It's an upgrade!"

"Ouch! Don't press your head against my jaw! It hurts! And stop biting me, Jamama!"

"Grraahh!"

Iris pressed her head against me all the more and said, "Go on. Make some long-lasting memories of my hair."

Jamama seemed to share his owner's feelings as he bit my head.

"Ow, ow, ow. Don't bite me there! I'll go bald!"

Oh, her hair smells kind of nice. Ouch!

The person in the next room complained about us being too loud. We got a warning from the innkeeper and had to apologize profusely.

I'm supposed to be a savior, but I'm just a public nuisance.

I went to bed that night deeply regretting my behavior.

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I had a dream filled with the people I'd failed to save, their faces twisted in despair. When I saw Yu and Mei, full of sorrow, it was enough to jolt me awake.

"Hah?! Hah, hah."

I was breathing heavily and my heart was racing. For a short while, I clutched my chest and waited for it to slow down.

"Looks like I'm not going to get over it all so easily," I mumbled to myself a few minutes later when my chest had finally stopped pounding.

Only now did I realize that I'd made a lot of noise. I looked to my side and saw Iris's blonde hair. She'd slept through it.

"This is the worst time to wake up."

Even with the wooden shutters closed, slight gaps remained. The lack of sunlight leaking into the room told me that it wasn't morning. It was still late at night.

I drank some water, then opened a window so I could feel the night breeze.

"That's a beautiful moon."

It was round and pale blue.

When was the last time I looked at the moon like this?

"Yu, Mei... I hope everything's going well."

My thoughts went to my old friends, somewhere far off, who I could never meet again.

I'm sure they're fine. I just hope they didn't feel too down. And that they weren't too hurt when they learned I'd been deceiving them.

I felt close to tears, so I looked at the moon again to take my mind off it all. It was full, just like on the night I'd first met Iris.

"Hm...?"

Something in the sky near the moon caught my eye. It was a mere speck—presumably something far away. I squinted and studied it, trying to figure out what it was.

"Achoo."

"Whoops."

The sneeze had come from Iris. The cold air coming in through the open window must've chilled her.

I closed the window then walked over to her bedside.

"Eh heh heh."

She was sleeping happily with Jamama in her arms. Jamama was also sleeping peacefully as if his constant aggression had just been my imagination.

I carefully pulled Iris's blanket up to her shoulders to make sure she wouldn't catch a cold.

"Nhmh."

She stirred in her sleep and then gripped the hand I was using to hold the blanket. After squeezing my hand, she settled and went back to breathing regularly.

"She looks like an ordinary little girl right now."

I reminded myself that she was an elf and probably older than me. Still, it was hard to see her as anything but a child when I watched her sleep. Her long ears were the only giveaway.

"What did she tell her parents?"

It hadn't occurred to me until now, but I had no idea what Iris had told everyone before leaving to follow me.

I'd lost my parents at a young age. They'd gone to a town to fetch medicine for me after I'd gotten sick, only to be attacked and killed by a manabeast. My

grandparents had raised me, but they had died of old age some time after the war against the Demon Lord Army began. I'd felt so sad.

I barely remembered my parents' faces, and I'd learned of my grandparents' deaths from letters that Yu's parents wrote while we were fighting against the Demon Lord Army. I hadn't been beside any of them in their final days.

But I hadn't been alone—I'd had Yu and Mei by my side. Yu had cried more than I did, and Mei's cheery attitude had always lifted my spirits. It was their support that had stopped me from breaking down.

Iris's situation was different. On the day we first met, her family was probably waiting for her return to her village. But now she was with me.

"I hate to think she set out after me without telling her family. Then again, maybe it's normal for elves her age to go off alone."

Elves were long-lived. They aged so slowly that they barely changed physically in the time it took to reach adult age. Though human notions of what it meant to be an adult probably didn't apply.

Since humans and elves had virtually no contact with each other, I had no way of knowing elven society's views on adulthood. I had a lot of questions, but I wouldn't get any answers just by thinking about them.

"We'll have lots of time to talk. Maybe you'll tell me when you wake up," I said softly.

"Mmmmh..." Iris wriggled in her sleep, as if she were responding to me.

I decided to go back to bed and tried to stand up.

"Uh? My hand's... Hey. Wow, you're strong!"

"Ayaaaame... Iris is here for you..."

Although her hand was much smaller and softer than my own, it was gripping me so tightly that I couldn't get free.

Given the way Jamama always let Iris hold him, I'd been under the assumption that he'd taken a liking to her, but I had to wonder whether he was merely unable to escape.

I gave up and fell asleep slumped over the bed with Iris still clutching my hand.



That same night, the round moon was casting soft light upon the outside ground.

Most living things were sleeping; those moving were the ones that preferred the darkness. The world was still and silent.

A lone figure was flying over the forest where Ayame had been hiding.

"Damn him. Where'd he go?" The rage-filled creature scoured the ground like a bird of prey.

He was Onyx the Speed Talon—one of the three Windscars who had served Downburst the Blast Wave, who Foyle defeated some time ago.

Onyx was the demon who'd been driven away and injured by Foyle after trying to attack Yu and Mei. He was a little smaller than Downburst and resembled a falcon standing upright; his winged arms ended in hands with curved talons, unlike those of any ordinary falcon.

With the purple eyes of a demon, Onyx glared down on the world from above.

"Lord Downburst's downfall was that fake hero's doing! He needs to give in and die! Same goes for that Warlord! He expects me to avoid fighting?! I have to avenge Lord Downburst!"

Onyx thirsted for revenge against the man who'd killed his master.

After Downburst's death, Onyx had led the withdrawal of the remaining demons as they left the watery city of Ahterdam. Soon after their return to the Netherrealm, other Warlords had set out with the aim of killing the hero. Onyx, however, was ordered to merely observe Foyle and his party from a distance.

The memory of two Warlords and the words they'd spoken to him were burned into Onyx's mind.

"You think we shouldn't send a large force after him? But he defeated a Warlord already. I'm afraid we can't take chances with this one. Downburst was

under orders to return after laying ruin to the city. His decision to stay there was his own."

"You think you can take on the hero yourself? That's laughable. You need to learn your limitations. It's beyond you."

The first had worn a peaceful yet unnerving smile and the second had been a musclebound figure named Bestreben the Mighty. The memory alone enraged Onyx. Not only had they ignored Onyx's suggestions but Onyx had then been placed under Bestreben's command.

"I serve no master besides Lord Downburst!"

As infuriating as it was to be under the command of someone other than Lord Downburst, Onyx lacked the power to defy the Eight Warlords. He'd executed his orders with a sense of humiliation, and the experience had left him bitter.

Onyx spoke to the bracelet on his wrist as he beat his wings. "Answer me. Did you find him?"

This bracelet was an enchanted item—an artifact used in an era long past. When paired with another such item, it enabled conversations to be held over vast distances.

The response was broken speech from another demon. "Gah gah...Lord...Onyx...not...found... Hero...is...nowhere."

"He's no hero! Just find him already! Or else I'll cut you up just like that wolf!" "Gih...gih gih. My...apologies."

Onyx deactivated the bracelet in frustration, abruptly ending the conversation.

"They can't even give me updates unless I ask the questions myself. What a dismal state we're in."

Downburst's once-mighty army was a shadow of what it used to be. It had been reduced to a collection of demons and monsters who could barely think for themselves.

Onyx had good reason to believe that Foyle still lived.

Onyx had been watching from the sky when three of the Eight Warlords had ambushed Foyle and when the Demon Lord Army had pursued him in an attempt to steal the holy sword.

The world believed that Foyle had fallen from the cliff to his death after his fight with Yu. Even Yu and Mei thought so. They'd searched for him, but when they failed to find his body, they lost hope and concluded that it had been washed away by a nearby river.

Onyx had seen the truth from above. Someone else had found Foyle at the bottom of the cliff.

"I don't know who or what they were, but they saved his life. I'm sure of it. He has to be somewhere in the forest."

And so Onyx was searching every inch of the forest, all in the hope of killing Foyle with his own talons. He was so focused on his search that he neglected to return to the Netherrealm or to inform his superiors of Foyle's survival. But searching this vast region of forest proved surprisingly fruitless. Even his sharp eyes were of little use because treetops blocked his view.

Onyx had remained calm at first. He knew Foyle was badly wounded. He knew there was no way he could make it out of the forest. Later, however, he'd grown impatient. For all his searching, he found no trace of his target. To his further irritation, a massive wolf had caused serious harm to the minions searching for Foyle. Onyx had taken care of the matter personally, but the wolf had found a chance to escape him. Onyx lost about half of his subordinates in the attack, further hindering their search efforts.

Onyx burned with rage. "I swear I'll find that fake! And then Onyx the Speed Talon will avenge Lord Downburst! The wolf too! It won't escape me a second time! Hm...?" Ouro Village caught his eye.

Onyx's inability to find the hero was making him increasingly frustrated. He felt nothing but contempt for the slow-witted minions under his command, but he was a demon just like them. He felt just as much malice toward humans as they did.

Onyx narrowed his eyes and thought wickedly, "Excellent. The screaming of humans is going to sound far better than the manabeast's cries."

Onyx glinted in the bewitching light of the moon, which reflected off his sharp talons and the white feathers that grew from his arms.

The Threat of the Speed Talon

The day began when the sun rose and the air still carried a chill.

In a wooden building that served as a checking station to the northeast of Ouro Village, Latio sighed for the umpteenth time that day while remaining ever-vigilant of his surroundings.

"Haah..."

"What's got you down, Latty Boy?"

"It's Latio," Latio replied curtly to the middle-aged soldier who was always poking fun at him. "I wish you'd stop treating me like a kid." He sighed once more.

The middle-aged soldier shook his head then took a swig of his drink. "Cheer up, will you? You were up against a mánagarmr. No one said anything about it being one of those. A rookie like you oughtn't be ashamed over getting knocked out."

Latio wasn't just feeling down because he'd been knocked out, but because it had happened while facing the baby managarmr.

Although he hadn't been on duty at the time, he'd insisted on following Ayame and Iris when he heard they were heading out of the village. The middle-aged soldier had been surprised when Ayame returned carrying Latio on his back. When he asked Ayame what had happened, Ayame had kept quiet out of respect for Latio's dignity and privacy. Unfortunately, Latio himself had let all the details slip when he woke up in the guard station a little later. Now every soldier knew about it.

Latio regretted sharing the story. The guards hadn't stopped teasing him about it ever since, and he'd grown short tempered with everyone as a result.

"Leave me alone. I became a soldier to protect our village. Ever since I learned from my oracle that my job is soldier, I've been trying my best. I'm an adult of

sixteen already. I shouldn't pass out in front of a manabeast, especially not a baby one."

"You just weren't ready for it, that's all."

"It's not as simple as that."

The other soldiers saw Latio hanging his head and gathered around. When they heard the reason Latio was upset, they began to laugh. The only soldiers who hadn't come over were the ones busy playing cards. They were clearly more interested in Latio's misfortune than in performing their duties. That just made Latio feel all the more powerless and made his job seem like a waste of time.

Although it was only a small village, they should have responded more seriously to the threat posed by manabeasts. Even when the wolf was sighted, the soldiers did nothing other than strengthen their defenses a little. Unfortunately, they were far too laid-back and took no pride in their job. Latio couldn't bear to see it.

"Hm? Isn't that Blast? What's he doing over there?"

"Oh, you're right. Hey, Blast. What are...you..."

The soldiers had spotted one of their members who'd wandered away from everyone else. They called out to him but soon realized that something wasn't right. One soldier approached him and was left speechless by what he saw.

Blast collapsed, covered in blood.

"Hey! Blast, hang in there!"

"What happened?!"

"Dem... Arm..."

"What? I can't understand you."

"A-Ahh!" Latio stammered.

"What is it, Latty Boy? What are you looking at?"

"Mwa ha ha ha. This lower life-form came right to me."

There appeared in the sky a creature that looked like an upright falcon. It had

long, sharp talons on the end of arms that were fused with its wings. The blood that dripped from them was proof that they'd been used to slash Blast. The soldiers began to quake with fear.

We're done for.

"He was just a warm-up. It's time you learned the true terror of demons."

"We're under attack!"

The moment the soldiers realized they were facing a demon, they began to cry out and sound the alarm.

The soldiers quickly surrounded the demon as it descended and glared down at them.

"Wh-What's a demon like you doing way out here?"

"Hah. You lack manners, but I'll answer you. My name is Onyx, also known as the Speed Talon. I serve none other than Lord Downburst the Blast Wave of the Eight Warlords. My business should be obvious: I'm here to massacre humans and cut them to shreds."

"Why this village? There's nothing here worth a demon's time!"

"All the more reason. A village far from the battles, where people live in peace. The very idea of destroying such a place fills me with joy."

"Gah! All charge!"

The soldiers all jabbed their spears forward at once. As soldiers, they used the ability Thrust as they attempted to skewer Onyx.

"Laughable. You're too slow."

Onyx's arm became a blur, and the point of every spear fell to the ground before it could reach him.

"Th-That's impossible."

"Your dull spears don't compare to my talons. You're all next. I'll dice you into fine pieces."

"Arraaaggh!"

At first, they felt a gust of wind. A moment later, Onyx disappeared from view, and each soldier received a deep cut.

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"It hurts, it hurts..."

"Ugh..."
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"Mwa ha ha ha! Yes, you should fear me! It was well worth paying a visit to this village on the frontier."

Onyx expressed his joy with a beat of his wings. Since Downburst's defeat, he'd been limited to reconnaissance missions, but the sight of terror-stricken humans was beginning to restore his former pride.

There was only one reason the soldiers hadn't died: Onyx was deliberately keeping them alive. His cruel and sadistic nature struck terror into all who witnessed it.

"Well? Who'll challenge me next? I'll cut you thoroughly!"

He narrowed his purple eyes. Eyes that carried a madness characteristic to the Demon Lord Army.

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"We're done for!"
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"We haven't got a chance against a demon!"

"Run! Run away!"

As their will to fight evaporated, the soldiers began pushing past one another as they ran toward the village. Latio, however, did the complete opposite and walked toward Onyx.

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"Hey! What're you doing Latty Boy?! Run!"
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"No."

"What?!"

"We're the soldiers defending this village. If we run, who's going to protect the villagers?"

"Don't be stupid! You've seen how powerful it is! You'll die!"

Latio ignored the middle-aged soldier's warnings and continued walking

toward Onyx.

Onyx's purple eyes fixed on Latio. "Oh? Looks like you've got some backbone."

Latio ordered his body not to tremble. Stop shaking! There'll be no one left to protect the villagers if I run away!

Latio was truly afraid. He wished he could turn around and run just like everyone else. But he knew he couldn't. He was a soldier. Protecting the village was his job. Protecting the weak was his responsibility. The job was given to him at age ten, and when he reached adulthood at the age of sixteen, he'd finally begun his service. Running away ceased to be an option ever since.

There was also another thought at the back of Latio's mind. Ayame—the man in the mask. That odd man wasn't even from the village, and yet he'd stood up to a fearsome manabeast. If a stranger could stand up for the village in a crisis, then how could Latio turn and flee?

"I'm...going to protect my village!" Latio gripped his spear tight and ignored the voices telling him to stop as he charged ahead. "Urrrooooh! **Thrust**."

"How foolish. I commend your spirit, but you can't possibly think you can lay a scratch on Onyx the Speed Talon!"

Onyx stopped the approaching spear effortlessly with his talon, then slashed Latio's shoulder with a backhand swipe.

"Guh, ah!" Latio felt burning pain, but he held back his tears and got to his feet. "You...won't...harm...my village...!"

"Mwa ha ha. You're my favorite type of human. Do you know why?" Onyx smiled menacingly. "Your unwavering spirit means you won't surrender. Humans like you will climb to their feet again and again as I slash them over and over. I love seeing the moment their spirit finally breaks."

"What?"

"I'll sever your fingers, and then your arms, and then cut your torso and then your head. Let me hear you scream, lower life-form."

Onyx's purple eyes, full of malice, narrowed. The sight was enough to set

Latio's teeth chattering in terror. He gripped his spear all the tighter.

"Mwa ha ha! I want to see more of your helpless struggling!"

"Ngh... Aarrgh!" Latio charged at Onyx.

Onyx defended against the attack once again, this time slashing Latio's leg.

Even then, Latio refused to give up. He made another brave attempt, but he couldn't land a single hit on Onyx. He was only getting even more wounded each time he tried.

"Gah haah!"

"Can you no longer stand? Humans truly are a lower life-form. You're only fit to be a plaything in the hands of a demon like myself, until you finally break."

"No...! We're all living our lives as best we can. We're more than just playthings for demons!"

"Hah. The loss of a leg should be enough to break that spirit of yours. But first, your fingers..."

"Urrraaahhh!" A bold cry made of many voices came from behind Latio. All of the soldiers who'd run away now charged forward to help him.

"Kill it! This village is ours to defend!"

"Grown men running away and leaving Latty Boy to fight? I don't think so!"

"You won't lay a hand on my wife and daughter!"

"I'm not letting this demon have its way!"

Soldiers who were normally little more than a group of drunkards had banded together to drive off the enemy before them. They seemed like different people entirely as they fought to protect their village. Latio watched the scene unfolding before him.

But it was of little use.

"Know your place, lower life-forms. Spiral Slicer."

"Gaaaaaah!"

Onyx beat his wings loudly, then moved with such speed that he disappeared

from view, leaving a powerful whirlwind in his wake that dealt slash wounds to all of the soldiers. Their determination waned as they were crushed by Onyx's superior might.

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"Guh, gaah..."

"Ugh... Guh..."

"E-Everyone..."
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The soldiers were all defeated. They still lived, but no one was able to stand. Latio gritted his teeth.

"Weaklings in a herd are still just weaklings. You're still lower life-forms who can't even fly. And I know what you're trying to do. You think you can buy time for the villagers to flee, don't you? It'll make no difference. By now, my underlings will be in position at the opposite side of the village to head them off."

"What?!" Latio's eyes went wide with shock.

Onyx was still calm. He'd been watching Ouro Village since morning and had learned all the villagers' escape routes. He narrowed his eyes and smiled menacingly.

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"No... You're lying!"
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"It's no lie. The fleeing humans are being slaughtered as we speak. We won't let a single one escape. But don't worry, you'll be going to the same place they are. Though not until I chop, slice, and cut every one of you. Let me hear you scream."

"D-Damn." Latio's heart filled with despair.

The overwhelming disparity in strength between humans and demons was undeniable. Humans couldn't compare. A wide gulf in power lay between them.

Faced with this reality, Latio's spirit was close to breaking. As the tears began to flow, he bemoaned, "I should've known... We can't beat a demon. Trying to fight this thing was—"

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"It wasn't pointless."
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As darkness was consuming Latio's heart, a voice rang out clearer than anything else.

"You've already bought enough time to save the villagers. Be proud of yourself. Know that you've done well."

The voice belonged to a man walking toward them from the village. There was power in his gait, and above all else, determination. Close by the man's side was a girl.

"You've all done your duty. Now leave the rest to me."

The man stood like a shield between Latio and the demon, where he seemed to tower over everyone.

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I made it in time? I breathed a sigh of relief.

The soldiers were all there doing their best, but they couldn't stop a demon invasion. They'd all gotten horribly wounded, though none of them were dead at least.

I spoke quietly to Iris beside me. "Iris, can you heal everyone? I'll deal with the demon."

"Of course. Be careful, Ayame."

"Don't worry. I've fought the Eight Warlords and lived," I said with a wink.

Iris laughed. "That's true," she said before going to heal Latio and the others.

The pup that normally stayed by her side didn't follow. I looked down by my feet and saw Jamama glaring at the demon.

"Graaah!"

"What is it, Jamama?"

I followed Jamama's gaze and realized he was staring at the demon's talons. They were wet with the blood of the soldiers.

"The feather was from those wings, wasn't it?"

I recognized the feathers growing from the demon's wings. They looked just

like the one I'd given to Fabbro. I could guess that this demon was responsible for wounding Jamama's mother.

"Let me warn you, Jamama. You've got no chance of winning against it."

"Grraah!" Jamama snarled. It was a cry of rage.

Without taking my eyes off my opponent, I said, "I know. You want to make him pay. But that's why you should leave it to me. Besides, I was the one who killed your mother, not him. Leave it to me to deal with the demon, then if you haven't forgiven me by the time you grow up, you can try to kill me then. Now isn't the time."

"Graah..."

"I need you to protect Iris while I'm busy fighting."

Jamama hung his head in response. He must have understood that he'd stand no chance against a demon until he grew much bigger.

A moment later he lifted his head, then barked and ran after Iris.

He's a smart pup. I'm sure of it.

I fixed my gaze on the demon in front of me.

"Done talking?" the demon asked.

"Yeah. You really made a mess here."

All around us lay the fallen soldiers, with their discarded weapons at their sides. They were all alive, but unconscious. I couldn't afford to take my eyes off an opponent who'd caused so much damage.

"Mwa ha ha. Are you enraged? I didn't think there'd be more humans foolish enough to come to me. The girl can try to heal the soldiers, but it's no use. You, her, the soldiers, and the villagers are like dirt beneath Onyx's talons. Not that talons collect dirt... Well, in any case, you may be full of confidence, but you can defend this village no longer. My minions are already bathing in the blood of this village's people."

"Your minions?" I sneered, then announced proudly, "They're all dead."

"Hah?"

"I killed them."

The reason I'd been slow to arrive was because Jamama's instincts had told him that demons and monsters were gathering behind the village. I had to kill them first before coming here. The underlings Onyx spoke of had already been wiped out.

"That just leaves you."

The announcement made Onyx's eyes widen with disbelief.

Weren't expecting that, were you?

"I've had enough of your nonsense!"

"Oh, it's the truth. I promise you. If you think it's a lie, then put it to the test. You've got a tool for contacting them, don't you?"

"Y-You can't be..." Onyx spoke to the bracelet on his wrist. "Hey! Answer me!"

I heard his voice coming from my pocket. I took out the transceiver bracelet I'd taken from one of the demons and held it up for Onyx to see.

Onyx looked at me, full of hate. "What are you?"

"Me? I'm the savior."

"I've never heard of a savior! I've heard enough of your delusions! I'd shred you for ruining my mood! **Dicing Cut**."

Onyx spread his wings wide and then rushed at me with incredible speed.



Onyx moved like a hurricane, but he wasn't quick enough to hit me.

"How did you?! Ngh!"

"Nice move," I told him.

I'd tried to cut off one of his arms as he was attacking, but he'd twisted his body at the last moment.

Onyx glared at me while holding the wound I'd just made. "Absurd. How can a lower life-form like you follow my movements?"

"I've fought demons way stronger and faster than you. You're nothing compared to them."

"What?"

I had experience fighting far stronger opponents. The demon before me didn't even compare to the Blast Wave or the Mighty.

Onyx looked skeptical at first, but then the meaning dawned on him. "You... You're the one! I've found you! I've found you!"

"Uh, did something make you mad?"

"Don't play the fool! You're the wretched human who killed Lord Downburst! You're no savior! You're the fake hero!"

I was surprised to hear him mention Downburst. It wasn't a name I expected him to know.

"Oh, I remember you," I said. "You're the Speed Talon."

I'd finally realized his identity too. In fact, I wondered why it took me so long. He was one of Downburst's three underlings. He belonged to a trio of higher demons—unusually powerful demons—known as the Speed Talon, the Plaguewind, and the Miasma.

Yu and Mei had slain the Plaguewind while Gladius and Mary had taken out the Miasma. The Speed Talon, however, hadn't been seen since I'd defeated Downburst.

I had no idea why he'd remained hidden until now or what he'd been doing in the meantime. All I knew was that he was here in front of me. "That's one more reason not to let you go," I said. "You hurt two of my friends and injured people from this village. As long as you're a threat to people, I have no choice but to eliminate you."

"Stop blathering, lower life-form! This is my chance. I'll take your head! I'll present your corpse as an offering before Lord Downburst's grave! **Spiral Slicer**."

Onyx spread his arms—and the wings fused with them—then disappeared with the speed of a gale. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

I was a little slow to dodge, and my sleeve was cut.

"Ugh."

"Mwa ha ha! Well? Do you see how things have changed?! Without the holy sword you're just another lower life-form! I'll cut you to pieces!"

"That speed combined with those talons is a problem."

"Indeed! But I'm not done yet! The cutting is still to come!"

Onyx vanished once again. First I heard the blast of air, and then I was attacked in multiple places, seemingly by the air itself.

Okay. He's fast. He might be one of the fastest opponents I've faced yet, I thought. But for some reason, I still didn't feel he was a threat to me. Am I just imagining it, or is this Speed Talon technique kinda slow?

He'd managed to cut my clothing, but he couldn't draw blood. My opponent seemed to think otherwise, however, as he continued trying to kill me with the same ability.

"Now I'll take your head!"

Unfortunately for him, I saw his attack coming. The reason was simple.

"You're not as fast as Downburst!"

"What?!"

I slashed at Onyx the moment he appeared behind me.

Compared to Downburst's Air Talon, Onyx's attacks lacked power, speed, and finesse. He was confident in his agility, but even in that regard, he paled in

comparison to Bestreben.

Onyx blocked my slash with his prized talons, but he was clearly shocked. That's how confident he'd been.

"Hah. You should see the look on your face. You didn't think I could stop your attack, did you?"

"Gah. Silence! Don't get full of yourself just because you predicted my movements! **Piercing Cannon**."

"Whoa?!"

Onyx opened his beak and fired a bullet made of air. I crouched to dodge, but immediately realized my mistake.

"Uh-oh!"

Onyx took to the sky where he could fly freely, beyond the reach of any human.

"You poor fool! You forget who you're dealing with! I'll slice you apart! **Wind Scythe**."

Onyx thrashed his talons as he beat his wings.

Sensing trouble, I jumped backward. A moment later I heard a blast of air and saw a talon-shaped gouge appear where I'd been standing.

"An invisible projectile slash? Or I guess I should call it a projectile scratch!"

"Figuring it out won't save you!"

I heard another blast of air.

I couldn't harm Onyx as long as he remained high above me.

If only I could use Holy Slash! In frustration, I gripped the hilt of my sword tighter.

Seeing how powerless I was, Onyx laughed and gloated in his advantage. "Mwa ha ha! Now you see the difference between us! I'm a chosen demon, granted the power of flight! The idea of you defeating me is absurd!"

"Don't celebrate your victory just yet!"

"Oh, the rest will be easy. The difference is in the powers we were born with! What can a human like you do as you crawl upon the earth?!"

"Ngh." I gritted my teeth.

Onyx saw my frustration from above and laughed. "I've longed for this day! Ever since you lost the holy sword!"

"What?"

I couldn't ignore what he'd just said. He was right that I'd given the holy sword to Yu, but that was just a few days ago. The news shouldn't have spread to the Demon Lord Army so quickly.

"How did you know... Wait..."

Somehow our movements had been tracked closely enough for three of the Eight Warlords—the Ice Mist, the Thunderbolt, and the Mighty—to ambush us. The Demon Lord Army shouldn't have been operating in the area, and yet demons had been able to intercept me as they tried to steal the holy sword.

And Onyx had only two real powers: sharp talons and the ability to fly.

"Don't tell me you've been watching me the whole time?!"

"You only just figured it out? I knew humans could only crawl across the ground, but it seems they're slow-witted as well. You're right—I was watching you the entire time! How amusing it was! Even your own kind were chasing you!"

After being exposed as the fake hero, I had to deal with pursuers trying to take back the holy sword. That was to be expected. From their point of view, the sword belonged in the hands of the hero. They had no choice but to reclaim it.

What had surprised me was that the Demon Lord Army also kept appearing from out of nowhere and trying to take the sword. I hadn't understood why at the time because I'd been too busy to think, but now the answer was right in front of me. It had all been because of Onyx the Speed Talon.

"I often saw a bird overhead when I looked up. That must've been you!"

"Exactly. You seriously hadn't realized? Not that it would've helped you if you

had!" Onyx sneered. "Why not? Because I can fly while you're forced to crawl across the ground! Just look at you now! You're powerless against me! **Wind Scythe**."

Onyx remained in the air as he sent one Wind Scythe at me after another. All I could do was predict the path of each one and keep dodging.

"Mwa ha ha. You're pathetic and you're amusing. Just like back then. Humans attacked you, didn't they? How did it feel to be shunned by those you tried to protect? How did it feel when those asking for your help suddenly turned on you?"

"It didn't bother me."

"Don't put on a brave face. Why struggle? Why fight? Your human allies will betray you the moment they realize you're the fake hero!"

"Yeah. Maybe they will."

I had to admit that he was right. There'd been some familiar faces among the pursuers I'd had to fight off. They'd turned their swords on me just like the rest. But they'd only been trying to reclaim the holy sword to give it to the real hero. I couldn't begrudge that.

Onyx gave a tsk. My response wasn't what he'd been hoping for. "Hmph. You're no fun. Oh, that's right. There were humans you tried to protect from my talons. Yes, a man and woman about your size."

I knew right away who he was talking about: Yu and Mei.

"You're such a fool! You tried to protect those useless weaklings. But they betrayed you in the end! They're both fools and so are you for trying to save them!"

"Shut up. Don't talk about them like that!" I yelled so passionately that I surprised myself.

Onyx was shocked too, but he soon began sneering at me. "Howl as much as you like; you're still a loser! A fleeing weakling like you poses no threat to me!"

"You think you're different, Onyx the Speed Talon?"

"What?"

"You said yourself. You were watching and listening. But this isn't where you belong. Shouldn't you have gone back to the Netherrealm?"

Onyx's expression changed. He must have known that I was badly wounded back then. He should have been able to steal the holy sword from me before I could give it to Yu. And then when I did hand it over, he'd seen it happen. In that case, Onyx should've ignored me to monitor Yu. And yet he was here. Right in front of me.

"You ran away, didn't you? From me and then from Yu. You feared the holy sword because you knew it defeated Downburst. You knew you couldn't win. In the end, you searched for me and couldn't find me, so you settled for attacking a village full of weaker people. Even now, you only think you can win because I don't have the holy sword. Am I wrong?"

"Silence!" he screeched before sending out a Wind Scythe that carried enough power to slice apart everything in its path. "Damn. Damn! Damn you and the remaining Eight Warlords too! You all look down on me! I won't have it! I won't have it!"

Onyx made small movements with his wings, creating a flow of air. Then, with repeated swipes of his sharp talons, he unleashed projectile attacks. Countless invisible slashes came at me.

"Ayame!" Iris cried in concern.

I glanced at Iris briefly to signal that everything was all right, then moved my foot through a sweeping arc that sent up a cloud of dust from the ground.

By watching the movement of the dust particles, I could see the path of each Wind Scythe well enough to block. The attack was inferior to Downburst's Vidofnir's Cry in both speed and power. This was easy.

"Haah. Haah. Mwa ha ha. Well? You can't dodge all—"

"Don't get cocky!"

Onyx gasped at the sight of me leaping up out of the cloud of dust.

"How did you jump so... No! I've lowered my altitude!"

As my taunts had made Onyx increasingly angry, he'd flown lower and lower.

I'd waited for the right opportunity before leaping into the air to deal a decisive blow. But it wasn't over yet.

"Guh?!"

I'd jumped just a little higher than Onyx, making it possible for him to dodge my sword after I began the swing.

"What are you trying to do?! Piercing Cannon."

After evading my attack, he fired another air bullet. I blocked it with my sword then fell back down to the ground.

"I messed up. Did I jump too high?"

I spat out bloody saliva as I tried to figure out where I'd miscalculated. I felt sure that if I'd tried the same trick back when I was being chased, I would have pulled it off and defeated him just now.

Maybe I got a little too heated when he insulted my friends? I don't know why, but it's like my body's different somehow.

Unfortunately, Onyx didn't give me any more time to think.

"You're a pest. Perhaps I'll have an easier time against someone you're trying to protect!"

I followed his gaze and realized he was looking toward Iris, Latio, and several immobile soldiers.

I should've finished this fight quickly!

"Iris! Jamama! Latio!"

"We're fine!" Iris shouted just as I was about to run over to her. "All you have to do is charge ahead, Ayame!"

Her green eyes met mine. She was trying to tell me something. When I guessed what she was planning, I turned and ran back toward Onyx.

"Irritating lower life-forms! You're finished!"

Onyx thrashed his talons once more. An invisible wind-based slash flew at Iris, creating a large cloud of dust as it hit.

"Mwa ha ha. You must be blind. Look! See what became of those you tried to protect!"

The dust cleared. What appeared in its place was a huge cluster of trees shielding the soldiers.

"It's just like last time," Latio muttered.

"That's right!" Iris replied proudly. "It's a secret elf trick called Converse with Tree Spirits. We live in harmony with nature, and the plants of this world are our neighbors! We can control them!"

The power to manipulate plant life was one of a small number of abilities that elves had passed down through the generations. Iris had protected everyone from the destructive power of Onyx's talons.

"How can mere plants possibly defend you from the Speed Talon?!"

"Please don't underestimate nature's power!"

"You little brat..." Onyx was enraged. But he soon regained his focus. "Where'd he go?!"

Onyx realized he'd lost sight of me, but it took him too long to realize why.

"He's directly under me?!"

I'd run along the branches created by Iris until I was close to Onyx but out of his view.

It happened to be the same method Yu had come up with for knocking Downburst out of the air. An attack from the opponent's blind spot.

Onyx was complacent. He thought I couldn't take him down as long as he remained out of my sword's reach.

That way of thinking left you wide open! Iris made the path I needed! Now I just have to follow it!

"You're mine! Get back on the ground!"

"Gaaaah?!"

My opponent screeched as I held my sword in both hands and swung it with all my might, slashing him across his shoulder. Onyx screamed as blood sprayed

from the wound. As a shower of feathers floated to the ground, Onyx plummeted.

"Haah, haah! Impossible! How can a lower life-form like you have knocked me from the sky? Ugh!"

While Onyx was still cursing me, I followed up with a thrust attack just as he hit the ground. Onyx just barely managed to leap aside to avoid being skewered.

"Damn. This is a disgrace! But you've gotten careless! Cutting Talon Kick."

The sharper, larger talons on his legs came flying at me. He was trying to cut my face with an upward kick, but I only had to twist my body slightly to dodge.

"What?!"

"Surprise attacks won't work anymore. Get ready!" I swung my sword again.

Without pausing to recover his balance from the kick, Onyx tried to hit me with the talons on his hands. But he was too slow. My sword severed his arm before he got the chance.

"Gaaaaah!"

"Your talons might be tough, but I can still cut through your arms. Especially now that you can't fly out of reach."

My biggest fear had been that he might fly over to where Iris was.

His every movement was focused on speed, with his techniques otherwise lacking any refinement. It would take more to defeat me. Letting him take to the air had been a mistake, but he couldn't do it again.

Before he could regain his balance, I charged at him. Onyx looked frustrated as he blocked with the talons on his remaining arm.

"Ngh. Guh. Don't get full of yourself!"

"Defeat me and I won't! But is this all there is to your talons?!"

"You haven't won yet! I'll show you how deep they can cut!"

My taunts were making Onyx wild with rage. That was exactly what I wanted. It would keep his attention off the soldiers for the rest of our fight. All I had to

do now was keep the pressure on him.

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"He's fighting one-on-one with that thing..."

Latio couldn't believe it. The pair before him were exchanging blows faster than his eyes could follow.

Behind Latio, Iris and Jamama were going from soldier to soldier, healing their wounds. Every soldier besides Latio had lost consciousness and could only groan. It was somewhat fortunate as it meant Iris could pretend she was healing them with common techniques when she was actually using the saint's power. Finally, Iris approached Latio with Jamama in tow.

"Please let me look at you too," Iris said to Latio.

He didn't reply. He was so entranced by the fight that he'd forgotten his pain.

Iris sighed and then kicked Latio hard to get his attention. "Listen."

"Ugh?! Ow!"

"You'll have to let me see your wounds right now. You're in such bad shape that you could die unless I treat you."

"O-Okay... Ouch!"

Latio winced in pain as Iris wrapped a bandage tightly around him. At the same time, she was closing up his wounds with her healing powers. A moment later, Latio's expression turned to surprise as he realized his pain was gone.

"It...doesn't hurt."

"A secret elf trick."

"Oh, that's right..."

Iris wasn't leaving any room for argument, so Latio said no more.

At first Iris was solely focused on healing, but then she said something as she worked. "I called you pathetic, but now I take it back. I'm sorry."

"Wh-What's this all of a sudden?"

"You did your best to defend the village. It's a fact. I said that you were

pathetic, but I was wrong. You fought courageously and stood your ground against a demon. I'm sorry. I really am sorry."

"It's fine. I mean...I was pathetic." Latio looked back at the ongoing fight. "What is he?"

"You mean Ayame? There's only one answer to that."

"Huh?"

"Just look at him and you should see exactly what he is."

"Grraah!" Jamama barked.

Latio looked back again and saw that the fight was reaching the finale.



Onyx couldn't keep up with my attacks anymore. It was clear which of us would win.

"Impossible! Why?!" Onyx cried as he grew increasingly distressed. "You've lost the holy sword! Why am I losing against this impostor?!"

I was winning the fight. In fact, I was doing better than I'd expected.

How's this happening? I don't even have a job or abilities anymore.

I could follow his every move. I read the trajectory of each swipe of his talons and could dodge every time with the slightest movement.

Is this a side effect of Iris using the saint's healing power? No, that can't be it.

There was one thing about me that was completely different from before.

"The Holy Sword Arianrhod... The sword that gives the wielder divine powers to exterminate demons."

The weapon provided a unique form of divine protection from the Goddess Olympia, but when in the possession of someone other than the hero, the sword couldn't even be drawn. The question was: what was I capable of now that I wasn't wielding it? I learned the answer the moment I unleashed a projectile slash.

"I'm such an idiot." It had taken me so long to realize. My own mistake made

me grin.

Onyx screeched, seeming to mistake my smile for a sneer at him. "What's so funny?!"

"It's not you. I'm laughing at how stupid I am."

I'd been very stupid. I should've realized it when I'd cut the log in Fabbro's store, and then when I'd fought the managarmr, and again when I'd defeated monsters attempting a pincer attack on the village.

"I've lost my job, but all the techniques I practiced are part of me now."

It didn't matter that I couldn't use my abilities. My training, and all the muscle I'd built up, were still part of me. It was as simple as that.

I'd lost the holy sword, and I wasn't the hero. These were both facts. But I hadn't lost everything. I'd honed my technique. I'd gained a wealth of experience. Even when I lost my job, nothing could take those things from me. And, there was another thing that meant even more.

"I'm filled with more determination than anyone right now."

Even if the whole world turned against me, I'd keep going for the sake of one girl who believed in me. I wouldn't lose. I couldn't lose.

"Onyx, you have every right to target me. I was ready for that when I began taking demon lives."

Communication was always crucial. If two sides couldn't reach a compromise, fighting was left as the only option. It meant that I risked everything to protect what was important to me each time I took an opponent's life.

Onyx, however, didn't see things that way. He was ready to crush the people of Ouro Village for his own amusement.

"But you disparaged those who stood up to you as you tried to take their lives. You tormented innocent people for your own amusement. And there's something else I absolutely have to punish you for." Onyx had done something I considered unforgivable. "You insulted my two oldest friends, Yu and Mei!"

When I last saw their faces, I could tell that they hadn't changed! Onyx called them fools, but they never were! I'm not letting him get away with making fun

of my precious friends!

"For the sake of others, for the sake of my friends' honor, and for the sake of my dream, I'll slay you here and now, Onyx the Speed Talon!"

"Silence!" Onyx snarled in response. "Don't pretend you've beaten me, impostor! Fake hero!"

He was right to call me that. I'd never been a real hero.

"There's nothing you can say to weaken my will. You may be right, Onyx. Maybe I'm no one."

But there's one girl who still called me a hero. Right, Iris?

Watching from a distance was the one girl in this world who'd accepted me for what I was. She believed in me, and didn't doubt for a second that I could win.

"But that doesn't mean I can't become someone. And I will, starting now."

"Nonsense! Out of my way! Cutting Talon Kick."

Talons sharper than those on his hands flew at me, but I knocked them aside.

"The talons of my legs are the sharpest. They'll gorge into you! **Talon Vortex**." He readied the talons of both legs and then launched a gust of wind in a straight line.

I readied my sword and charged at him.

Dodging his attack would've been the sensible thing to do, but I didn't. Even so, I was confident that I could strike him down.

I had no abilities. But I didn't need any to swing this sword. I could use it just fine.

I just have to make use of what I've got to the fullest extent. To the absolute extreme! That's something I can still do!

"Cut through it all!" I roared as I swung my sword with all my might.

The deadly winds that blocked my path and threatened to slice me to pieces were all cut into two.

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"You erased it...?! You erased my Talon Vortex?!"

"I've got you now! I'm charging straight ahead!"

"Guh?!"
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I swung at Onyx while he was still in shock and cut the talons from his feet.

"Why?! Why?! Why am I losing?! To this lower life-form! It's not possible!"

Already, Onyx could do little more than screech at me. With all of his talons gone, he went half mad with rage and began pecking at me with his beak.

"Impossible! Impossible, impossible, impossible! Why?! How can you be stronger without the holy sword?! It makes no sense! What even are you?!"

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"Didn't I just tell you? I'm—"
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"That's right, he's—" As Latio watched them fight, he remembered the discussion they'd had on their first meeting.

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"So what are you?"

"Me? I'm—"

"A savior!"

"Guh, gaaaah!"
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My sword moved like a gust of wind, gleaming as it cut down Onyx.

Winds of Departure

Having repelled the demon invasion, I was ready to head to the next town as originally planned. Fortunately, none of the villagers had been injured besides the soldiers, and even they had all lived because Iris had healed them.

The people of the village came rushing to me when I announced that I was about to leave.

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"This is a token of our appreciation. Please accept it."
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"Are you sure...? Then I'll gladly accept. Thank you."

They gave me food and money. There was the reward for slaying the

mánagarmr, then more on top for saving the entire village. A place like this couldn't have much to give, but I couldn't refuse their goodwill. I had to accept to ensure they wouldn't feel indebted to me.

The village elder bowed his head. "Without you, this village would have been destroyed by demons. I'm truly grateful."

I shook my head. "It's nothing."

It was true that the village would most likely have been destroyed if I hadn't been here. But I wasn't the one who'd done all the work.

I pointed to the soldiers and said, "They're the ones who worked the hardest to defend the village. All I did was help them out."

The soldiers reacted with more surprise than the villagers or anyone else. But it was the truth. If they hadn't held Onyx back, I wouldn't have had time to deal with the demons and monsters that tried to attack the village from the rear. Lives would surely have been lost if Onyx had attacked from the opposite side while I was busy.

My praise made Latio uncomfortable. "No, we all tried to stop the demon, but none of us could."

"Don't be so humble. I know you couldn't defeat him, but you still stood up to him. I wouldn't have made it in time otherwise. This isn't only my victory; it's everyone's doing."

That made them realize that I meant what I said. The soldiers all looked embarrassed.

Members of the crowd mumbled to one another and exchanged glances, then a lone child approached the soldiers. "Thank you, mister soldiers!"

The child sounded sincere, and their words triggered a wave of thanks from the other villagers.

"Yeah, thanks!"

"I always thought you were just a bunch of layabouts!"

"We had you all wrong."

"I guess you guys are kinda reliable."

"N-No, we were fighting for our own lives too," a soldier said.

"Well, this is our home."

"R-Right. So we just did what we had to..."

The villagers surrounded the soldiers and began showering them with praise and thanks. As the soldiers grew increasingly embarrassed and some looked down at their feet, the villagers were all the more pleased.

"They sure are bashful," Iris said.

"Yeah. I guess they'll take their jobs a little more seriously after this."

As everyone was praising the soldiers, Fabbro turned to me. In his hand he held a leather sack bulging with something or other. "I want to thank you for saving our village, son. Have this."

"What is it?"

"It's daggers and polishing powder that I gathered up from inside the workshop. You'll need the powder to maintain your sword, right?"

"Oh! Good point. Thanks. I'll take good care of it."

"Right! And let everyone know where you got it. Tell them your sword was made by Fabbro of Ouro Village."

"Will do."

We smiled at each other as we said our goodbyes. It was friendly and openhearted.

Then Latio came walking toward me. "Um..."

"Hmph! I hope you're not about to start making accusations against Ayame again!" Iris said. "I know I apologized, but that was another matter!"

"No! Nothing like that! Um, well, I'm sorry for all the trouble I gave you." Latio bowed his head.

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "You were just doing your job. And you were right; I really was suspicious."

"Still, thank you. Are you going to keep traveling and helping people? I can barely defend my own village, but you're the savior...so...keep it up."

"Ha ha. You too."

We exchanged a firm handshake. There was a newfound maturity in Latio's face.

"And..." Latio began.

"What is it?"

"Are you..." Latio stopped, like it was difficult to say. Then he shook his head and smiled. "Actually, forget it. You're our village's savior. That's all. So...thanks."

"Yeah, you keep up the good work too, and thanks."

I'd had a lot of disagreements with Latio in the beginning, but those were all behind us now.

The villagers waved as we left the village.

"Bye-bye!"

"See you!"

"Thanks for saving our village!"

They were showing us pure gratitude and warm support. These were the smiles that I wanted to protect.

"Look after yourselves!" I waved back to them as we left.

As we left the village, Iris walked alongside me, with her long blonde hair swaying in the breeze.

"Ayame, Ayame, where are we going next?"

"Hm, good question. To a town, I guess."

"Sounds great!" Iris said happily. "There's a place named Fiore nearby. We can get ahold of spices and some supplies they don't have in villages. We'll be able to get a new comb for Jamama and feed him some good food."

"Grraah," Jamama barked.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said.

Yu, Mei, I'm following my own path. I know you're doing the same.

As I imagined what the future might hold, I took another step on my journey as a savior.

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The savior who'd rescued the village was leaving. Latio spent a long time watching Ayame. He waited until he'd disappeared into the distance.

"He was cool..."

Once Ayame was out of sight, the other villagers went back to their jobs and began talking among themselves. Latio heard some soldiers echo his thoughts.

"He looked really cool."

"And he praised us for defending the village."

"Was he the hero or something?"

"With a hero like that around, we'll look bad unless we get back to our jobs."

The soldiers went back to their posts with newfound enthusiasm.

Latio remained in thought. Something Onyx had said came to his mind. "Don't play the fool! You're the wretched human who killed Lord Downburst! You're no savior! You're the fake hero!"

Since Latio was the only one who'd witnessed the showdown between Onyx and Ayame, he was the only one who'd realized Ayame's true identity. But he'd lost his nerve just as he'd been about to ask Ayame whether it was true.

He was the fake hero? Well, it doesn't matter. He's the man who saved my home. That's enough for me.

It was a feeling he hadn't been able to share. Ayame was the savior of the village. The world's opinion of him couldn't change that. These were the facts. Nothing else mattered.

The middle-aged soldier who was always drunk said, "Hey, Latio. It's time you got back to work."

"Stop calling me— Huh?" He was about to give his usual response, but he stopped as he realized what the older soldier had said.

"Yeah... You're not a kid anymore. You're a full-fledged soldier. You've convinced me. Just don't work yourself to death, all right?"

"Heh... And you too! Keep the drinking under control!"

Latio went running after the soldiers who'd already left.

What followed was a day like any other, with many of the same conversations. The only real difference was that everyone worked just a little harder.

Side Story 1 — A Childhood Friend's Lament

A full moon hung in the sky, casting gentle light upon the ground.

"Krrrrr."

"All right, Quanos. I'll polish your scales in a second."

A beast tamer named Faupan, one of Yu's companions, was petting an indigo dragon in their inn's manabeast enclosure.

As Faupan scraped Quanos's scales clean with a brush, he couldn't stop thinking about Yu—the man he looked up to like an older brother. It might have been why he scrubbed the scales a little rougher than usual.

"Kuu! Krrrr!" Quanos gave a cry of submission at the hard, painful scrubbing.

"Oh! S-Sorry. My mind was wandering just now." Faupan began brushing more carefully. Then something made his ears prick up.

"You're still awake, little Fau?"

The man who emerged was Owen Lopust—a warrior whose hair was cut intimidatingly short at the sides. He wore armor made from a manabeast and carried a sword as large as his own body.

"Oh, it's you, old man. I thought it was someone up to no good."

"Don't lie. You knew it was me when you heard my footsteps. You've got beastkin blood in you."

"You've got me there. But where've you been?"

"Can't you guess? I've been enjoying a few drinks with pretty girls."

"Liar. You haven't touched a drop."

"You've caught me out already?"

"I'd smell the alcohol. I've got a good nose." Faupan laughed and rubbed the area below his nose as his beast-like ears twitched. It was a gesture he often made out of habit, but it looked forced today.

"Normally, I would drown myself in booze, but I'm not in the mood tonight. Is Master still shut up in his room?" Owen asked.

"Yeah. Sis Chris tried talking to him, but he won't even reply. Sis Mei went to see him a while ago too. I've just been petting Quanos... I don't know what else to do."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. I tried going out, but I'm not in the mood for anything. I was headed back in when I saw you out here."

Owen sat down beside Faupan. The two were silent for a while. The only sound was Quanos's purring as he enjoyed Faupan's petting.

"About our bro..." Faupan said quietly.

"Yu? What about him?"

"When he told me about Foyle, it was complicated stuff, but he sounded happy once he got talking about him. Sis Mei looked annoyed at first, but eventually she relaxed too and had this nostalgic look on her face."

These were Yu and Mei's reactions when Faupan asked what sort of man Foyle had been. Faupan didn't know what had led Foyle to part ways from Yu and Mei. He had no idea what sort of person Foyle had been. But one thing Faupan felt sure of was that there'd been a friendship between the three. He could tell they'd been close.

"Yeah... I was wondering..." Owen began.

"What is it?"

"Ever wish you had a different job or title?"

"Never. If I wasn't a beast tamer, I wouldn't be here in the human world with Quanos right now."

"Krrrr," Quanos purred happily. He leaned into Faupan's hand as he petted him.

Owen nodded. "Right. People just accept the jobs they're given, right? We don't really question it. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Here's what I think. Having your life laid out for you takes a load off your mind. Instead of planning for an unknown future, you go along with the Goddess's decision, and you assume everything'll be fine. Obviously, that's not how it always goes. People have problems. They screw up. But still, they know they're in the right job. So they stop worrying and keep at it. That's why, when I was assigned as a warrior, I never wished I was something else. Same again when I got the title of Dragon Slayer for killing a tough dragon; I didn't question it."

Title holders generally earned their title some time after their job was assigned. The most notable exceptions were the hero and the saint. And then there were those with exceptional talent, like Mei and Mary.

"I don't know what sort of guy Foyle Austin was," Owen said. "I don't know why he pretended to be the hero. I can't figure that one out. But the fact is, he handed the holy sword to Master in his final moments."

Owen thought back. Those final moments were what led Yu to shut himself in his room. Yu had wanted everything to come to a peaceful conclusion, but he'd been denied that wish.

Owen continued, "It made me think, the world sure is an unfair place. I'd never felt like that before." He spoke softly, but his words were full of emotion.

In his mind, Owen pictured Yu. He was like a little brother to him.

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The regrets kept coming back to torment him.

Powerlessness, remorse, grief, emptiness, despair, sorrow, sadness. A concoction of negative emotions was eating away at him.

Yu hadn't left his room since it all happened.

There came a knock at the door, followed by a high-pitched voice full of concern. "Yu, I collected your dinner from the inn staff. Won't you eat anything?" Christina was standing outside of the room, carrying fluffy white bread with water.

There was no response.

"Yu, please at least drink something."

Again, the response was total silence.

"Yu, I'm coming in."

Christina built up enough courage to try the door and found it unlocked. Either Yu didn't think much about security, or he'd stopped caring. Christina suspected the latter.

She opened the door and stepped inside.

There she found Yu, simply sitting on the bed. There were no signs that he'd been angry. He was so still and so devoid of life that he resembled a statue.

He'd lost weight, but at least he was still alive. That brought Christina some relief. Up to that point, she'd started to consider the worst.

She looked around and noticed the holy sword—the symbol of the hero—lying unceremoniously on the floor. She didn't like to see the gifts of the Goddess treated with such disrespect. As a priestess, she would normally rebuke such behavior. At that moment, however, her concern for Yu won out.

Christina took a deep breath. "Yu, I know it's unfortunate how things turned out. I asked the church to search the region for the fake—excuse me. For Foyle Austin, but they didn't find him. The search was called off. Yu, I know you're hurting, but I have to say it. While you're isolating yourself, more and more people are falling victim to the Demon Lord Army. It's why we need you—the hero. Won't you set out again to save the people from the Demon Lord Army?"

"Hero...? Ha ha ha." Yu's laughter was emotionless. He was filled with self-loathing. He couldn't have looked any less like a confident hero.

Yu looked at Christina.

For a moment, Christina almost backed away. Yu's gentle face had been replaced with something else entirely. His eyes were lifeless—completely lacking in will or emotion.

"What is a hero? Someone who protects people?"

"Yes. The hero wields the holy sword and becomes a beacon of hope for—"

"Then why did I have to kill him?!" Yu's voice was a roar from deep inside.

Christina froze. She'd never heard anyone speak with such rage.

Yu approached Christina with unsteady steps, then he gripped her shoulder as he knelt. "He said I was a light. But I'm not. If I'd known I had to kill my oldest friend to be the hero, I never would've..." Unable to finish his sentence, Yu's words turned to sobs.

Yu had reverted to a mere child. A little boy in tears. Christina was at a total loss for how to react.

"I knew he'd be like this," said another voice.

"Oh, it's you, Mei."

Christina didn't know how long Mei had been behind her.

Mei studied Yu's face. There was a sad look in her eyes, but she soon began chiding Yu for his behavior.

"Yu, don't give Chris a hard time. A priestess can speak the words of the Goddess, but she can't read the Goddess's mind. She can't argue either. It's not fair to blame her for anything."

In response, Yu said nothing. But he slowly took his hand away from Christina's shoulder.

"Um, Mei—" Christina said.

"Sorry, Chris. He'll be fine. Would you give us a moment alone?"

"All right."

Christina took one last look at Yu, who'd gone back to sitting on the bed with his head hanging low, then left the room looking sad.

Once the door was closed and blocking out the light of the lamps in the corridor, only moonlight shone into the room.

Mei sat beside Yu and remained silent as she waited for him to speak.

After a long time, Yu finally said, "I didn't know the first thing about Foyle."

His heart was filled with regrets, sorrow, despair, and a sense of loss. Each

one a negative emotion.

Mei was quick to disagree. "I think you did. I don't think anyone gets along better or understands each other better than you two did. You were better friends than anyone in our village."

"I used to think so too. But I was wrong... When it happened, I didn't understand what he was doing until he started talking. I really thought he'd changed. I should've known he hadn't. I should've had faith in him."

Why didn't I trust him? I should have, even when no one else did. That thought alone made Yu's chest tighten. We were friends. We'd been close since we were kids. So why couldn't I guess how he felt?

"He always led the way," Yu said.

"Hey, Yu! Stop daydreaming! Let's get moving!"

"He always gave me courage."

"Everyone messes up sometimes, so don't sweat it. All that matters, Yu, is that you keep growing at your own pace."

"No matter...what happened...he always...saved me."

"You're in a sorry state. But you tried your best, I know. Leave the rest to me, Yu."

"He...always...led the way..."

"What're you crying for? You're a real crybaby, Yu."

The tears began falling one after another.

"Why'd it have to end like this?" Yu's voice was quiet and faltering. "If I hadn't been given the title of True Hero, the three of us could've stayed together, just like back home. Then Foyle wouldn't have... It was me. It was my fault. It all happened because I wanted to be the hero. I was better off as an unassigned. I just wanted the three of us to be together. That's all. But then I killed Foyle with my own hands."

"Yu." Mei said his name to cut him off, then suddenly hugged him.

Yu felt himself enveloped by human softness and warmth. "Mei...?"

"You and Foy both never change. Once you start beating yourself up over something, you won't ask for help. Foy always got reckless and tried to fix everything himself. You always want to be alone and blame yourself."

"It's not like that..."

"It definitely is. I should know," Mei said softly.

She stroked Yu's hair as she spoke.

"You and him both, wherever you went, you always came back covered in wounds. I always told you both to stop pushing yourselves, but neither of you listened. At some point, I gave up trying to stop either of you, but I was always watching. I don't think either of you ever realized just how much you made me worry."

"You're right... You were always there to treat us when we hurt ourselves."

"Exactly. Do you know how much I worried?"

"Uh... I'm sorry," Yu whispered. "I'm always causing trouble for everyone."

Mei ran her hand through Yu's hair once more.

"Yu, I talked to Foy one last time after he kicked you out of the party."

"Huh?"

"He was the same old Foy we always knew. I didn't realize it back then because I was so angry at him for kicking you out, but now I see it."

She'd seen the pensive look on his face. For a moment, she'd seen that he was close to tears as he told her to take care of Yu. If only she'd taken a moment to ask what was wrong.

"I didn't understand him any better than you did. Don't put all the blame on yourself and don't cry. Don't carry it all by yourself... And... D-Don't cry."

Yu raised his head as he felt something wet hit his cheek.

Mei had started crying. Even as the clear droplets flowed, she'd been smiling as she attempted to raise Yu's spirits.

Yu had been blaming himself. I thought it was only tough for me. But that's not right. Mei's suffering just as much.

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"I'm sorry! Mei! I'm sorry...Foyle! I... I..."
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"You never change, Yu. You always cry a lot... But today... Just for today, I'm a crybaby too. Is that all right? Ughhh..."

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"Uh, waaah... Waaah!"
"Ngh... Ugh... Uwaaah. Uwaaah. Hngh. Foy... Foy...!"
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The pair both struggled to contain their voices. They weren't the True Hero and an Archmage anymore. They were just two children mourning the loss of their friend.

"Mei, your eyes are all red."

"Yours too. Ah, they're going to be all puffy tomorrow. Owen's going to laugh at me again."

"Same goes for me."

The two smiled. The atmosphere had changed. Their smiles were somewhat forced, but at least now they felt they could smile.

Their sadness hadn't gone anywhere. They'd just found some temporary relief. The pain was still there, lingering in their hearts. Yu felt it was something they'd carry with them for the rest of their lives.

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"Mei."

"What?"

"I'll defeat the Demon Lord Army."

"I know."

"That's the only way to atone for what I've done."

"Right..."
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Why did Foyle smile in his final moments? Yu wondered. He didn't understand it, but he'd decided to move forward carrying the feelings Foyle had left him.

Yu picked up the holy sword and held it high. As the blade reflected the moonlight, it shone with a strangely sad light.

Thus the True Hero was born.

It fell to him to brandish the holy sword and use its power to vanquish the Demon Lord that existed like a blight upon the world. But was a pure desire to save the world the only thing that lay in the depths of a hero's heart? That was unclear.

The moon continued to cast sorrowful light through the gaps in the window.

Side Story 2 — The Demon Lord Army

The Demon Lord Army. The natural enemy of humanity and a source of evil spreading sorrow throughout the world.

Their home was known as the Netherrealm—the source of the corrupting essence that gave monsters their power, and an environment where they could run rampant in their element. The levels of corrupting energy in this place were so high that previous human armies that had come here to defeat the Demon Lord Army had withstood it for less than three days before turning to flee.

Though sinister, this place also felt majestic, largely due to the presence of the long-standing Demon Lord Castle, which overawed many who laid eyes on it.

In the Demon Lord Castle there was a meeting room containing an impressive round table with places for eight demons. Only the highest officers of the Demon Lord Army could enter here. Five figures had gathered for a meeting, leaving three places around the table vacant.

"You have failed us."

Mercury Changuro Hanzhongli, also known as the Aqua Legion, was giving his opinion.

He was clothed in a beautiful, elegant kimono, and his features were so androgynous that no one could tell at a glance whether they were male or female. His hair was a translucent blue, like an ornamental piece. All in all, he was as beautiful as any work of art.

His eyes, however, were unyielding.

"Bestreben, Sway. What was your intention when you decided to return here without having slain the hero? Pains were taken to fool the humans and lure the hero into a trap, but those efforts were rendered meaningless."

Bestreben was silent.

"I wasn't in the mood," Sway replied.

"His Majesty the Demon Lord intends to eradicate humanity. Slaying the hero is a necessary step toward that aim. Do you understand the seriousness of acting against His Majesty's will?"

As Bestreben and Sway barely reacted to Mercury's criticism, a man covered in pure white fur and possessing a tail was watching. He was Tordön the Thunderbolt.

"Told you this would happen, didn't I?" he said. "You'd better be ready to get punished."

"Tordön, you too," Mercury said. "The hero and his companions escaped because you failed to find them, did they not? Had you not toyed with your prey, the swordsman wouldn't have escaped. Your tendency to amuse yourself when you should act quickly is a bad habit of yours."

"Huh?! What're you blaming me for?! It was those two who let them go! Punish them, not me! I'll punish them for you if you want!" Sparks leaped from Tordön's body as he spoke.

Bestreben had been listening in silence, but now he spoke. "I'll accept my punishment, but only from the Demon Lord himself. I won't be punished by a weakling, and that rules you out."

"You wanna settle this right here?"

Tordön sizzled with static electricity as Bestreben allowed his power to emanate from his body. They were on the verge of a fight. Although Mercury had been the one criticizing them over the matter, it was Mercury who changed the topic.

"Let's put the matter aside. According to intelligence gathered later, this hero —Foyle Austin—was an impostor."

"Buh heh. He was a fake?"

The response came from someone who'd been silent up to now. He was an orc-like demon with blackened skin and a sagging stomach. He looked as though his body had been charred or dyed, and he was three times the size of

any ordinary orc. This was Braciola Gen Vulcan, and his alias was the Infernal Flame.

"Yes. The church's forces say that this generation's True Hero is named Yu Protargonist. Foyle Austin was a fraud calling himself the hero. I had my assistants work to turn the population against him, hoping to leave him isolated and thus allow us to claim the holy sword before the True Hero could. Unfortunately, our attempts were all thwarted. The fake hero was later slain by the True Hero."

"And this True Hero, how does he compare to the fake one?"

"That's unclear. The Speed Talon's unit was handling our surveillance efforts, but they've since gone missing. They were monitoring the fake ever since Downburst's defeat and maintained regular contact with me until suddenly going silent." Mercury looked at Bestreben. "What do you make of it, Bestreben?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"The Speed Talon was under your command."

"Because you assigned him to me without asking. I might have been his commander officially, but in actuality, his orders were coming from you, Aqua Legion."

Mercury had transferred Onyx to Bestreben's command. The reason was simple. Though Onyx wasn't particularly strong, demons that could fly were useful. Concerned that Onyx might disobey orders, Mercury had placed him under Bestreben's direct watch believing that he'd remain obedient in the face of superior strength. Onyx had then been dispatched to monitor the hero.

Mercury simply looked at Bestreben and smiled, prompting Bestreben to snort.

"His spirit was already crushed," Bestreben added. "I doubt he'd act according to his own motives. He lacked the willpower for that."

"I see. Thank you. Then I was correct to be concerned about him. It seems he later found himself unable to flee and was killed."

"He was just a demon," Tordön said. "A nobody. He thought speed was his specialty, but he couldn't keep up with me. Well, with him gone, we've lost Birdbrain's forces."

Tordön was scathing in his assessment. It was true that a vast gulf existed between the Eight Warlords and ordinary demons, so no one contradicted him.

Along with Onyx's defeat, Downburst's forces had been completely wiped out. Though no one in attendance was particularly bothered.

"Buh heh heh. So now there's a True Hero?" Braciola said. "If he's the one who defeated a flying demon like the Speed Talon, then he truly must have the power to evaporate a demon from afar... Buh heh, buh heh! Buh heh hell hell! I'll burn him... Buuuurn him!"

"Ouch! Don't burn us, you dumb ball of flames!"

Braciola responded to Tordön's insult with a hearty laugh. "Buh heh! A bolt of lightning won't hurt me! I'll enjoy the heat!" Flames rose from his body like infernal fire.

"Keep your fantasies to yourself, freak!"

"Please contain yourself, Braciola," Mercury said. "All we can do is monitor the True Hero because so little is known about him. It's too dangerous to strike. He's different from the others we've faced. Now, I'd like to discuss the Soleil Sun Kingdom."

The focus of the meeting changed and the fake hero, Foyle Austin, was largely forgotten. But as they were considering their upcoming duties, two among them still held an interest in Foyle.

"Hmmm. Fake hero? Well, if they call him that, he must've failed at being the real thing. Just imagine the envy, the jealousy, the bitterness, the pain and resentment he must've had for the True Hero. Maybe I shouldn't have let him get away so easily." Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist was growing interested in Foyle and the role that had been forced on him.

"That was a fake?" Bestreben the Mighty was surprised to hear that Foyle hadn't been the True Hero. His level of skill had certainly seemed weak and pitiful to Bestreben, but Foyle had landed a hit on Bestreben's face in a fair

fight. Bestreben thought little of Foyle, but also knew not to underestimate him.

If what the Aqua Legion said was true, then he gave me this wound while putting on an act. A human's power drops considerably when they try to use powers outside of their given job. If he wasn't the hero, then merely wielding the holy sword should have put him at substantial disadvantage. And yet he scored a hit on me...

The wound Foyle had left on Bestreben's cheek throbbed. He felt a lust for combat surge through him more powerfully than before, but at the same time he felt cold. The opponent he sought was dead. There would be no rematch.

"How dull," he said to himself. He was beginning to use those words a lot as of late.

Bestreben kept his opinions to himself as the other Warlords continued the meeting.

Mercury was speaking. "We received word from the Ground Rot that the war against the Soleil Sun Kingdom has reached a stalemate because they have the hero and the divine protection of the goddess. But we had already planned for this. In fact, it's to our benefit if humanity focuses their strength in one location. Many strategies become available to us. The downside is that we'll suffer a significant loss of monsters and demons on that particular front. That in itself won't hinder our war effort, but there's a risk of those losses raising human morale if it suggests that the Demon Lord Army isn't worth fearing. That wouldn't be any fun, would it?"

"None at all. The common human trick is to get together in herds to raise their spirits."

"It doesn't matter how many monsters we lose because they're easily replenished, but I won't allow humans to look down on the Demon Lord Army." Mercury pointed to a position on the map that lay on the table. "We have decided to deal them a crushing blow in this location. Please look. It's known as the Trade City of Rikko. It's a key place for merchants of various nations to procure goods. It also serves to link humanity's innermost nations to those near the Netherrealm's border, such as the Soleil Sun Kingdom. The people there grow complacent because they're not on the front line. It's also a prosperous

city. Enough so that they hold a festival known as the Full Bloom Festival where fireworks are set off in the night sky. We'll strike here and cripple the city's functions. One of us must take on this task."

"Would you like me to do it?" Sway asked.

"Would you be willing?"

"Yes. If they're having festivals with a war going on, just imagine how blessed the people are to be in a good place with good food. Ah, I'm so jealous. I envy them."

The air in the room turned cold. Sway was laughing to herself, but the others could feel incredible envy from her.

"It's clear why they sometimes call you the Witch of Envy. Very well. I'll leave the task to you."

"Heh heh. Then I'll say goodbye now. I've got a bunch of things to do to get ready for the trip."

Sway stood up and left the room. The meeting wasn't over, but it was no use stopping her. Mercury simply watched her leave.

"Let's leave Sway to handle the rear. Tordön and Braciola, I'd like you to bring the Sodome Warfare Nation and the Gorrahm Knight Nation to ruin. Both nations assist the Soleil Sun Kingdom by providing goods and soldiers. I'm somewhat displeased by the pride they have in their warriors—it's what drives them to continue supplying their forces at the front line. This nation has very little remaining military might. In addition, an assistant of mine has influence over a small nation, and thanks to their help, many demons have already been able to conceal themselves in positions to the rear of our targets. Likewise, assistants who've infiltrated our two target nations can offer guidance as you encircle, crush, and eliminate those nations."

"Nice. Exactly what I've been waiting for," Tordön said.

"Buh heh heh! I'll burn it all to a pile of embers!" Braciola said.

"Given their positions, there's a high chance the hero will appear in one of these nations. In that event, please withdraw. Our aim is to cause these nations to collapse, but in a worst-case scenario, it will be sufficient to cause significant damage."

"Huh? That's no fun."

Mercury responded to Tordön's sudden loss of enthusiasm by sternly reminding him, "That's an order."

Tordön gave a tsk, but nevertheless agreed.

Mercury continued to smile as always and then made a final statement. "Bestreben, I cannot give you any authority over this operation. Your previous target may have been a fake, but you let him escape and thus missed a chance to recover the holy sword. This can't be overlooked."

"Do as you will."

"Yes, I intend to," Mercury replied with a charming smile.

Bestreben showed his lack of concern with a snort.

Mercury then signaled the end of the meeting. "I hope you will all strive for the sake of His Majesty the Demon Lord."

With the exception of Mercury, the Eight Warlords left the meeting room.

A new group of figures appeared behind Mercury. Or more precisely, the four of them had been there all along. They'd spent the entire meeting simply standing in the shadow of pillars behind Mercury without saying a single word.

There was something strange about them. Each had white hair and facial features that could have belonged to either a boy or a girl. What was even stranger was that each had the exact same face and exact same physique.

Each was a homunculus under the Aqua Legion's direct control.

"We appreciate your work, Lord Mercury."

"No one drank the tea we prepared... That's displeasing and depressing."

"Ah hah. What a troublesome bunch they are."

"And none of them know how to listen. They make a terrible team."

The homunculi consoled Mercury with expressions of joy, anger, pathos, and

humor. They were united in criticizing the other Warlords.

"Yes, they're difficult. I do wish they'd function as a unit since we're calling ourselves the Demon Lord Army. I couldn't even invite the other one to our meeting."

Mercury heaved an exaggerated sigh. The homunculi smiled knowingly—they knew just how their master felt. They all watched Mercury with the same eyes.

"I wonder if the two you sent to overthrow nations will stick to their orders."

"Braciola may, but Tordön will do as he pleases. I'm sure he will try to fight the hero," Mercury responded.

"Then shouldn't he be stopped?"

"There's no use. Trying to talk to him merely adds to his irritation," Mercury explained. "Better to let him fight to his heart's content while we watch his efforts from afar. What better way to learn of the True Hero's capabilities?"

"Then he's a sacrifice?"

"Heh heh heh. I wouldn't put it that way. He's a fellow member of the Demon Lord Army and I will of course pray for his victory," laughed Mercury.

"Impressive, as always, Lord Mercury. Your heart is black, and your cunning knows no bounds."

Although the four figures each spoke with the same voice, Mercury talked with them without any hint of confusion.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. "I'm not worried about Sway's attempts to ruin a city, but I fear she'll simply drive the humans out again... She doesn't kill. It's as though she still feels a sense of belonging among people. If she was going to stain herself, she should've done so until she fully became one of our kind."

Mercury concluded that this wouldn't be a problem and then turned his thoughts to more immediate issues.

"I could find no records of there ever being a 'True Hero.' Well, however strong he turns out to be, there's a limit to what one man can do. Only the hero is a threat to a Warlord. If our Warlords strike in multiple nations

simultaneously, then the hero can only save one of them. We can continue in the same manner until every nation falls."

Heroes and Demon Lords had a long history. The rivalry spanned five hundred years and was still ongoing. It always ended with the Demon Lord's defeat. That was because each Demon Lord had been conceited in their power, and their highest ranking officers had been defeated one at a time.

The Eight Warlords existed to protect the Demon Lord. Humans proved difficult opponents because they used ingenuity to compensate for their lack of strength. Though victory could be achieved by having multiple Warlords surround opponents before eradicating them.

In Foyle's case, Mercury had carefully considered his strength and then decided that three Warlords should be dispatched to eliminate him. Foyle had been forced to flee, so Mercury's estimation of him had proved correct. What he hadn't considered was that Bestreben might simply let him go.

"He might be one of the most powerful among us, but he's too selfish... Or maybe he's no more selfish than anyone else."

Mercury knew that the Demon Lord Army was strong. But that was what had led to their defeat in the past. Strength alone wasn't enough to ensure a victory in single combat against the hero. That was why Mercury had other ideas.

"What reason is there to take on the hero directly? Even if a final showdown is inevitable, our goal is the eradication of humanity. He can be left until the very end."

A hero would have no purpose once he was left alone. Humans always lived in large groups. For that reason Mercury planned to leave the hero isolated by causing humanity's gradual decline.

Much like water gradually seeps into the soil and spreads, he would eat into the bedrock of humanity and make it crumble. By the time the humans realized what was happening, it would be too late.

Mercury's crooked smile was reflected in the surface of the water in his cup.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Shinonome Kousyaku. Although Kousyaku means duke, I'm just a novice author. I'd like to thank you for choosing to read *The Fake Hero Crashes the Party*.

This work was awarded the 2021 HJ Novels Prize in the Shosetsuka ni Naro category, and then compiled into a book. Receiving the prize was a great honor and a source of great joy.

I might have received an esteemed prize and had my work compiled into a book, but seeing it in book form made me feel my lack of experience keenly.

I had other things going on in my life at the time, so it took almost a year for the book to be released after I'd received the prize. It's very different from simply posting text online.

To my dear editor, A, I'm deeply thankful for the modifications to the text and guidance you've offered! I'm sorry for the trouble my slow writing caused, but also very grateful for your patient advice.

What makes me happiest about having my work compiled into a book is seeing illustrations added. Souichi Itou created a set of wonderful illustrations, including the main character Foyle and his childhood friends Yu and Mei.

Most notable is Iris! She is so cute that I smile every time I look at the illustration. I've always loved elves, so it's what makes me the happiest. Blonde-haired elves are the best!

On the other hand, I was most surprised by Onyx. I didn't think he'd be such a handsome demon... I think he's the character who changed the most compared to the original web novel. He's the one who benefited most when the work was adapted as a book.

Lastly, to the readers who've supported this work since it was published as a web novel, thank you so much for choosing to purchase this version. I am truly grateful!

The next volume will showcase battles with the higher demons, the remaining Eight Warlords.

How will Foyle—now known as Ayame the savior—Iris, and Jamama handle these tougher opponents? Please look forward to finding out.

Bonus Short Stories

A Girl in Love

Though many had heard rumors about the mysterious elf village, neither humans nor the Demon Lord Army had ever been able to find it.

Elves were very different from humans. They lived as part of nature, in coexistence with the spirits, beyond human reach.

In the center of their village was a towering tree with many lesser trees growing around, and all of their branches entwined so as to form bridges between them. The elves had created their dwellings by changing the shapes of these trees.

In one of the many rooms within the trees, a blonde elf girl with green eyes was hurriedly making preparations.

"What about this...? Guess I don't need it. Oh... I will need this. Oh! Mushrooms! I'll take these ones!"

It was Iris—the elf who'd been saved by Foyle Austin.

Iris had laid various items and plants on the floor so she could decide which ones to put in her bag.

"And then these! Masks! Heh heh. I'm quite impressed by my own work. It was worth staying up all night to make them. I just know he'll be pleased."

Into her bag went a huge pile of handmade masks.

Despite how angry everyone had been last time she left the village, Iris was plotting to set out again because it was the only way she could see Foyle.

"I've heard humans don't live very long. What seems hasty to us elves should be about right for a human. I just know I'm going to lose him somehow if I don't do something. I have to be there for him!"

When Iris had met Foyle, she'd realized he was carrying some burden. She

was determined to be the one to support him.

Since time passed quickly in the eyes of elves, they were generally slow to act, but Iris was far quicker than most.

"And if I take too long, there might be another woman beside him when I get there. I can't let that happen." Iris clenched her fists and grew even more determined.

This was the real reason for her haste. She felt she had to slip away before someone else could beat her to him.

As she resumed her preparations with renewed enthusiasm, she thought about their next meeting.

"I wonder what he'll say when he sees me. I bet he'll be pleased to see how much I've grown. Heh heh. Maybe he'll even fall in love with me! And then maybe... Eh heh heh."

An unladylike smile appeared on her face as she began to fantasize.

Elves physically matured so slowly that she hadn't actually grown at all since her last meeting with Foyle. All the things she was imagining would never happen.

That was when, as if to punish her for her impure thoughts, the bottom of her bulging bag burst open.

"Aahh?! It tore! I must've put too much in there!"

The contents of the overly packed bag noisily spilled out onto the floor, attracting the attention of Iris's parents. When they came to see what was going on, she had a hard time explaining away the mess she'd made.

Not long after, Iris sneaked out of the village to follow Foyle. She was considerate enough to leave a note behind, but, needless to say, her departure caused an uproar in the elf village.

A Secret Late-Night Meeting of Childhood Friends

"Ugh... I'm so tired. They keep me busy from dawn to—Hm?"

It happened one night during my time spent training day after day in the royal capital. I was heading back after going to the toilet when I spotted a familiar head of blue hair in a courtyard.

"Hey, Yu. What're you doing here?"

"Uh... Oh, it's you, Foyle!"

It was my old friend Yu. I hadn't seen him much since we'd arrived in the royal capital because I was so busy being trained up as the hero that I barely had time for anything else. I bumped into him for the first time in a while as he was practicing sword swings with a wooden sword.

"Do you always practice alone until this late?" I asked.

"Yeah. I can't learn any abilities since I'm an unassigned. But that just makes me want to train even harder. Especially when I think of how hard you and Mei are working."

Yu's sword hand was covered in blisters.

Don't tell me he's been training every night like this since we arrived in the royal capital? All day every day? He puts me to shame for giving in halfway through.

"All right, Yu... I'll train with you. Be grateful. You're about to get instructions directly from the hero."

"Huh? But aren't you tired, Foyle?"

"Do you know who I am? I'm the hero, Foyle Austin. This is nothing to me."

It was a lie. I was totally beat and couldn't wait to sleep. Nonetheless, I wanted to look cool in front of Yu, so I put on a brave face and trained with him.

"Yah!"

"Oh, not bad, Yu!"

We were fighting with wooden swords.

There was a huge skill gap between us because I'd had direct training from knights. Still, Yu improved considerably after some practice with me. He amazed me as always. I felt certain that he was the real hero. But he had some way to

go.

"You're too careless!" I cried.

"Whoa?!"

"You can't let yourself lose so easily. You've got to get better, Yu."

I'd knocked Yu's wooden sword out of his hand.

"What now? Want to stop?" I asked.

"No! I'm not done! One more fight, Foyle!" There was still a burning passion in Yu's eyes.

He doesn't know when to quit. He never changes. I smiled, preparing myself for another training fight with Yu. But before we could start, we were interrupted.

"Who are these two naughty boys secretly out misbehaving late at night?" a voice asked.

"Huh?"

"Uhh?!"

The person who'd quietly appeared behind me was Mei—another of my oldest friends. She was wearing comfortable clothing and had let her hair down.

"Mei? What are you doing here?" I asked.

"It's late. You should be sleeping," Yu said.

"Normally, I would be. But I'm having trouble sleeping because I can't relax here like I could back in the village. And being by myself makes me lonely—makes me bored, so I figured I'd go for a walk to improve my mood. Then I happened to see two familiar faces. That's why I'm here."

Mei gave us a mischievous smile and stuck out her tongue.

"You might be quiet when you're training alone, but you sure shout a lot when you're together. Don't you realize you'll get caught?"

"Uh. Th-That would be bad."

"We'll be more careful..."

We'd gotten a little carried away and started raising our voices. We both slumped our shoulders in shame.

"We really should be sleeping, but the three of us haven't gotten together in so long. We should stick together a little longer. I'll watch from over here. Is that okay?"

"Of course. All right, let's go again, Yu!"

"All right!"

"I just told you to keep your voices down."

Yu and I went back to sparring as Mei watched over us.

Some day I'd have to give up the role of hero for Yu, but I hoped the three of us could at least stay together. I'd hate for us to be separated.



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The Fake Hero Crashes the Party: Volume 1

by Shinonome Kousyaku

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Amy Griffin

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