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Illustration

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HERO

CRASHES THE PARTY



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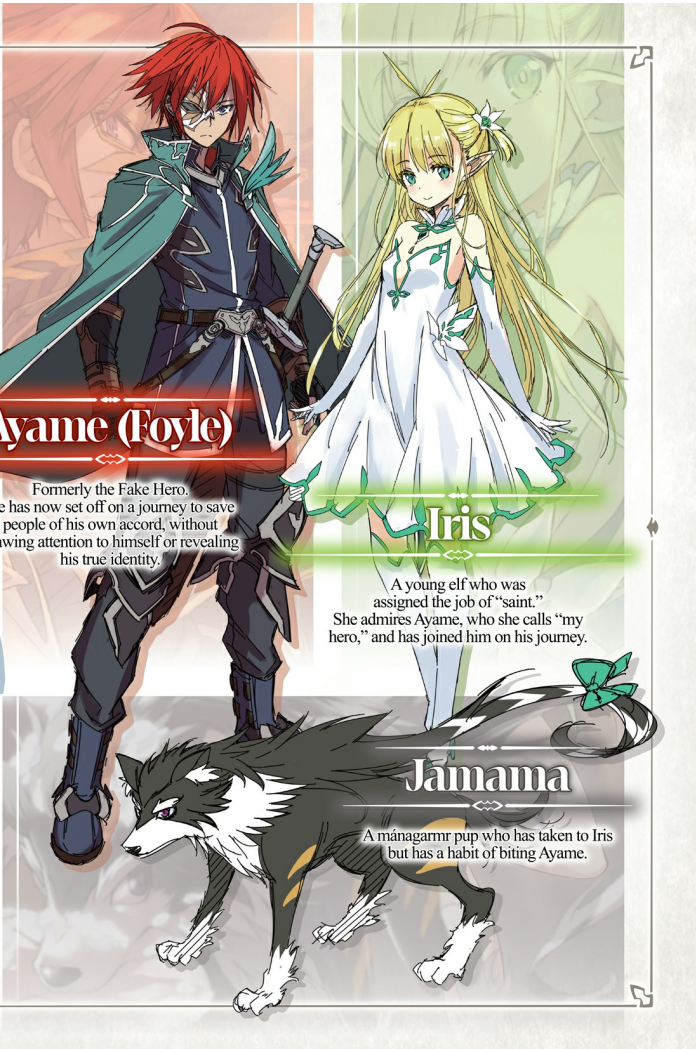
THE FAKE HERO

CRASHES THE PARTY



Sway

One of the Eight Warlords of the Demon Lord Army. She wields ice magic with such power that not even attacks from the Archmage of Fire could threaten her. She is also known as the Ice Mist.



Ayame (Foyle)

Formerly the Fake Hero. He has now set off on a journey to save people of his own accord, without drawing attention to himself or revealing his true identity.


Iris

A young elf who was assigned the job of "saint." She admires Ayame, who she calls "my hero," and has joined him on his journey.

Jamama

A managarmr pup who has taken to Iris but has a habit of biting Ayame.

THE FAKE HERO IS THE PARTY



“Please
promise
me. Please
tell me no
matter
what
happens,
you'll
come back
alive.”

Despite the tears,
Iris was smiling
bravely. She held up
her little finger.

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Chapter 1: The Savior's Journey

"Yah!"

"Giiih?! Giiih..."

The giant centipede collapsed as my sword cut its head from the rest of its body.

It was a type of manabug known as an armored centipede, and it was as large as a tree. As a carnivore, it fed by coiling around prey with its large body and immobilizing the victim with venomous fangs.

The centipede was still writhing even after I'd cut it in two, so I thrust my sword into it again to finish it off.

"Y-You saved us," a merchant said from his hiding place behind his cart. "I thought we were done for."

I'd fought the armored centipede after spotting it wrapping itself around a horse-drawn cart. I'd cut off its tail to make it release the cart and move away, then I'd fought with it while Iris tended to the wounded.

"What a relief!" one of the guards said. "I'd already given up fighting that thing and was trying to escape with Cramer. With skills like those, I'm guessing you're both adventurers?"

"Adventurers? No, we're just travelers. You were unlucky to be attacked by an armored centipede."

"You've got that right," Cramer, the merchant, said. "It's real bad luck because these things don't normally appear around here. Ah, it damaged the cart. Though I suppose I should be glad it didn't hurt my horse." He heaved an exasperated sigh.

When Iris noticed that the fight was finished, she came jogging over to me with Jamama in her arms. "Armored centipedes would normally be sleeping at this time of year. It must have been so hungry that it came down from the

mountains looking for food.”

“How is everyone, Iris?”

“I’ve treated the guard who got bitten, but he should really see someone about the venom as soon as he reaches town.”

“You’ve done more than enough.” A guard bowed his head low. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart. It’s not uncommon to lose a colleague in this job, but it’s something I’d rather avoid.”

I knew just how hard it was to lose a companion.

The merchant stepped forward. “I’m truly grateful and would like to repay you somehow. Is there anything I could do for you? If it’s within reason, I’ll gladly agree.”

“In that case, how about letting us ride with you? We’re both tired after a long walk.”

“I don’t mind, but the only space we have is alongside our cargo.”

“I’m fine with that. As long as we can sit, I’d appreciate it.”

We’d been walking ever since leaving Ouro Village—a place so remote that it was considered part of the frontier. Neither the village chief nor the villagers had a horse to spare, forcing us to go on foot.

Now that we had the merchant’s approval, we sat down where there was space in his cart.

“This’ll make the trip to the next town easy,” I said.

“I do like walking, but it’s tiring when we have to stay wary the entire time,” Iris said. “Though the roads around here are in good enough condition that traveling by horse and cart makes sense.”

“Hmm. Maybe we should borrow a horse next time. Everything’s going to be much easier when Jamama is full grown, assuming he lets us ride on his back.”

The mánagarmr pup in Iris’s lap barked at me. “Grrah! Grrah grrah!”

“He says he doesn’t want you to ride him.”

“Yeah, I thought he’d say that. That’s a shame.”

There was nothing unusual about people riding manabeasts into battle. Dragon riders and beast tamers were known for it.

Iris wasn't a beast tamer, but that didn't mean she couldn't ride large creatures. If that was the case, only dragon riders and beast tamers would be able to ride horses. Obviously, we didn't have any special abilities to help us, but that wouldn't stop me from riding anything.

The reason Jamama didn't want me near him was because I'd killed his mother. I wasn't going to argue.

"Grrroww... Grrahaahh!" After sniffing around the cart, Jamama started barking.

I looked over and saw him sniffing a bundle of some kind of plant.

"What is it, Jamama?" Iris asked him.

"What's wrong? Don't touch the cargo," I warned.

Iris and I both looked at the plant, which looked perfectly ordinary.

We must have made enough noise to get the merchant's attention. "Is something wrong?" he asked us.

"Do you sell these?" Iris asked.

"That's right. We're delivering them to a baron in town. He's a noble who's awfully fond of this particular plant. It's my third time supplying it to him. I don't worry as long as I'm getting paid. Why'd you ask?"

For some reason, Iris had been looking closely at the plant as the merchant spoke. Despite my curiosity, I simply thanked the merchant and he left us alone in the cart.

"What's got you so interested in that plant, Iris? And Jamama too for that matter."

"Oh, it's nothing. If the buyer just likes how it looks, then there's no problem. Now would you move your legs for me?"

"Huh? Sure..."

With Jamama still in her arms, Iris sat on my lap, just like when I'd brushed

her hair in the inn.

“Huh? What gives?”

“I feel more comfortable sitting on you than this cart floor.”

“Oh, okay. But you know, it might fix your problem, but the shaking of the cart is still going to give me a sore butt.”

“But at least you get to be a chair for a cute girl like me. Doesn’t that make it worth it? Besides, it’ll give you a chance to praise me for the good work I did earlier.”

Iris pressed her head against my chest. Then she looked up at me with her stunning jade eyes.

“Okay, I don’t mind,” I agreed. “You’ve been a big help to me.”

“Eh heh heh.”

I patted Iris’s head as I watched the scenery go by outside the cart. I enjoyed the landscape, though it didn’t make my butt any less sore.



“Thanks a lot. If you ever need any goods, visit Arnold Company and ask for Cramer. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Thanks to you too,” I said.

We shook hands one last time before parting ways. After seeing him off, we took a good look at the town around us.

“Well, here we are,” I said.

We’d gotten here surprisingly quickly. We’d already walked farther than we’d realized, and traveling the rest of the way by cart made a big difference.

All around us we saw buildings and people walking between them. There was always a lot more activity in towns. Though, according to Cramer, this particular town—Fiore—was still considered the countryside. Either way, it was a world of difference from Ouro Village.

First, there were the roads. Fiore’s were paved with cobblestones, while Ouro’s were almost entirely dirt. There were also two fences surrounding the

town along with a moat. I could already tell that Fiore had far better defenses than Ouro.

“It’s nice and lively here. It’s hard to believe there’s a war going on.”

“That’s because we’re far from the front,” Iris replied.

“Ah, that’s right.”

A certain place came to mind: the Twilight Plains that lay at the front line, where a ceaseless procession of monsters approached from across the border. Naturally, the Soleil Sun Kingdom had soldiers there to hold them back.

Monsters unleashed an overwhelming amount of corrupting essence as they died, requiring priests to constantly purify the area. It wasn’t enough to keep the soil healthy, but abandoning the land wasn’t an option—the monsters would reach the Soleil Sun Kingdom if they ever made it beyond the plains. There were always countless soldiers stationed on the plains to halt their advance.

Thoughts of those soldiers fighting against the Demon Lord Army at that very moment filled me with complex emotions. I wondered whether I really deserved to be so carefree.

“Ayame, look at that! They’re selling roast bird over there. Huh? Ayame?”

“Oh, ah, yeah, they are. Smells good! Now I’m getting hungry.”

“Me too. Isn’t it time we had lunch?”

“You’re right. Let’s look for somewhere to eat while we’re walking around.”

“All right! Jamama, let us know if you smell something good!”

“Grrah!”

I shook my head. Iris would worry about me if she knew what I was thinking. I decided to focus on the town instead to take my mind off everything else.

As we approached a group of stalls, we heard a number of booming voices.

“Try our famous white apples! They’re bursting with sweetness and flavor!”

“Come take a look! Each of our short staffs is adorned with a first-rate sampo! They’ll make your magic spells even more powerful! The stock’s almost all

gone! Now's the time to buy!"

"Looking for a newspaper?"

"Get your pancakes, made with sweet dough! They're a steal!"

The area was bustling with activity everywhere we looked. Everyone was having a good time and their faces were full of hope.

"Ayame, this is amazing! Look how many stalls there are!"

"Yeah, you're right."

Iris was enjoying the sight of it all. Just seeing her reaction made me enjoy myself too.

A thought came to me. *When was the last time I visited a town just to sightsee like this?*

All that came to mind were ruined cities, screams, and people cursing me after they learned my secret. The scenes in my head were nothing like the town before me.

For some reason the bad memories were making my heart pound so hard it hurt. *I don't know why I feel this way... Actually, yes I do. I'm scared. Scared to be seen. I didn't feel it in the village because there weren't as many people.*

Everyone would look at me differently if they realized who I was. I was terrified by the thought of the same thing happening to me again. I looked down, hoping to hide my face for a little while.

It was then that I heard a rumbling sound from the stomach beside me.

"Ah."

"Ha ha," I laughed. "Sounds like you're hungry. Me too. How about I grab some crepes from that stall over there? You can sit here and wait for me while I buy them. Do you have a favorite type?"

"I'd like one with mandarins! Would you be okay with that too, Jamama?"

"Grrah!"

"He said yes. You don't mind, Ayame?"

“Not at all.”

I walked over to the crepe stall and joined the line. I didn't have to wait long at all until it was my turn to be served.

“Welcome. We've got some delicious treats for you! Our strawberry crepes combine cream with the sweetness of fruit for a taste to die for, all wrapped up in soft dough.”

“Could I get two with mandarins in them?”

“Sure thing. Here's the price.”

“Oh, that's more expensive than I thought.”

“They're chock-full of cream and fresh fruit. You can be sure they'll taste great.”

“I suppose so. Is this enough?”

Flush with the rewards I'd gotten for defeating Onyx the Speed Talon and the mánagarmr, I could easily afford a few treats.

A moment later, the seller handed me the crepes I'd asked for. “Thanks! Here are your crepes.”

That's a lot of cream and fruit packed into the dough. I'd better be careful not to spill it. They really do look good. I'll get these back to Iris quickly.

With these thoughts in my head, I returned to find a crowd of people around Iris and an argument going on.

“Excuse me, please,” I said as I made my way through.

My fears were confirmed when I found a man in fine clothing, accompanied by several guards, talking to Iris.

“But living with me is going to make you very happy. Do you know why?”

“No matter how many times you ask, the answer is no,” Iris replied. “I'm waiting for someone, so could you please leave me alone? All these people are going to get in his way once he gets back.”

“Listen here.”

“Grrr!” Jamama growled threateningly at the man.

“What is this rude beast?!”

When I saw the man’s guards put their hands to their sword hilts, I knew things were close to turning ugly.

I got between Iris and the man. “Pardon me.”

“Who do you think you are? I don’t like the look of that mask.”

I spoke to him politely. “My name is Ayame. It’s clear from your mannerisms that you’re someone of considerable importance, but I’m afraid I haven’t learned your name as a result of my poor upbringing. I would be honored if you’d grace me with an introduction.”

When I was the hero, I’d met with royalty and nobles multiple times and learned how to deal with them. Anyone who worked as a butler or a maid would easily outdo me, but my manners were passable at least.

The man was annoyed that I’d butted in, but I judged from the way he snorted that my attempts to appease him were working. “Hah. You don’t even know my name? I’m Baron Dias Al Dieter. As the head of the esteemed House of Dieter, I own the land that all the commoners around us live on.”

“Then you’re the ruler of this entire region? I’m honored to meet someone of such high esteem. Now may I ask what business you have with the young lady?”

“This girl very rudely turned down my invitation. Even when I offered to see to her every need in life! What greater honor could there be?”

“It didn’t sound nice in the slightest,” Iris said quietly.

It was just as I thought. Iris certainly was beautiful, but a grown man announcing his desire to make a childlike girl his concubine in broad daylight felt very wrong. That said, I’d often had nobles ask me to marry their young daughters at parties in the past. At any rate, I’d have to put him off.

“Your Lordship, I’m sure she must be incredibly honored to hear you’ve fallen for her at first sight. However, I’m afraid you must accept her refusal.”

“What?! You dare turn down an invitation from a baron?!”

"I promised the residents of the elf village that I would protect her until I've escorted her to her destination. I'm sure you wouldn't be so foolish as to lay a hand upon her without considering the repercussions that would follow. I implore you, please make a reasonable decision as befits a man of your great status." I was lying about the elf village, but not about wanting to protect Iris.

"Hah!" Dias was still angry.

"Lord Dias, I'm afraid I must advise you to reconsider," one of his attendants said. "There's little we could do to protect you if you were to anger the elves."

As annoyed as Dias was, he had to agree. "I know that!"

I expected him to quietly back off, but he didn't.

"What you're telling me is that there'll be no problem so long as I'm not forcing her. Let me say it again. Be my concubine." He hadn't given up at all.

If he wants to woo a lady, a little subtlety might work better than a blunt order to be his mistress. Anyway, what now? We have to refuse, but I'm not sure how. I have to tread carefully so I don't anger him further.

"No. Absolutely no."

Iris...you didn't have to say it twice.

As expected, Dias began twitching with rage. "Y-You little—!"

"Lord Dias! A dispute with the elves could end with your house being stripped of all power! Wasn't there another lady you planned to make your own? The graceful course of action would be to give up here."

"Grr... I know that."

With a sense of relief, I bowed my head. "I'm most grateful for the tolerance you've shown us."

"Pah. Wretched commoner." Dias paused to spit on the side of my face not covered by the mask before walking away.

I kept my head down until the carriage he boarded was out of sight.

"Whew. He's finally gone. Are you okay, Iris? You too Jamama?"

"Ayame! Why'd you have to bow to a man like him?! You could've easily

beaten him.”

“Listen, Iris, being strong makes it easy to hurt people, but that’s why I have to show restraint. Uncontrolled power is just senseless violence. I’d be no better than the Demon Lord Army.”

Being strong didn’t mean I could do whatever I wanted. If anything, it meant that I had to act carefully.

“But you shouldn’t let anyone treat you like that.”

“Maybe you’re right that there’s a limit to what I should tolerate, but that doesn’t mean I should solve my problems with violence.”

The world would be a simple place if violence solved everything. It would be like the world of manabeasts.

“There *are* times when violence is the only way to solve a problem. If anyone ever uses force against me, I’ll defend myself to the fullest extent. I can promise you that. But I’d rather show restraint when I can. Will you do the same? For my sake?”

“Ah! Well, if you insist. I’ll find it in my heart to forgive people. But first, please crouch down for a moment. I’ll clean the filth from your face.”

Iris wiped my face with her handkerchief then threw it away as if it was too dirty to keep. Another person’s saliva could be dirty, but it mostly looked like an expression of her hate for Dias.

“Grrah.”

“Thank you to you too for protecting me, Jamama. I’ll pat your head as a reward.”

“Grrah! Grrrooww.”

Jamama happily wagged his tail as Iris petted him.

“She’s right,” I said, “I should praise you too.”

“Grrah!”

Seems like he doesn’t want me to touch him. That’s sad. Oh, I almost forgot...

“Let’s just enjoy our crepes. Looks like the cream melted a little.”

“I’m sure they’re still good. Thank you.”

We moved over to a fountain and sat down, hoping it would improve our mood.

Iris took her crepe and bit into a part with fruit in it. The sunlight reflected off her jade eyes as she ate. “This is really delicious!”



"It sure is. The dough's firm and the cream's smooth. It was worth the thirty copper coins I paid."

"What? Couldn't we have eaten at an actual restaurant for that much? Though it tastes so good, I have to agree."

"Grrah, grrah."

"You want some, Jamama? Here you go." Iris scooped up some cream on her finger and held it out to Jamama.

"Is it safe for wolves to eat sweet things?"

"I'm not going to give him a lot. Besides, he wants to try something nice, don't you, Jamama?"

"Grrah."

"Looks like you're right. Now how about we forget what just happened and take a walk around the town?"

"All right! We haven't found an inn yet."

Sounds like Iris is in a better mood. That's a relief. We can forget all about it and enjoy a walk around the town, I told myself.

But it wasn't long before we came to another problem. Down an alleyway, a townsman was being beaten by several men.

"Hah! You stepped out of line!"

"Ugh!"

I sensed we were in for trouble. It was annoying to have to deal with one incident after another, but if I was a savior, I couldn't just keep walking while a defenseless person got hurt.

"Iris, stay near me."

"All right! I'll be by your side forever!"

"No, just a few minutes will do."

When I left Iris alone a moment ago, a creep had used it as a chance to talk to her. Although I was headed into trouble, I decided she was safer with me. Her

reply had been a little much though.

Iris gave me a dissatisfied “Hmph,” but I had to stay focused on what was in front of me.

“Ganging up on someone like that isn’t very nice.”

“Huh? Who do you think you are?”

“Just a passing savior.”

The men looked at me like I was crazy. I could guess how they felt.

“Why are you being so violent? It doesn’t look like he’s doing anything wrong. If you’re taking your frustration out on innocent people, you should feel ashamed.”

“Beat it, jerk. Can’t you see what I’m holding? Get lost right now. We don’t need kids sticking their noses in here.”

“I know I don’t look it, but I’m twenty years old. Hmm?” *Okay, I see how it’s going to be.*

A brown-haired man was flashing his knife and looking pleased with himself. The other men around him were also sneering at me.

“Let me warn you, threats don’t work on me,” I said. “And if you’re drawing a weapon in a town, you must be ready for someone to respond in kind.”

The men in front of me barely posed a threat compared to a Warlord or a manabeast. I was confident that I’d been through a lot more than they had. Men living in a peaceful town couldn’t compare to someone who’d survived multiple battles.

Still, I only wanted to scare them rather than provoke them and cause even more trouble. As hoped, the men started to look worried.

“D-Damn! I’ll teach you not to be full of yourself!” The brown-haired man lunged at me with the knife.

“Whew.”

“Agh!”

I dodged easily, grabbed his wrist to make him drop his weapon, and then hit

him from below the jaw with the heel of my hand. He landed on his back unconscious.

“Y-You’re kidding me?!” one of the other men said.

“Why not back down?” I suggested, trying to sound as calm as possible. “There’s nothing to gain from fighting.”

The men turned to run. *They’re just going to leave their friend?*

“Not so fast! Take him with you. He’s your friend, right?”

“Ahh! W-We won’t bother you!” The terrified troublemakers grabbed the brown-haired man by his legs and dragged him away.

That’s a little rough. He’ll go bald if they scrape his head across the ground like that.

“How pathetic,” Iris said. “They were all muscle and no courage.”

“No matter how muscular they are, no one wants to die. I can’t blame them for that. It’s a natural instinct of all living things. More importantly, are you okay?” I asked the man on the ground.

“Ugh,” he coughed. “Oh no, the flowers.”

The beaten, bespectacled man got up and, without even looking at me, started picking something up from the ground as I watched him from behind.

Is he gathering petals? I wondered.

“This is terrible. The flowers...” the bespectacled man said as he looked at the flowers trampled by the thugs. Then he suddenly noticed me and looked up. “S-Sorry. I should be thanking you for saving me. I’m Romeo Mongue. Please call me Romeo. I run a flower shop here in the town.”

“I’m Ayame. The elf here is Iris, and this *mánagarmr* is Jamama.”

“Nice to meet you!” Iris said.

“Grrah!” Jamama added.

“What? An elf?! And a w-wolf?!”

Romeo looked completely unremarkable, so I guessed he was an ordinary

commoner. Jamama might have been a pup, but any wolf was still a shocking sight for most people.

“Don’t worry,” Iris said. “Jamama doesn’t bite people for no reason. Except for Ayame maybe.”

“I wish he wouldn’t bite me either,” I said. “Anyway, do your wounds need treating?”

“No, I only took one punch.”

“I think you’ll be all right, but I should apply a gauze or two, just in case,” Iris said. “Now will you tell us why those thugs attacked you, Romeo?”

“I don’t know. They suddenly picked a fight with me while I was walking through town. I didn’t so much as bump into them, but they grabbed my shoulders, dragged me into this alley, and then started beating me. I was all right once Ayame showed up, but I don’t know what would’ve happened without him.”

So, they’d started the fight and gotten violent for no reason. It didn’t seem like they were mugging him or extorting him for money. It really did look like an act of senseless violence.

This place might not be as safe as I thought. After talking to those soldiers, I thought it was going to be a friendly town.

“I’d like to thank you somehow. Would you accompany me to my home?” Romeo asked.



Romeo’s house was on the outskirts of town. His flower store was nearer the center, but the flowers he sold were all grown here.

“This is my home. It’s a little old, but it’s cozy.”

It was an ordinary two story building. The only thing of note was the impressive collection of flowers growing around it, in various colors and sizes, creating a beautiful display in his garden.

“Are these the flowers you sell in your store?” I asked.

“That’s right. I’m carrying on a tradition my grandmother started.”

“That’s wonderful,” Iris said, taking great interest in the garden. “They’re all so healthy. It’s rare to see flowers with so much life force in a town rather than a forest.”

“Do you know a lot about flowers, Iris?” Romeo asked.

“Well, I am an elf. I can tell just by looking that you’ve given them a lot of care.” Iris looked at them with caring eyes, then gently touched one before greeting it. “Hello there. Yes, the weather’s nice today.”

“Grrah.” Jamama sniffed at them, then happily wagged his tail.

This all looked like a scene from out of a painting to me.

“Do you mean it?” Romeo replied. “That means a lot, coming from an elf. You are nature’s arbitrators after all.”

“Yes, and you should be proud. But why are there so many begonias? Do you just like them?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.”

“Sounds like there’s a reason.” I laughed and gently prodded him. “Why don’t you tell us?”

Romeo looked bashful as he explained. “Well, you see, there’s a woman named Julie who lives in this town. And, well, she’s a noble and very graceful, and also beautiful and kind. I had a chance to talk to her while delivering flowers, and she was just like I’d imagined. And, well, she told me that she likes begonias.”

“Oh, so now you’re growing some begonias to give to her?” Iris asked. “How thoughtful of you. And considering what begonias symbolize, it’s a wonderful choice.”

“Ahhh, y-you’re embarrassing me!” Romeo crouched down and covered his face.

Iris probably meant that a begonia could symbolize Romeo’s unrequited love for Julie.

I know it was me who asked, but no one had forced him to share all the details, I thought. Iris must have been thinking the same. We both laughed when we made eye contact.

“You should be fine now,” Iris said.

“Oh, thanks.”

Iris had put some ointment on Romeo where he’d been hit, and then put gauze over the area. Even without using the saint’s power, her healing was first rate. She made her own medicines, and they seemed even more effective than those I’d seen in stores.

“I expect the swelling will go down by tomorrow without leaving any marks.”

“Oh, thanks a lot. I appreciate it.”

“It’s a good thing those thugs didn’t use any abilities, or you’d have been in a much worse state.”

“There’s a good reason for that, Iris,” I told her. “Anyone who uses combat abilities within the town can face harsh punishments unless they’re a soldier or a knight maintaining public order. Assuming they’re not fending off manabeasts or monsters that is.”

Of course, there were some nonfatal abilities, but others, such as the fire magic used by mages, were deadly. If a fight broke out in town and two people started using dangerous abilities against each other, it might harm not just the fighters, but everyone around them. For that reason, using combat abilities in a town was considered a serious crime.

“That makes sense, but I’ll bet some of those good-for-nothings ignore the rules and use them anyway.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Not everyone in this world is nice. I know it as well as anyone. You’d better not go wandering off while we’re here.”

“I’ll be all right! I have you to protect me!”

“I’m happy to hear you trust me, but promise me you won’t go running into danger or starting unnecessary fights.”

“Awww.” Iris didn’t sound very happy.

When I pressed her again, she gave me an unhappy “all right” and nodded her head.

“You two get along well,” Romeo said.

“Yes, we do! Ayame and I have a very special relationship! You could say that the bonds of fate make us completely inseparable! We—”

“I agree with the bit about our relationship being special, but would you calm down? You’ll give people the wrong idea about us.”

“Ah ha ha. You two really do get along well. Oh, that’s right, I need to show my appreciation for treating my injury.” Romeo stood up and left, then came back carrying several flowers.

He sat at a workbench where he cut thorns from the flowers and arranged them neatly. His movements were so precise that I was impressed.

“I use the abilities Generation and Fixation to make sure they keep their shape,” he explained.

“Wow,” Iris exclaimed as she watched him closely.

Finally, Romeo wrapped the flowers up in a bouquet and held it together with tape. “Okay. This looks good. Here you go. This is to show my appreciation,” he said while handing it to Iris.

“Wow! Thanks!”

Seeing Iris smile and hold the bouquet tight made me happy too.

I tried thanking Romeo as well but he said, “You needn’t mention it,” and bashfully waved his hand.

“It’s amazing how you put a beautiful bouquet together so quickly,” I said.

“Well, it is my job. It’s certainly rewarding to assemble them and see my customers happy.” Romeo was clearly proud of the work he did.

“That’s amazing, Romeo. A tree spirit is telling me that you raise your flowers with such love that your garden makes a comfortable home.”

“Ah ha ha. I’m happy to hear it. Wait...there’s a tree spirit with us?”

“Yes! There’s one right in here, though it’s still too small for anyone to see.

Hello. Do you like these flowers too?” Iris was talking to someone or something as she affectionately petted the flowers.

Tree spirits apparently lived in trees and other forms of plant life. I’d seen their fearsome power firsthand while fighting Onyx the Speed Talon. According to Iris, one was sitting in Romeo’s bouquet.

I couldn’t see tree spirits, but Iris, being an elf, could. Jamama seemed to sense it too as he sniffed at the flowers.

Romeo glanced at the clock and jumped up in surprise. “Oh dear! It’s almost time to deliver flowers to Lady Julie! I have to get her order to her right away. Oh, but the ones that got trampled were the best I had.” Romeo’s head dropped in disappointment. In his hand he held the remains of the bouquet that the thugs had ruined.

I looked at him and then exchanged glances with Iris. I knew we had the same thought.

“We’d better go with you,” I said. “You might run into trouble again.”

“Huh? I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Consider it our thanks for showing us how you make bouquets. Besides, you’ve piqued my interest in this woman you’ve fallen for.”

This was just an excuse of course. Our real intention was to stay by his side in case he ran into more trouble. Hopefully, the thugs had just wanted someone to fight, but if there was more to it, we might have to protect Romeo from their next attack.

He seemed to sense our concern and lowered his head. “All right. Thanks a lot. Could you wait while I quickly make a new bouquet?”

“Sure thing... Hm?” I shivered as I felt the air turn cold behind me.

Fearing the worst, and with cold sweat running down my back, I turned to look at Iris. The look on her face couldn’t have been more different from a moment ago.

“Ayame? Did you just say you’re interested in this woman you’ve never even met?”

“Ah! Hold up, Iris. By interested, I just mean I’m curious! I definitely didn’t mean romantic interest!”

“Wah! I care for you more than she does! I can’t believe you’re cheating!”

Iris’s headbutt hit me right in my solar plexus.

“Ugh!”

Iris wasn’t big enough to smack me as hard as Mei could, but this certainly hurt. I fell to one knee as I desperately tried to clear up the misunderstanding.



Julie’s house was on the outskirts of town too, but on the opposite side. It was a manor with not many other buildings around it, though it was perhaps better described as a villa given its small scale.

“Lady Julie! It’s Romeo, the florist! I’m here to deliver the flowers you ordered!”

“You’re just calling out to her?” I asked.

“Yes. She doesn’t have a gatekeeper, but that doesn’t mean I can just walk in uninvited. I have to call out to her directly.”

“Oh, okay.”

As we were talking, a woman appeared, though rather than coming out of a door, she came from a corner of the garden. “Oh, it’s you, Romeo. You’re a little late today.”

“Lady Julie! I’m s-sorry. I had some trouble on the way.”

“I keep telling you, just call me Julie.”

“N-N-No, I couldn’t! A noble like yourself deserves more respect than I’m showing even now! I couldn’t be even less polite!”

Julie put her hand to her mouth and chuckled. Her complexion was fair and her hair white. There was something ethereal about her.

“She may be beautiful, but she’s a little lacking in vitality. She reminds me of the elderly elves in my village.”

“Cut it out, Iris, you’re being rude.”

There certainly was something about her that made her look delicate, but Iris had used a poor choice of words.

Fortunately, Julie didn’t look at all offended. In fact, she was laughing.

“Oh my, what a cute girl. Nice to meet you. My name is Julie. Judging by your ears, you must be an elf.”

“That’s right! This is Jamama, and this good-looking guy is Ayame!”

“Grrah!”

“I see. What a wonderful friend you have!”

“I’m n-not giving Ayame to you!”

“Giving me? Am I an object now?” I said.

Julie seemed like a nice person. She’d greeted me with a smile despite the mask I wore.

“Your dog’s rather cute. May I pet you?” she asked Jamama.

“Grrah!”

“Thank you. Tee hee. You’re not just cute, but smart too.”

Julie petted Jamama without any fear. She might have called him a dog, but he was closer to a wolf. She had nerves of steel.

I was a little taken aback when Jamama was comfortable with Julie petting him, despite never letting me touch him.

“Um, Lady Julie, the flowers...”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Romeo. Please, show me what you’ve brought. I’ve been looking forward to seeing them.”

“Of c-course! Here they are.”

“Thank you. Oh, is this flower...?”

“Y-Yes! I listened to what you told me, then got hold of begonias. They’ve grown so nicely that I thought you might like them. I hope I’m not being a nuisance.”

“Not at all,” Julie said with a warm smile. “Thanks. It’s a favorite flower of mine. I’m so pleased.”

Romeo looked back at her with his face turning red.

“Young love,” I said.

“It’s bittersweet,” Iris agreed. “I know the feeling well.”

We both smiled as we watched them.

The mood suddenly changed when Julie noticed the gauze. “Oh, Romeo, what happened to your face?”

“Ah... I was attacked a short while ago.”

“What?! Are you all right?”

“Yes. Ayame and Iris here saved me.”

“That’s a relief. Thank you for saving Romeo, Ayame; he’s an important friend of mine.”

“A f-friend? A friend... Okay.”

Romeo looked a little disappointed by the word “friend,” and Julie seemed to find his reaction amusing. I sensed strong affection in the way she looked at him.

Romeo might have a chance here.

“Would you join me for some tea, Romeo? I’d like to thank you for bringing the flowers. And I’d love for you two to join us as well, so I can thank you for saving him.”

“Uh?! I’m not worthy. I don’t know what to say,” Romeo replied.

“Don’t be so awkward,” Iris told him. “When a woman asks to show her appreciation, you should accept gracefully.”

“She’s right,” I agreed. “You can’t turn her down now.”

“Oh... I see. If my bad manners won’t offend you, then I’d love to join you for tea.”

“Tee hee hee. You sound so formal. You really are funny sometimes, Romeo.”

Julie smiled like she was enjoying herself and told us, “Please make yourselves at home,” as she guided us into the garden.

I didn’t know much about gardens, but I was impressed by this one.

We were taken to a round table where we sat down. On the table was a vase filled with gaudy red roses that somehow didn’t fit with the rest of the garden. I guessed they were just another type of flower that Julie liked, but Romeo knew better.

“These flowers...” he said.

“Yes, his lordship had another messenger bring them to me. It’s the third time this month.”

“You mean the baron?” Iris asked. “That loathsome man who clearly thinks he’s far better than everyone else?”

“Oh, you’ve already met him?”

“He ordered me to be his concubine.”

“Were you all right?”

“Yes! Ayame and Jamama were there to protect me!”

Julie gave a deep sigh of relief. “Oh, that’s good. He can be troublesome. He pressured me to marry him when he delivered these flowers.”

“Huh?! D-Did you accept his proposal?!” Romeo began to panic. Given his infatuation with Julie, the news was no doubt alarming to him.

“What’s got you so flustered, Romeo? Don’t worry. I don’t intend to marry him anytime soon.”

“Oh. Well, that’s a relief. But then why keep the flowers?”

“As much as I dislike him, sending gifts isn’t a crime. I’d have to be as awful as he is to throw the flowers away. They did nothing wrong. Besides, it’s not me that he’s after.”

“Not you? What do you mean?” Iris looked confused. My expression was probably the same as hers.

“Here’s what he said when he asked to marry me: ‘Grant me your job and

your knowledge, and I can restore your House of Pulet to greatness.’”

“Do you mind if I ask what your job is?” I said.

“It’s nothing particularly special. I’m a pharmacist. Over the course of several generations, the House of Pulet has produced many pharmacists who were somewhat accomplished at making plant-based remedies. Anyway, I’m not interested in restoring my house to greatness. I’d like to continue the carefree life that I’m living. Though he probably thinks my lifestyle isn’t fit for a noble.”

I could imagine how an outsider might see her as a noble girl down on her luck and then want to save her like something out of a minstrel’s song. But the sort of man who’d try to make Iris his concubine was unlikely to have good intentions. Maybe it was cynical of me, but I couldn’t help but suspect that he had an ulterior motive. My suspicion wasn’t totally baseless either. Dias’s statement about wanting Julie’s job and the House of Pulet’s knowledge was definitely odd.

The same sense of distrust was shared between us.

“I think I know why he wants me. He hopes to learn more about a secret remedy passed down within my family.”

“A secret remedy?”

Julie nodded. “I don’t know how the remedy is made, and I’ve told him so, but he doesn’t believe me. What I do know are its supposed effects. It’s a remedy to cure diseases of every kind.”

“Diseases of every kind?!” I couldn’t help but be shocked. Such a remedy would be as powerful as the saint.

“Yes, but I don’t think it works.”

“Uh, what?”

“I don’t know exactly what happened, but the remedy caused an incident in the past. My family was all arrested by the government. My grandfather was sentenced to death while my mother and father were stripped of their titles and exiled from the nation. I wasn’t punished because I was still young when it happened, but it was the downfall of the House of Pulet all the same. The Pulet

name lives on, but there's no prestige behind it now. Even this house, though I call it a manor, was originally a secondary residence, and it's all my family left to me."

What she was saying made sense. Although it was a big house, it was rather small for a noble's home, and now I knew why.

"I've stopped caring about the House of Pulet's prestige. I've no interest in the remedy either, since it's what ruined my family. I just want to continue living peacefully. A noble lifestyle is too restrictive for my tastes."

Julie looked at the flowers Romeo had given her, with eyes full of appreciation and affection.

Restrictive? I'd talked with nobles and attended parties with them many times, so I could emphasize with her a little.

"I shouldn't complain so much," Julie said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Romeo replied. "I don't mind at all. In fact, I was just thinking that I'd like to know more about you."

"Really? Oh I'm glad."

The conversation continued between Romeo and Julie.

I realized that Iris had been quiet for a while. I looked at her and it seemed she was deep in thought.

"Iris?"

"A-Ayame! What is it?"

"Is something wrong? You're quiet."

"It's nothing."

It was rare for Iris to struggle with her words. I studied her face, knowing that there had to be something on her mind.

Iris glanced at the pair talking, then beckoned for me to move closer to her.

"Something about Julie's story caught my attention," she whispered. "There was that awful baron, then those plants that Cramer the merchant was delivering, and now talk of a remedy that cures diseases."

“You think they’re connected?”

“Yes. I know of a remedy for all diseases that’s effective for a short while, but rather than actually curing—”

“What are you two talking about?” Julie asked us. “Your faces are so close together.”

Iris turned red and moved her face away from me. “It’s n-nothing!”

“Oh? I wanted to ask something. Iris, what were your thoughts on Romeo’s work?”

“He’s meticulous. The flowers he grows are all beautiful. I’ve honestly never seen anyone outside of my village who raises flowers with so much love, or who’s so devoted to what they do.”

“Exactly! I thought so too! Oh, Romeo, I was thinking about planting the new flowers I just received in the garden. Perhaps you could give me some advice.”

“Uh, ah. I’ll d-d-d-do my best!”

“Tee hee. Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

Romeo nodded as his face turned red. It must’ve been exactly what he hoped to hear.

“Ayame, I hope we can meet again some time.”

“I hope so too.”

I’d really enjoyed drinking tea with them. The time had flown by and it was already evening. I decided it was time we left.

“Well, we’ll be off now,” I said.

“All right. Thank you both. I really enjoyed today. Let me know before you leave town.”

“We will,” I replied. “Thanks for the tea.”

“I had fun too,” Iris added. “I hope we’ll get another chance to talk.”

“Yes, indeed. Same goes for you too,” she said to Jamama. “See you.”

“Grrah!”

By this time, Julie and Iris were getting on great with each other.

It'd be some time before we left town, so we'd likely get another chance to visit. *Maybe we'll come here with Romeo again*, I thought.



A man in finely tailored clothes had been secretly watching.

"I'll have to report this to Lord Dias," he whispered to himself before leaving.

Jamama's ears pricked up. "Grrah?"

"What's wrong, Jamama?" Iris asked.

No one except Jamama noticed anything amiss.



The next day, Romeo was pacing back and forth restlessly outside his house on the outskirts of town.

"Ah, what to do, what to do. I never imagined it would be like this."

He'd asked himself the same question countless times, but remained at a complete loss. The cause of his distress was a client he'd accepted recently.

"I never thought his lordship would be one of my customers. I wish I could refuse, but who knows how he'd react to being rejected by someone of my low status. I hate this. I hope nothing bad happens."

Romeo had been asked to put together a bouquet for the lord of the region, Dias Al Dieter, and he had to prepare it fast.

The timid Romeo didn't like dealing with nobles. Julie was an exception, but most were just arrogant, and if a noble disliked the flowers he gave them, it could spell the end of his business.

Dias was a problem in particular because he wanted to make Julie his own, but Romeo had feelings for her himself. As a rival in love, he really wished he could refuse.

But business was business. Romeo's only option was to deliver something that would leave no room for complaint. He paced back and forth as he came up with some ideas, then he sprung into action.

“His lordship’s family has a one hundred year history and many of his ancestors were great warriors. A bouquet with flowers that symbolize prosperity in the center and red flowers around the outside should be fitting.”

All other thoughts vanished once he grew focused on the task, and he carried out the work with his usual serious expression. A short while later, he’d made a bouquet he was pleased with.

“It’s finished! I’ll take this to him right away!”

Romeo’s passion for his job was soon chilled when he arrived at the baron’s home. It was larger and far more imposing than Julie’s manor, and Romeo’s nerves made him clutch his stomach as he stood before it.

Romeo sighed. “I really hate this. It’s giving me a stomachache.”

He tried to ignore the sharp pain as he told the gatekeeper that he had an item to deliver. For some reason the gatekeeper paused to give him a pitying look before letting him through.

When a servant opened the door to the residence, Romeo was surprised to find himself confronted by Dias directly.

“Pah. You took too long. How dare a commoner keep someone of my noble status waiting?”

Romeo hastily straightened his back. “I’m t-terribly sorry, my lord! I, um, I have the item you requested.”

“Yes, I can see that for myself. Take it,” he said to a servant.

“Yes, my lord.” The servant by Dias’s side took the bouquet and then passed it to Dias.

Romeo breathed a sigh of relief at knowing the order was now fulfilled.

“Here’s the fee that was agreed,” the aged servant told Romeo.

“Oh, thank you for your patronage,” Romeo said as he accepted the money.

“What’s this flower doing in here?!” Dias suddenly demanded while thrusting the bouquet in Romeo’s direction. “What’s the meaning of this?!”

Something wasn’t right. In the center of the bouquet was a purple rose that

Romeo was sure he hadn't put there.

"A purple thorn rose!" Dias cried. "These carry deadly poison! Did you intend to kill me—Baron Dias—the patriarch of a prestigious house?!"

"Th-That's not... I didn't put that flower in there!"

"Excuses won't save you! Throw this criminal in a cell!"

"Ahhh!"

Romeo barely had a chance to speak before armed soldiers seized him. He looked at the servants around him and found none were trying to defend him. Romeo's face twisted in despair.

Dias saw Romeo's reaction and sneered. "Oh, I know you. You're the one in love with the lady from the House of Pulet."

"H-How did you..."

"I learn such things quite easily through my servants. I hear you visited her manor yesterday. You've forgotten your place, commoner. How dare a low-born wretch like you fall for a noble?"

Now Romeo realized that it had all been a trap, but it was already too late. There was no one to help him here. A gag was forced in his mouth and his arms bound.

"What's all this commotion?!" A shocked voice filled the room. For some reason, Julie was there.

Lady Julie!

"Oh, Lady Julie. I knew you would come," Dias said.

"I had no choice after reading the veiled threats in your letter. But tell me what's going on here!"

"What? I'm merely apprehending a thug who made an attempt on my life."

"No. He'd never do such a thing!"

"Oh, but I have the proof of it right here. Now take him away."

"Yes, my lord."

“Mmgh! Mmgh!”

Romeo disappeared from Julie’s view as he was dragged through a doorway.

“Stop! Release him!”

“I cannot do that. He’s guilty of an attempt on my life. Though I see you feel some pity for him. Then perhaps... Yes, I think I could show him mercy if you agree to my request.”

“Your...request?”

“Well.” Dias placed his hand on Julie’s shoulder and whispered in her ear.

Julie’s eyes went wide with surprise as he spoke.

“You will accept, won’t you?” Dias said.

Julie had no other option.



The next day, there was a commotion among the townspeople as they shared their feelings about an announcement posted on a large notice board in the center of town.

“Did you hear? The Mongues’ son was arrested! They say he tried to assassinate His Lordship with a poisonous flower! A purple thorn rose!”

“What? The son of that florist family wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

“It’s true! It was written on the notice board. And you know about the lady from the House of Pulet, don’t you? Her marriage was announced too. The ceremony is happening today.”

“Wasn’t the House of Pulet ruined? I heard a lone girl is the only remaining member of the family.”

“Someone must want the Mongue boy out of the way. If I remember correctly, he was in love with the Pulet girl.”

“Well, there’s no saving him now. It’s a shame since his bouquets always made my wife and daughter smile.”

People were sympathetic toward the young man who’d been ruined, but they

accepted the news.

All this talk in the town reached our ears as we were eating breakfast.

“What do you think, Iris?”

“I’m sure it’s all part of that good-for-nothing’s plot. There wasn’t a single poisonous flower in that florist’s garden.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

Though I hadn’t thought Dias would do anything so drastic, he had to be behind it all. Now I had to wonder whether the thugs who’d beaten up Romeo were also working for Dias.

“It’s either jealousy or a personal grudge. In any case, we can’t sit back and let it happen.”

“What can we do, Ayame? If it’s all true, then he’ll want to silence Romeo quickly.”

“Of course he will. Let’s go. There’s no way I can watch an innocent person have their life ruined. And if Dias is using force, it means I can do the same.”

I wasn’t going to let it happen. If Dias thought he could gain the upper hand through the use of force, I had other ideas.

There was a hint of wickedness in my smile as I added sugar to my coffee and drank it quickly.



Romeo had lost count of how many times he’d been hit in the stomach. He let out a faint cry of anguish as another blow landed. His mouth was already so full of blood and saliva that he could taste only iron.

“It’s time you started talking. You plotted to assassinate His Lordship, didn’t you?”

A male warrior grabbed Romeo by the hair and forcefully lifted his head up.

No matter how many times he asked, Romeo always had the same answer.

“I...didn’t put...the purple thorn rose...in there.”

“Hah. **Hit.**”

He punched Romeo in the cheek causing a broken tooth to fly out of his mouth. Hit was an ability that caused increased pain. As someone without a combat job, Romeo felt the pain all the more.

“If people start saying we got the wrong man, it’ll come back to haunt us later. We really wanted to get a confession first, but it’s no use, is it? You’re more stubborn than you look. Since we’re getting nowhere, I might as well put you out of your misery.”

“You’re going to kill me?”

“That’s right. His Lordship wants you out of the way. Too bad for you that you made our brainless ruler jealous. Don’t hold it against me. I’m just doing my job.”

As the man picked up a syringe, Romeo stared at it vacantly. Then, despite his blurred vision, he realized that there was someone else standing behind the man.

An instant later, the new mysterious figure took the torturer by the neck and put him in a sleeper hold.

“Ngh?! Ugh gh gh!”

The torturer struggled but couldn’t free himself. Finally he passed out from lack of oxygen. As he fell to the floor, the masked figure standing behind him came into view. Romeo recognized him.

“Ayame? What are you doing here?”

“I had Jamama follow your scent. And I’m glad I did. Looks like you’ve been having a bad time.”

“My whole body hurts real bad.”

“If you’re well enough to speak, you should be okay. You’re lucky they didn’t break you to the point where you couldn’t talk anymore.”

“Lucky...?” Romeo replied with a dry laugh. “Ha ha ha. I can’t believe it. I took over the flower business from my mom. I worked hard. I was tireless. And look how easily my life was ruined. I never should have developed feelings for Lady

Julie. The baron said it too. How dare you fall in love with a noble, he said. Ha ha ha ha."

Romeo sounded bitter and pitiful, and tears were flowing as he spoke.

Ayame quietly listened at first, then told Romeo, "They say Julie's going to marry Dias."

"Huh?!"

"The ceremony's happening today, and Dias is claiming that it was arranged a long time ago. The timing looks suspicious to me. And from what she said yesterday, Julie doesn't really want to marry Dias. She must've been threatened. And that threat must relate to you."

"Me?"

"Yes. I'll get to the point. I'm here to save you. I can help you get out of town before Dias realizes you're gone. But is that what you want?"

A scene began to unfold in Romeo's mind of Julie happily accepting and treasuring one of his bouquets. *"Thanks. It's a favorite flower of mine."* He saw her faint, fleeting smile. Romeo was drawn to her smile the moment he saw it.

"No! I love her! I'm ready to risk everything for her! I... I want to save her!"

"That's what I wanted to hear."

With a swing of Ayame's sword, the chain binding Romeo's hands broke apart. Romeo's eyes widened. He couldn't believe Ayame had cut through it so easily.

Ayame took the key to Romeo's shackles from the unconscious man and handed it to Romeo.

"The ceremony hasn't started yet. You can still make it. I'll be there to clear a path. Your job is to whisk away the bride."

"M-Me?"

"It's you she's waiting for. It wouldn't make sense for me to do it."

"Oh, right. When..." Romeo tried to stand up, but after so long spent in restraints, he was too unsteady to stand without Ayame's support.

“This is gonna be difficult,” Ayame said.

Fortunately, Iris returned to Ayame’s side right at that moment, having finished taking care of other business.

“I’m back, Ayame. Everyone must be at the ceremony because that was a breeze. There weren’t even any lookouts. I found it, just like we expected.”

“Grrah!”

“Good. Romeo’s in worse shape than I expected. Do you think you could help him, Iris?”

“Well, if you don’t mind patting my head and combing my hair, then sure.”

“All right. Heal him up and you’ve got a deal.”

“Yay.”

Iris’s outstretched hands began to glow with faint light, and in no time at all, Romeo’s wounds faded.

“Wow, my wounds are healed. They’re gone completely this time. But how?” Romeo, now fully recovered, couldn’t believe it.

“It’s a secret elf trick.”

She’s still calling it that? Ayame thought.

“Why are you doing all this for me? You don’t owe me anything.”

“First, there’s the bouquet you gave to Iris, then there’s some foul behavior going on that I can’t ignore. But above all, it’s because I’m a savior.”

“Savior...? Well, you do fit the description.”

Ayame had declared the same thing back when he saved Romeo for the first time.

Romeo smiled softly then looked Ayame right in the eye. “Let’s go. I’m going to save Lady Julie.”

“All right. We’d better hurry. The ceremony hasn’t started, but we can’t have long.”



In a church on the edge of town, Julie knew she had no chance of escape from the walls that surrounded her. She felt like a bird trapped in a cage.

The wedding was a solemn affair. The priest was nearing the point where he would step forward to ask Julie to say her final vows before Goddess Olympia, the protector of the people.

Julie couldn't resist asking, "Do you promise he'll be all right?"

"Worry not," Dias said with an arrogant smile. "I'll release him as soon as the ceremony concludes."

Although Julie didn't trust him, she had no choice but to take him at his word.

"Finally! The House of Pulet's secret remedy will be mine. With this, the House of Dieter will reach new heights."

While Julie was somber with her head hung low, Dias was elated by his thoughts of the future.

The priest finally stepped forward. "Bridegroom, Dias Al Dieter, do you vow before the goddess to love Julie Pulet as your wife?"

"I do."

"Bride, Julie Pulet, do you vow before the goddess to love Dias Al Dieter as your husband?"

"I..."

Words failed Julie as she tried to answer the priest. Images of peaceful days spent in her residence came to her mind. Then memories of Romeo: "*They've grown so nicely that I thought you might like them. I hope I'm not being a nuisance.*" He was serious about everything and a little clumsy at times, but he was incredibly kind.

Now I'm sure. I'm in love with him.

"I..."

Tears had collected in the corners of her eyes. *I hate this so much, but I have to say my vows or else Romeo will lose his life.*

Just as Julie was about to finish her sentence, a man barged into the church.

“Stop the ceremony!”



“Haah haah! I made it! Lady Julie!”

“Romeo?!”

“What?! Preposterous! What are the staff in the manor doing? Well, no matter, arrest him! He’s guilty of trespassing on a sacred wedding ceremony!”

At Dias’s orders, his soldiers all rushed forward with their spears at the ready.

“Sorry, but it’s me you’ll have to deal with.” I moved swiftly, leaping in front of the soldiers and knocking them down as they tried to block the way forward.

“Ugh?!”

“Go!” I cried.

“All right!”

“Wait,” Dias yelled. “Hold him back. Ugh?!”

As Romeo rushed ahead, I fought off the soldiers that tried to stop him, clearing the way to Dias and Julie.

“Lady Julie!”

“Romeo!”

“You’d better stand down. I don’t know how you made it this far, but you’re not getting away with interrupting a noble’s wedding ceremony. Hand me my sword.”

“Sir.” A soldier passed a blade to Dias.

“Ha. How can a mere florist stand against a noble such as I whose assigned job is swordsman? But very well, I accept your challenge... Or more to the point, I’ll gladly cut you down myself.”

“Ngh! Give back Lady Julie!” Rather than slowing down, Romeo ran even faster and unleashed a battle cry. “Uhoooh!”

“Hah! You’re an idiot for rushing forward!”

Dias remained perfectly composed as he readied his sword. In ordinary

circumstances, Romeo would have no chance against Dias. But these weren't ordinary circumstances.

Having already made short work of the soldiers, I sliced a button from one of their uniforms and, with a flick, I sent it flying into Dias's eye.

"Ghhaahh?!"

"Uhoooh!"

As Dias was wincing in pain, Romeo hit him in the side of the face with a well-aimed punch, knocking him to the ground.

"Huh? I actually hit him?" Romeo's mouth hung open in surprise.

"Romeo!"

"Lady Julie!"

Romeo took Julie's hand in his when she rushed to him. Then, after mustering up some courage, he decided to put his feelings into words.

"I'm finally going to say it! I'm in love with you!"

"Oh! And I'm in love with you!"

The bewildered priest was looking back and forth between the couple and Dias where he lay on the ground. "Um, I'm happy for you both...?" were the only words he could find.

This touching moment is nice and all, but we're still in the middle of enemy territory here.

Dias climbed to his feet with blood dripping from his mouth. "You rat! You're not getting away with this! Soldiers, kill him!"

The shocked priest made an attempt to calm the situation. "What?! W-Wait! You can arrest him, but you mustn't spill blood in the middle of a sacred ceremony of vows before the goddess."

Enraged, Dias yelled, "You be quiet! You expect me to endure this?! You'd have me humiliated further?!" Dias put his hand to his cheek and called to the soldiers, "Do it now!"

More soldiers appeared and ran toward the couple.

“I don’t think so!” I kicked a nearby table, sending it flying into the soldiers.

“Arragh!”

I used the opportunity to call out to them. “Both of you! This way!”

Romeo and Julie hurried toward me. Once they were safely behind me, I pretended that we were trapped with our backs to the wall. I could’ve defeated the rest of the soldiers, but I had something else in mind.

It hasn’t happened yet? What’s taking so long?

Dias looked at me triumphantly. “Hah. You’ve got spirit, but you’re hopelessly outnumbered. You’re all finished. Any last words?”

“What makes you think you’ve won?” I asked.

“Don’t you understand your situation? Soldiers, I don’t care whether you injure my wife! Just stop them!”

“Sir! **Thrust.**” One of the soldiers thrust his spear forward.

Thrust was an ability that drove a spear out at high speed and with enough force to pierce a thin metal plate. Anyone suffering a direct hit would be left with serious injuries.

“It doesn’t matter what attacks you use as long as I don’t get hit!”

“What?! Ugh!”

I dodged the spear and then cut it in two. Finally, I kicked the stunned soldier, sending him flying backward.

“Don’t flinch! Surround him and take him down!” Dias yelled.

“Bad idea!”

Multiple soldiers thrust their spears at the same time. As I jumped to avoid them, I snatched up the shaft of the spear I’d cut and slammed it into a soldier’s forehead. Then I continued the motion, sweeping it sideways and knocking down the other soldiers.

“Gah! Hey!” Dias cried. “What’re you doing?! He’s just one man and he’s not even using any abilities! He can’t be that much trouble!”

“Lord Dias! There’s something you must hear!” An elderly servant had appeared with an anxious look on his face.

“Go away! I don’t have time for you! They need to be eliminated!”

“The p-people have learned your true reason for wanting those plants, and now worshippers of the goddess have shown up at the manor! They’ve brought plants and documents as proof, so there’s no way to appease them!”

“Wh-What?!” Dias was shaken to the core by his servant’s announcement.

The priest who’d been presiding over the wedding now glared at Dias with a look of distrust. “What plant? The church is taking action? Lord Dias, you must explain this to me.”

All the while I was chuckling to myself. *Nice work, Iris.*

Iris had told me that the plant that Cramer—the merchant we’d met while traveling—had been transporting was usually harmless, but that it could be dried and prepared in a particular way to create a banned drug.

Some called it a soothing medicine, but in reality, it was an addictive drug that temporarily increased the user’s life force by stimulating the heart. What’s more, it had powerful side effects. Anyone who used it would gradually destroy their health.

Patients would use it once and think their ailments were all cured, only to crave more later. The more they used it, the closer they got to death.

Since the merchant claimed Dias periodically requested the same order from him, Dias must have known the plant’s significance. I’d asked Iris to slip into his manor to look for the substance or some evidence we could use. As expected, Dias had a stash of the plant and was cultivating it in large amounts. Iris also found documents showing that he planned to sell it to other nobles as a healing remedy.

Dias had probably targeted Julie because he wanted the secret behind her family’s remedy. A monopoly on it would have made him even richer.

Whatever the specifics were, the plot was incredibly reckless. He’d have been sentenced to death if the nobles buying his product discovered its true nature,

and he'd been trying to grow the plant himself after having it delivered to him by Cramer, so evidence of his crime was easy to find.

"Oh dear," I said. "Were you doing something better kept secret? You know you really shouldn't hide things like that."

"This is your doing?!"

"Now that my work here is done, I'll be on my way."

"You're going nowhere! Soldiers, seize—?!"

I took out a smoke bomb that Iris had made and threw it toward Dias. At first no one reacted to it, but then it started to take effect.

"Ugraaah!"

"Ow ow ow ow ow!"

The soldiers began to cry out and writhe on the floor.

The sight stunned Romeo, but it was I who was the most shocked.

"Wh-What have you done?" Romeo asked.

"Iris told me she's good at making smoke bombs, but this is a little much."

It was really awful. Dias and the soldiers were writhing on the floor, tears and mucus flowing as they struggled to breathe. Iris had told me that she'd mixed various dried plants to create it, but she'd gone too far. Even from some distance away, I could feel a stinging sensation. I knew that those in the center of the smoke cloud had to be experiencing a living hell.

I took a moment to promise myself that I'd never set off one of these things by accident.

"Now's our chance. I'll lead us out."

"But the way's blocked by smoke and soldiers. How can we get through?"

"Easy. Like this."

I swung my sword at the wall behind us. The stones broke apart and crumbled like they were nothing.



“Didn’t I say? I’m going to clear a path.”

“Ah. Ha ha... I didn’t think you meant it literally.”

“Romeo,” Julie said.

“Oh, that’s right. This way. Let’s run!”

Romeo took Julie’s hand and ran toward the forest that had come into view. Naturally, I ran too.

“S-Stop,” Dias called after us.

“Not happening!”

On the way out, I cut down a tree to create an obstacle behind us.

The bride had been whisked away by an intruder, leaving the groom alone at the altar.

With the chaotic ceremony over, priests serving the goddess soon flooded into the ceremony hall to arrest Dias for smuggling and cultivating forbidden drugs.



After making our escape, we headed for a spot under a large tree where I’d arranged to meet up with Iris. We found her and Jamama already there waiting for us.

“Good work, Ayame.”

“You too, Iris. How’d it go?”

“I showed them all the plants and various pieces of evidence just like you told me to. Since elves know the most about plants, I had no trouble convincing the priests to take action. Nobles like him have no power over the Church of the Goddess, so his excuses won’t work now.”

“All right. Thanks, you’ve done well.”

“I did, but I hate asking the church for help. I wouldn’t have done it if it hadn’t been for this incident with Romeo.”

Iris must have had complicated feelings as she asked worshippers of the

Goddess Olympia for help. Since someone's life was at stake, she'd put her misgivings to one side and did what she had to.

I turned to Romeo and Julie behind me. "Well, we got away, but what are you two going to do now?"

"Good question," Romeo said. "Maybe I can make a fresh start in a new town. I don't think I can stay here any longer."

"Same goes for me too," Julie said. "I have no family left here, so I'll go with Romeo."

The two were holding hands in a clear sign of their affection for each other. Their feelings were strong enough that they had no second thoughts.

"Okay. Do you have money and a place to go?"

"There's another settlement half a day's walk south of here," Romeo said. "I think we can get a horse there then travel even farther away. As for money, I have some savings in the country's biggest firm that I should be able to withdraw when needed."

"We shouldn't run into any manabeasts around here as long as we always stick to the paths, so I think we'll be fine," Julie added. "I wouldn't want to cause you any more trouble."

"All right. But let me give you these smoke bombs just in case. They're just like the one I threw at Dias. Use them if anything happens."

"Thank you so much," Romeo said.

"Thank you," Julie said. "Iris, you helped us a lot too. And Jamama. Take care!"

"Good luck!"

"Grraah!"

The pair walked off along the road.

I watched them until they were out of sight and then sighed to myself. Romeo was a commoner and Julie a noble. As Mary had once said, they were from two different worlds. But since they'd been able to overcome that barrier, I knew

they'd overcome whatever trials lay ahead of them. They continued to hold hands the whole time that I watched them. I sensed they shared deep trust and affection, which made me a little envious.

It suddenly occurred to me that things might have been very different if I'd confessed to Mei back when I had the chance.

"Or maybe not." *She has Yu, after all...*

"Hey!"

"Ouch. What was that for, Iris?"

"Judging by the look on your face, you were remembering a girl you used to know. Then you started getting depressed over it."

"That's awfully specific."

As I was wondering whether Iris had the power to read minds, she gestured at me to stoop down.

"I want to give you something, Ayame. Before coming here, I did something a little rude at Romeo's house."

Iris put something on my head. *It smells good, so I guess it's made of flowers?*

"Aren't these the flowers we talked about yesterday? You made them into a crown?"

"That's right. I made it while I was waiting."

"Impressive. But didn't you say that these flowers symbolize something? I forget what..."

"Heh heh. That's a secret. Come on, let's go, Jamama."

"Grrah."

"Huh? Now you've got me worried. Wait up, Iris!"

Iris began to move away while humming to herself, so I hurried after her. She was in high spirits for some reason.

The flowers Iris had handed over, whose petals were now scattered in the air between the pair, were begonias. In the language of flowers they meant "a

confession of love” and “days of happiness.”

Intermission 1: The True Hero's Recollection

Yu Protagonist. That was my name.

I'd always liked stories about heroes, especially the ones where friends would band together and use their combined power to overcome some great evil.

The hero was the character I looked up to most. Someone who saved a nation by eradicating forces of evil that were preying on the weak. They were role models. It was what I wanted to be.

But I was cowardly. I was weak and hated getting into fights. Worst of all, I was a crybaby. I felt I'd never amount to anything. I knew I was far from the storybook ideal of a hero.

I was nothing like Foyle. He'd been my friend since childhood, and I looked up to him more than anyone else. He was more courageous than I was and kind at the same time. When I learned he was the hero, I felt I'd known it all along.

I did of course feel some frustration knowing that I'd never be the hero myself, but a bigger part of me accepted that he was more worthy of the role.

I can barely remember what came next. I've mostly forgotten the moment when I learned that I was an unassigned.

I remember running off and crying endless tears, but not much else. I went to the secret base I'd made with my two friends and cried there alone for a long time. If Mei hadn't followed me, perhaps I never would have stopped crying.

When Mei said we should find Foyle, I got nervous. I thought he might look down on me. I was afraid he'd want nothing to do with me. Mei reassured me that everything would be fine, but I was so cowardly that even she couldn't erase my doubts.

It turned out that my worries were all for nothing. Foyle's attitude toward me hadn't changed. In fact, he told me I was his precious friend.

That made me happy. So happy that I cried again. Ha ha...

When Foyle told me he wanted me by his side, I decided I wanted to support him however I could. I promised I'd always accompany him, no matter what happened.

Ten years later, I was a young man.

My body had grown strong and my features had become more mature. I hadn't found a cure for being a crybaby though.

I still couldn't compare to Foyle—he'd grown so dignified that the role of hero seemed made for him. His sword skills were incredible too. He was a fine hero by anyone's standards.

I hadn't stopped training with a sword. I mostly practiced alone. Sometimes Foyle or a knight would give me lessons, but I struggled to keep up because I couldn't even use the most basic abilities.

Still, I didn't give up. I knew he'd leave me far behind and disappear beyond my reach the moment I stopped trying. I couldn't stand the thought.

I persevered, swinging my sword even as Gladius told me I was wasting my time and Mary ridiculed my clumsy efforts.

Time passed, and then Downburst Gryps the Blast Wave of the Demon Lord Army's Eight Warlords entered the picture. He'd taken control of the watery city of Ahterdam and was holding its citizens as hostages. When I formed a plan to defeat him, Foyle trusted in my idea, and the plan worked.

Helping Foyle defeat the Blast Wave left me feeling happier than ever. I believed we'd eventually prove victorious over the Demon Lord Army if we just carried on in the same vein.

And then he kicked me out.

He said I was useless and unneeded. He looked at me coldly and told me it was because I was an unassigned.

I remember running dumbfounded out of the inn, but not where I went or how I traveled. When I came to my senses, I wasn't in the town, or even on a road. I was in the middle of a forest with my thoughts focused entirely on my sword swings.

I was cutting down trees and plants around me as an outlet for my pain. I was so reckless and destructive that I hadn't even noticed the manabeasts gathering around me. They must have thought a lone human was an easy meal.

"Aaaaaaargh!" To find some relief from the emotions building inside me, I screamed aloud, hoping it might bring me some calm.

Then I swung my sword with abandon. *I'm so stupid. How can I be so stupid?*

Everything Gladius and Mary had said to me was true. At some point I'd abandoned any serious thoughts about growing stronger, and Foyle had no doubt realized it.

I felt as though running from mere manabeasts would just prove what a coward I was. I'd lose the right to ever talk to Foyle again. Standing my ground and taking on every last one of them was the only way to prove myself worthy.

By the time I'd calmed down, the ground was littered with the bodies of manabeasts. I was heavily wounded and standing in a vast puddle of blood. Wounds covered my body and my wild sword swings had left the blade badly chipped and smeared with bloody gore.

Knowing that my trembling legs wouldn't support me much longer, I rested on my sword as I caught my breath. But even that wasn't enough. I was on the verge of collapsing when Mei appeared.

"Yu, are you all right?! You're bleeding! Let me treat you right now."

I was relieved just to have her with me. But more so, I was cursing myself. I'd proved nothing. Once again, someone had to save me.

"Mei... I... I..."

"Don't talk. Here, drink this."

"I... Ngh... I wanna be stronger!" I couldn't hold back my tears or my sobs as I spoke.

As an unassigned I had no abilities, but I wasn't going to use that as an excuse. What mattered was my desire to grow stronger. A desire that I'd somehow forgotten until now.

I wanted to be strong enough to stand with him.

After I'd revealed these feelings to Mei, she told me that she'd left the Hero's Party.

I couldn't help but cry out, "But why?!"

"Because I was worried about you," she told me.

Just hearing her say it made me happy. But something didn't feel right. "What about Foyle? Aren't you worried about him?"

Mei didn't answer.

"Mei?"

"I...I don't care about Foyle. If he can cast out his oldest friend, then I don't want to know him."

She'd always affectionately called him Foy, but not now. I didn't ask what had happened between them. I knew it was a topic best avoided. Above all else, I saw the anguish on Mei's face as she claimed not to care.

A heavy silence fell over us.

Mei and I moved away from the town and began living as adventurers. I wasn't as strong as her, but I knew how to fight. I'd learned how from my training sessions with Foyle. Since I was so weak, I started putting more thought into my actions than ever before.

It must have paid off because I got stronger as time went on. Though I still had nothing on Foyle.

Several months passed.

We became known as the People's Defenders to the villages on the frontier. It was said that we'd appear and save people whenever a manabeast was causing damage. I was a little embarrassed because I didn't think we deserved so much praise.

Even at this point, I was still weak compared to Foyle and Mei.

One day we were visiting a village where there was something ominous about the air flowing in from the mountains. We decided to stay in the village while we investigated.

That was where I met Christina. Back then she was still an acolyte. Despite her great achievements with the Church of the Goddess, she hadn't taken up a position in a town because she preferred to go from village to village helping the less fortunate who lived on the frontier. I honestly thought she was incredible. Especially since she was even younger than us.

The village came under attack from monsters. Mei and I met them head-on as they tried to attack the church, but there were too many. They were going to break through.

That's when something mysterious happened. *"The time has finally come. Will you do what I lack the courage to do myself and save this world, True Hero?"*

It was an unfamiliar woman's voice. Just hearing it made me feel at ease somehow.

I felt power fill my body, followed by a sense of elation in my heart like nothing I'd ever experienced. With one quick swing, the sword in my hand cut through the monsters. My newfound power was enough to kill every monster before me with a single attack.

Mei was shocked. I'd just used some sort of ability.

I looked down at my hands and recalled the words I'd just heard, unable to believe it myself.

Several days after the monster invasion, Christina led me into the church. She wanted to learn more about me after hearing about my fight with the monsters.

Her conclusion was nothing short of astounding. She told me my job was hero, and my title was "True Hero."

It was exactly what the voice in my head had told me, but still I couldn't believe it. I didn't understand it. It made no sense.

Foyle was the hero, and in my eyes, a hero was as incredible as any character from a story. When Christina told me I was the True Hero, it was too far-fetched.

Christina traveled with us. She said she'd been asked by the goddess to lend

us her support. Even then, I wasn't convinced of the things she'd told me.

Nonetheless, I could feel myself changing. My movements became more precise, and my opponents' movements easier to read. I also learned to use many performance-enhancing abilities that were only accessible to the hero, though I still couldn't use those that required the holy sword.

As time passed, I gradually came to accept the things Christina said. I felt inexpressible emotions building inside me. I was the real hero after all. The realization brought on an irresistible sense of satisfaction.

In the course of our travels, we met Owen, then Faupan and Quanos. They became important companions. They believed in me and wanted to offer their support. They encouraged me, praised me, and expected great things from me. It felt good to have people look at me that way for the first time.

That's right. I was giddy like a child. Foolish and innocent.

The price I paid was the loss of an irreplaceable friend.

When Foyle was proclaimed a fake hero during an oracle ceremony, many declared him an evildoer and wished him dead. By that point, I already knew that the Hero's Party had gained a bad reputation after I'd been kicked out. But that reputation didn't extend to Foyle himself. Still, in the eyes of many, he'd committed a grave crime by pretending to be the hero.

Upon learning all this, I wanted to find him before anyone else could. In my conceit, I believed I'd be the one to save him.

It would be some time before I learned the extent of my own arrogance.

I was the one who killed him. I cut him down.

In his final moments, Foyle had spoken to me while I was still distressed and confused. When kicking me from the party, his eyes had been cold, but at that moment they were full of kindness. I was overcome with confusion as he explained himself to me.

I yelled at him and told him it couldn't be true. I asked why him. My heart couldn't accept what I was hearing. But I knew he had no reason to lie to me now.

As Foyle looked at me, his eyes were kind, but also serious. It was the face I'd looked up to, not the face of the man who'd kicked me from the party. All I could do was tremble and look into his eyes.

Foyle gave me his familiar smile and then pressed the holy sword to my chest. "I'll leave the world to you, and Mei too."

I took it from him, and thus held the Holy Sword Arianrhod for the first time. Its weight was far greater than its sacred air and unblemished appearance suggested.

The holy sword I'd dreamed of since childhood was now in my hands.

I cried like a baby as I came to understand what it meant to be the True Hero. The feeling of my weapon cutting through my own friend was something I never forgot.



The Soleil Sun Kingdom was the most prosperous nation in the human world, but also the closest to the Netherrealm.

Five hundred years ago, an entity known as the Demon Lord appeared without warning and brought the world to the precipice of a dark abyss. One young man had resisted.

He was the first hero—Soleil Seed Fandation.

Soleil received the holy sword from the goddess and used its power to fight the Demon Lord face-to-face, ultimately forcing him back into the Netherrealm. It had been a close call for humanity, but victory was ours for the time being.

Around the same time, the hero and his companions established the Soleil Sun Kingdom.

Soleil had proclaimed, "Some day the Demon Lord will return. We must prepare for his arrival. As humanity's first line of defense, we will watch the Netherrealm from here, and it will fall to us to halt his next invasion. We will hold him back as humanity awaits the rising of a new hero, and the rising of a new sun."

His words came true. One hundred years later, the Demon Lord's wounds

were healed, and he began another invasion.

Soleil had long since passed away, but the people of the Soleil Sun Kingdom carried on his will by fighting the Demon Lord Army without rest.

It wasn't enough to stop humanity from being pushed to the brink once more. After being bested by a hero in the past, the Demon Lord this time created creatures known as monsters to support him.

Four hundred years ago, the second hero, Helios Root Ignacio, took on not just the Demon Lord, but also his monsters. It was a hard-won victory, but the Demon Lord was finally slain. It seemed humanity was the ultimate victor.

Another hundred years passed. Then three hundred years ago, a new Demon Lord arose. This time, he was accompanied not only by monsters, but also demons and a group of powerful allies to whom he gave a portion of his own power. In the face of this new threat, the third hero, Light Trunc Stephano, was left horribly wounded and the Soleil Sun Kingdom was brought to its knees.

Then there appeared an individual with the power to seal away monsters and demons and to heal wounds. This was the birth of the first saint—Twi Anastasia. She used her powers to heal the wounded hero.

Finally, the Demon Lord was slain once more by the combined power of the hero and the saint, and his monsters and demons were sealed within the Netherrealm by the saint's power. The land at the boundary between the human world and the Netherrealm was then named the Twilight Plains in honor of the first saint and the third hero. This land became the front line in later wars between humanity and the Demon Lord Army.

Ever since being founded by the first hero, the Soleil Sun Kingdom was always ready for war with the Demon Lord Army. This nation fought on the front line whenever the Demon Lord Army reappeared, thus earning it the right to call itself the protector of humanity. The kingdom's citizens were proud people driven by a sense of duty.

Whenever there was a Demon Lord, there was war. It had already happened four times. Now was the fifth war: the current, ongoing invasion. The Soleil Sun Kingdom was once again holding back vast hordes of monsters on the Twilight Plains.

The capital of the kingdom was known as Harmachis. As the royal capital of a major kingdom, it was the world's largest city, and was considered the most prosperous.

Despite being close to the Netherrealm, the city was bustling with human activity, which spoke of the Soleil Sun Kingdom's importance. Its people had faith in the city's sturdy walls and the invisible barrier that repelled any invader from the Demon Lord Army. Above all, they knew they had the hero.

From the top of Castle Helios—named after the second hero—the entirety of the royal capital was visible. Within the castle, on an imposing throne that few people could even approach, sat a solitary man.

A banner to the throne's right was a display of the kingdom's pride—it was reminiscent of the sun and was emblazoned with a towering sword. Hanging to the left was an almost identical banner emblazoned with a priest's staff in place of the sword. Behind the throne were depictions of the first hero Soleil wielding the holy sword and the saint using her magic as they defeated the Demon Lord.

“Yu Protagonist. I am here at your call, Your Majesty.”

When Yu lowered his head and took to one knee, Mei and the others did the same.

A large man sat before them, wearing extravagant red clothing and a crown on his head. He was Tyrannos Dignity Algren Soleil, a direct descendant of Soleil and the current king of the Soleil Sun Kingdom.

The king quickly stood up when he saw Yu kneeling. “Raise your head, Sir Hero! You are the world's hope, while I am but the ruler of a single kingdom. It should be I who bows. All I can do for this world is beg you to save us.”

“No, I'm merely the man who wields the holy sword. My burden and the path I walk are nothing compared to those of a king who leads an entire nation and its people.”

Knowing that Yu was sincere and unable to persuade him otherwise, Tyrannos looked defeated. The others were impressed by Tyrannos's display of concern for Yu. He was far more humble than the king who'd sat on the throne when Foyle was declared the hero.

“Very well. Though I’d still prefer you to proudly hold your head up high, Sir Hero. Now, there are things we need to discuss. First, tell me, how powerful is the holy sword in your hands?”

“I can wield it comfortably now that I’ve had training from Owen, and I can call on my abilities with ease. Though I wouldn’t say I’ve fully mastered them.”

“That’s good enough. If you know how to use your abilities, you’ll master them in due course. I’m sure the Goddess Olympia will offer you guidance there.”

There was an awkward silence.

The Goddess Olympia—the one who assigned people jobs and offered them guidance.

Humans could learn abilities after receiving their job from the goddess in an oracle ceremony. It was what made it possible to resist the Demon Lord Army. She was a protector of humanity, truly worthy of being called a goddess.

Yu’s feelings toward the goddess, however, were complicated.

Yu couldn’t see her, but Mei was keeping her gaze fixed on the floor. He had no idea what was going through her head.

“Sorry...” Tyrannos said. “Pretend you didn’t hear that. Who am I to counsel you in these matters?”

“I understand your perspective, as the ruler of this kingdom.”

“Do you...? Then I’m grateful. But let’s move on to the main topic. This is the true reason that I invited you all here today.” The king called to a knight standing by his side. “Luwin.”

“At your service.”

The knight—Luwin Almighty Luxifer—stepped forward. He was the captain of the Knights of Prometheus, which were a great source of pride for the kingdom. In his hand he held a letter written on high-quality parchment.

“I bear a letter—one of many that has come to us from informants in other nations. This one states that the Demon Lord Army is acting suspiciously near the Sodome Warfare Nation.”

“The Demon Lord Army!”

They were the enemy of humanity and the root of all evil. Or at least, a great source of evil. Their activity had been limited ever since Downburst the Blast Wave was slain by Foyle, but now it seemed they were beginning to move once more.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, the Sodome Warfare Nation is an important ally, and they cannot stand against the Demon Lord Army alone,” Tyrannos explained. “However, we have limited resources available while our forces are fighting on the Twilight Plains. We need your power as the True Hero. Though I realize...that the Holy Sword Arianrhod has not long been in your hands. If the task is too great, then I will spare some of the kingdom’s forces instead.”

“I’ll go,” Yu replied without hesitation.

He’d be headed into a war where he’d face enemies far greater than the manabeasts, bandits, and thugs he’d fought so far. He’d be up against demons—humanity’s nemesis.

Yu had learned about demons during the days he’d spent traveling with Foyle. Driven by pure evil and malice, they would harm humans without mercy. In truth, demons were terrifying. But that didn’t matter.

“I’m the hero. I’ll fight.”

The king and the ministers who surrounded him regarded Yu with admiration. This was the hero they wanted.

“Yu, allow me to accompany you,” Christina said. “The miracles I receive from the goddess will aid you!”

“If Master’s going, I’m not getting left behind,” Owen said.

“I’ll go too, Brother!” Faupan agreed.

“All of you...? Okay. We’ll do it together.” Yu smiled back at them, lifting their spirits. Even so, it looked as though he was pushing himself.

“Yu...” Mei was the only one who looked worried.



Chapter 2: The Ice Mist Descends and a Flower Blooms Above

Adventurers

I heard the chirping of small birds—a sign that dawn had broken and animals were beginning to stir.

The forest was removed from the bustling activity of town, and all was quiet around us except for the movements of some animals. It felt as though I'd been cast out into the world alone, but that wasn't an altogether bad feeling.

"Yah!"

I was training, like I did every day. It was a habit of mine that remained unbroken since my days as the hero.

I still haven't found my body's limit.

I wanted to push myself harder, but I had to resist the temptation. I couldn't let myself be worn down while we were moving through manabeast territory. I trained regularly, trying to recapture the movements I'd used when wielding the holy sword, but I made sure to reserve the strength I'd need for the road ahead.

"You've been working hard, Ayame. Here you go." Iris passed me a towel.

She'd guessed that I was getting ready to take a break. Today her long, silky blonde hair was decorated with white flowers at each of her pointed ears.

"Thanks, Iris."

"It looks like your movements are getting smoother."

"Yeah, I think I've improved a lot. The fights against Onyx the Speed Talon and then Dias's soldiers were both good practice."

Both opponents had used superhuman powers and abilities. The progression

of each battle had inspired changes in my own fighting style.

“At one point, you closed your eyes and took up a stance like you were acting something out. Were you remembering past fights?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I was practicing something too.”

“Practicing what?”

“Wanna see?” I held the sword flat. “**Spark!**” I thrust the weapon like I’d done many times before, but this time the blade whistled as it cut through the air.

Iris’s jade-colored eyes widened as she noticed the difference. “Ayame, you can use abilities again?!”

“No, it’s not an ability.”

“But that was—”

“It’s a technique, Iris.”

“A technique?”

Since losing the holy sword, I’d been compensating by improving my techniques. I’d trained in various stances, sword styles, movements, and abilities. These all culminated in the technique I’d just used. Essentially, I was mimicking the abilities I’d used before to create my own techniques.

“After my fights with Onyx the Speed Talon and then the soldiers, the muscle memory behind it came back to me.”

The recent fight against Onyx the Speed Talon at Ouro Village had been my first real fight since losing the holy sword, and the experience allowed me to imagine intricate sword techniques that I could then practice. I’d refined these techniques while fighting with Dias’s soldiers.

“That was my attempt at mimicking Thrust. It’s easy for people with combat jobs, but all I can manage is a flawed copy.”

“Oh, does your technique not have as much power as the real thing?”

“Yeah, exactly. Thrust adds extra power behind the blade, so it can pierce iron plates. But my Spark’s only as strong as my body and my sword. In other words, I’m powering it with my own muscles. It’ll get weaker the more tired I am.”

The abilities someone gained depended on their job. Anyone who'd learned Thrust could pick up a weapon and use it to pierce iron plates, even if they were a child. The Goddess's blessings were the source of the power that made abilities possible.

I'd initially gained abilities through my job of fake hero, but when I lost the holy sword, I'd lost the blessing of the Goddess Olympia along with it, leaving me unable to use abilities. Everything I did from then on had to be powered by my own strength.

"It looks good enough to me. Your strength combined with your techniques is just as impressive as any ability!"

"No, not quite. My sword techniques would look like a joke to a true ability user."

The image that came to mind was the attack used by Bestreben the Mighty of the Eight Warlords. His Howling Fist of Destruction, Obliterator had destroyed a mountain. Could I really stand against that? The very obvious answer was no.

I was a lot weaker than when I'd wielded the holy sword. My techniques didn't measure up.

"Please don't put yourself down! You're no different from us elves. We can't use abilities either."

What? They can't use abilities at all?

"But Iris, you controlled plants to shield Latio from the Speed Talon in Ouro Village. Wasn't that an ability?"

During Onyx's attack, Iris had blocked him by controlling the trees around us.

"No, it wasn't. The Goddess Olympia doesn't... Ugh. Even saying the name bothers me after hearing about how she branded you a 'false hero.'"

"Iris, let's stay on topic."

Jamama, held in Iris's arms, gave a nervous yelp.

"Oh!"

I could feel the dark emotions welling up inside Iris, and the moody

atmosphere she was creating was enough to scare Jamama. It seemed wise to avoid any talk of the goddess.

“Ahem. What I mean to say is that none of my people can use abilities. We aren’t even assigned jobs, so it’s impossible.”

“Oh, that makes sense. A job is what defines someone’s abilities. No job, no abilities.”

Elves didn’t receive the blessings of the goddess. More to the point, they didn’t need them.

“Yes. Instead, we communicate with the avatars of the natural world, known as spirits. For example, what you were talking about a moment ago is called Converse with Tree Spirits—the power to talk to the spirits of trees and gain cooperation from plant life. We can also use a power known as animancy by asking for cooperation from the spirits that embody the elements. The four main types are water, wind, fire, and earth.”

“Water, wind, fire, and earth? Those are the same as the four classes of mage.”

Each mage had power associated with a particular element. Those with exceptional magic power would also gain the title Archmage, like Mei.

“Mages only use the power of one element?” Iris asked. “Since our magic comes from the spirits, we can use nature’s power in all its forms.”

“In other words, you can control all of nature?”

“Rather than control it, I’d say we draw out natural phenomena. But it’s the spirits you should be impressed by, not elves. There’s a lot we can’t do without help. We’d be powerless without the spirits.”

When she put it that way, it made it sound like our mages were superior since they didn’t borrow anyone else’s power. On the other hand, it meant elves would be aided by the spirits wherever they were present. Just as their status as nature’s arbitrator suggested, they lived in much greater harmony with the natural world than humans could.

“Are you really allowed to tell me all this?” I asked.

“Oops.” Iris had been happily telling me everything, but now her hands covered her mouth.

I knew it. She’s not supposed to tell anyone.

“Uh, um, but I can trust you, Ayame. You’re not going to let it slip to anyone else, are you? Are you?”

“Well, that depends...” *What’s a slip anyway?*

“Ayame?!”

Iris had begun to panic. Obviously, I wouldn’t dream of betraying her trust, but I couldn’t resist teasing her a little.

Jamama, thinking that I was bullying Iris, barked at me before sinking his teeth into my leg. “Grrah!”

“Ow ow ow ow?!” It didn’t hurt too much, but it was enough to make me regret teasing her.

“I took the joke too far. Sorry Iris. Sorry Jamama.”

“Oh Jamama, don’t bite him so hard. Ayame didn’t mean it.”

“Grrrr...”

After this intervention from Iris, Jamama released his grip on my leg.

As I was rubbing the area where I’d been bitten, something occurred to me. “But Iris, what about ice? I know ice magic exists, so shouldn’t there be ice spirits?”

I was thinking of a very powerful ice magic user in particular—Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist of the Eight Warlords. She’d been powerful enough to suppress the flames produced by the Soleil Sun Kingdom’s most powerful Archmage of Fire—Mary Susie. I couldn’t help but think there was something missing from Iris’s explanation.

Iris looked worried. “Um... Ice...? Uhhh...”

“Sorry. If you’re angry at me, you don’t have to answer.”

“I’m not angry at you at all. Ice spirits do exist. Strictly speaking, they’re transformed water spirits, so really they’re just the same thing...” Iris began to

look even more nervous. “To be honest, I’m not really sure. The adults in my village always refused to talk about those who control ice. Just mentioning them is taboo.”

“Taboo?”

Ice is taboo? Elves are supposed to be nature’s arbitrators. Are you telling me they like some spirits better than others?

Wait. She said “those who control ice.” Is that a type of elf? So maybe it’s not the spirits they don’t like, just the elves who control ice. Do other elves treat them like outcasts?

After I’d been quiet for a while, Iris was growing worried about me. “Ayame?”

I shook off the thoughts. There was no use prying into things Iris didn’t like talking about. I forced myself to smile and then changed the topic.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, I’ll be able to keep training in my own style from here on.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve gained some confidence. But ‘technique’ doesn’t sound very exciting, does it? Oh! I know! Let’s call them arts!”

“Arts?”

“Since you can’t use abilities, you’re relying on your physical strength and sword arts, so let’s call them arts! Elves sometimes talk about the esoteric arts of the bow—that’s where I got the idea!”

Arts...? Okay, sure. That’s what I’ll call the techniques I’m learning instead of abilities.

I could’ve just called it swordsmanship, but that was already an established term that generally referred to the use of abilities with a sword. What I was doing was similar, but not quite the same.

“Arts sounds good to me. I’ll call them that from now on.”

“All right! But please be a little more careful next time you’re training. It looks like someone was clearing the whole forest here.”

“Oh, um, sorry.” I hung my head in embarrassment.

My sword had cut through many of the plants and trees around me. Fortunately, Iris said it wasn't a problem. After she'd recited a brief chant, the plant life returned to its former state.

I decided I'd rein myself in next time. Though there was still one thing left on my mind.

If the Goddess Olympia doesn't bless the elves or give them abilities, then why was Iris chosen as the healing saint?

I wished I knew more about how elves lived. Unfortunately, I'd missed the right moment to ask, so I'd have to put my questions aside for the time being.



"How long will it be until we reach the next town?" Iris asked.

"Hmmm. In Fiore, they told us it takes four days in a carriage, so it should take about ten days on foot. We've been walking for six days, so even if we're moving faster than expected, it'll be another two days at the very least."

We were walking to the next town. Towns were spaced far apart, so the journey had left us a little low on food.

"It really is a long way to travel. Shouldn't we have borrowed a horse?"

"There weren't any stagecoaches, unfortunately. And we didn't have time to find a horse of our own after the Romeo incident. Do you hate walking, Iris?"

"No, not at all. I lived in a forest that was left to grow wild beyond the village boundary. I can fight manabeasts and I'm good at climbing trees. Did I ever tell you I once climbed a tree that was higher than the clouds?"

"Higher than the clouds?! That's really something. That's higher than the Castle Helios in the Soleil Sun Kingdom."

"Eh heh! But I could never keep up with the others. I'm weaker than most elves my age. That's why I need you to protect me."

"That's no problem."

"Eh heh heh. You're so wonderful, Ayame!"

Our conversations were always lighthearted like this, but we remained wary

of our surroundings. Not that we needed to. We had Jamama walking ahead of us and he'd realize immediately if there was another manabeast in the area. He even noticed small snakes that I overlooked at night. His keen senses were yet another manabeast capability.

"Grrah." Jamama, walking ahead of us, came to a sudden stop and started barking.

"Huh? What's wrong Jamama?" Iris asked.

"Grrah! Grraagrrah!"

"Really, Jamama, what is it?" she asked again.

Jamama darted off into the trees.

"Jamama!"

"Whatever it is, we can't ignore it now," I said. "Let's follow him!"

"All right!"

Iris and I followed Jamama into the trees.

These mountain roads were particularly tricky. There was a risk of slipping in mud or tripping on tree roots even when moving at a slow pace, and running was even more hazardous because there were leaves sharp enough to cut skin.

But run Iris and I did. I'd been through enough fights over the years that minor risks like this didn't bother me, and Iris, being an elf, was always at home in a forest. Neither of us tripped.

The bigger concern was that little Jamama might vanish from our view once obscured by the foliage.

Fortunately, Jamama soon came to a stop at the edge of a cliff.

"You shouldn't go running off like that, Jamama!" Iris scolded.

"What's gotten into you? You ran off with no warning."

"Grrah. Grrah!"

Even as Iris picked him up, Jamama continued to bark without so much as looking at us.

What's got him so excited?

I looked down over the cliff edge and saw a party being attacked by a pack of manabeast wolves. At the front of the group stood a muscular man with a massive war hammer, and behind him were a young man with a bow and a young woman dressed like a mage. It looked like they were trying to defend another man who didn't look tough enough to be out here.

Seeing that they were badly outnumbered, I made a quick decision. "Iris, I'm heading down. You can—"

"No, I'm going with you!"

"Grrah!"

"All right. Follow me, but be careful."

I'd been about to tell Iris to stay put, but she wasn't willing to sit back and watch the battle unfold. After considering the risk of more manabeasts surrounding her, I decided it was best to keep her close by.

I leaped down in a single bound.

A wolf had dodged the archer's arrows and would have struck the wielder of the war hammer from behind, but I came swooping down and took it out with my sword.

"Pierce it! **Spark!**"

"Aoown?!"

"What?! Who the heck are you?!" the man with the war hammer asked.

"I'm here to back you up! Can you keep fighting a little longer?" I replied while cutting down several wolves with a single sword swing.

Surprised by my sudden appearance, the wolves' attacks grew less intense.

"Well, whoever you are, I'm glad for the help! Now's my chance! **Pulverizing Blow.**"

"Aooown?!"

A great swing of his war hammer sent a wolf flying backward with so much force that it knocked several others off their feet before smacking into a tree

hard enough to topple it.

That hammer really packs a punch. I'll bet he could easily crack a boulder in two with that thing.

Outmatched by the two of us, the wolves turned their attention to the other three party members.

"Uh-oh!" the mage cried. "They're coming at us! Ranka, do something!"

"Ngh... **Precision Voll**— What's that?!" Ranka, the young man with the bow, was just about to nock an arrow when he noticed the roots at his feet slithering up out of the ground.

To their amazement, the roots held back the wolves.

"Whoa?! Something's coming out of the ground?!"

"W-Wow... I've never seen this before!"

"Scintilla! Don't touch it!" Ranka warned him. "It might be some type of manatree!"

As I used my sword to slash the wolves captured in the roots, I called out to them, "Relax. It's no manatree. It's a barrier to keep you safe."

"Huh? RReally? But who are you?!"

"Let's talk later! Here come more of them!"

I quickly turned around and shoved my sword's scabbard into the mouth of a wolf that tried to bite me while I was distracted. I must have thrust the scabbard harder than I thought because I broke through the wolf's spine.

"Heh. You saved us," the war hammer wielder said. "We're not done yet, though."

"Stay sharp. Wolves are a real handful when there are so many."

The wolves weren't backing off even though I'd taken out a good number of them. I knew I could handle it, but it was going to be hard work.

Just then, Jamama leaped down from the cliff and positioned himself in front of me.

“Grrrr!” Jamama growled at the manabeast wolves. He was smaller than the others and heavily outnumbered.

“Jamama?”

“Where’d the little one come from? Is it with the others?” The man with the war hammer was surprised to see him appear.

Before I could warn Jamama to back down, he let out a roar.

“Grrah! Grroooowww!”

To the adult wolves, Jamama must have looked like a tiny pup. But his roar was enough to make them tremble in fear and send them darting off.

“Grrah.”

“They’re gone. You scared them off, didn’t you, Jamama?”

He just looked at me. Somehow his face looked smug, as if he was gloating.

Jamama wasn’t so different from the other wolves. Perhaps these closely related manabeasts had sensed some sort of latent power that existed within mánagarmrs.

“Everyone okay over there?” I asked the party members at the rear.

“Ah, yes. We’re quite all right,” the mage replied. “But if this isn’t a manatree, then what in the world is it?”

“That was my doing,” Iris replied.

Iris grabbed an outstretched root and skillfully slid down to us. As she landed, she released her control over the trees and the roots all disappeared back into the soil.

“Now I’d better heal you. May I see your wounds?”

“No way!” the mage cried. “Those long ears! You’ve gotta be an elf! Wow! Can you believe it?! I’ve never seen one before! And she’s a cute one too! She’s just like a doll!”

“You’re right! This is amazing!” Ranka agreed.

“I never thought I’d meet a legendary being. Life really is full of surprises!”

Scintilla said.

The three party members who'd been protected by the roots surrounded Iris.

"Um... I don't mind the get-together, but could I see your wounds before we do anything else?" Iris looked ever so slightly annoyed.

The mage apologized on behalf of the group. "Oh, sorry. I'm Milleuse. Thanks for saving me just now," she said.

Iris took a few remedies out of her bag and began seeing to their injuries.

I couldn't sense any more manabeasts in the vicinity, so I cleaned the blood and gore from my blade before putting it away.

"Sorry about that," the large man with the war hammer now resting on his shoulder said to me. "You saved us. We're adventurers. You can call me Badisch, since that's what my friends call me. Nice to meet you."

"It's fine, I'm happy to help. I'm Ayame, by the way. Nice to meet you too." I reached out and shook his hand. "You were in a tough spot with all those manabeast wolves around you."

"No kidding. Normally, a few manabeasts wouldn't even slow us down. Thing is, I was wounded from another fight and they caught us off guard. I shouldn't have let it happen." Badisch sighed.

"Another fight?" I asked.

Ranka, the mild-mannered young man with the bow, was the one to answer. Iris was already done healing him. "Truth is, we came here after taking on a quest, but our target won that fight. Then those wolves attacked us. We were hunting a dragon, by the way."

"A dragon? Those aren't easy opponents."

Of all the manabeasts that existed, dragons held superiority in the air. They could fly above humans, basic weapons weren't enough to even scratch their hard scales, and their fire breath could even burn through metal armor. They were tough in every respect. Without the proper gear, the hunter could easily become the hunted.

As we were talking, another man stepped forward. Even from above, I'd

judged that he didn't belong on the battlefield. He wore thick gloves, a brown apron, and glasses with black rims and round lenses. There was also a peculiar smell about him. *Do I smell burning?*

"I'm the one who issued the quest. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Scintilla. Firstly, I owe you my thanks."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ayame. The elf here is Iris and the wolf pup is Jamama."

"Badisch! Badisch!" Milleuse cried. "You won't believe it! My wounds stopped hurting completely after this girl healed them! They don't even hurt! And her wolf pup's really cute too!"

"G-Grroow."

"Um... Could you please cut that out? Jamama doesn't like it," Iris said. "Or at the very least, please hug him a little more gently."

Milleuse was squeezing Jamama tight. His fur was all messed up and drooping lifelessly. Milleuse must have given him a thorough petting already.

"Excuse me, Badisch, do you still plan to complete that quest?" Iris asked.

"It's not happening. I should've known we'd need a bigger party to take on a dragon. Then again, if we can't handle it, trying again with more adventurers mightn't make much difference. Our team's one of the best in the town. There's bigger teams, but a dragon would make short work of them. Looks like the risk was never worth the reward."

"Oh..." Scintilla's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

The quest came from him, didn't it? I felt a little sorry for him, but I had to side with Badisch since his party would be risking their lives.

"Ayame, Ayame. You could handle a dragon, right?" Iris asked as she healed Badisch's wounds.

Iris says it like it's nothing. She must think I'm capable of anything.

I'd defeated several dragons and knew their weaknesses. A good way to weaken a winged dragon was to cut off its tail, which basically made it lose its balance in the air, severely reducing its maneuverability. Cutting off a wing

would have a similar effect, but the tail was an easier target.

Dragons were also very vulnerable to attacks from the blind spot right above them. That was unsurprising. As the peerless rulers of the skies, they didn't feel a need to look out for attack from above, unless there was another dragon around.

"Hmm... Maybe I could take on a dragon."

The problem was, I'd always taken dragons down using the holy sword. Although I felt physically stronger than before, I wasn't so confident in my current equipment. Fabbro had given me a sturdy, reliable sword, but I wasn't sure it could pierce the scales of a mature dragon.

I'd been careful not to sound overly confident, but that didn't stop Scintilla from rushing over to me with his eyes sparkling. He got a little too close actually.

"Do you mean it?! Then please, please assist me! I can pay you!"

"Wait, I said 'maybe.' I'm not giving you any guarantees. Besides, I need time to prepare if I'm going hunting."

"But then we won't make it on time for the Full Bloom Festival," Scintilla replied.

"The Full Bloom Festival?"

"It's a festival happening in the trade city of Rikko, just up ahead," Ranka explained.

"It's amazing," Milleuse added. "They send up fireworks that light up the night sky in red, blue, green, yellow, purple, and every other color! It's mesmerizing, like something out of a dream!"

"The noise is kinda annoying though," Badisch said.

That was enough to offend Scintilla. "How dare you! Badisch, if you think explosions that shake your stomach and beautiful rumbles that rattle your eardrums are annoying, you don't know the first thing about fireworks!"

"All right, calm down, Scintilla." Ranka raised his hands and tried to calm him.

“So you’re saying you need materials from a dragon for this Full Bloom Festival? If you’re serious about it, you should really have more people and better gear.”

Badisch glanced over at Scintilla, who was still being consoled by Ranka, then whispered to me, “Maybe, but I never expected to win against a dragon.”

“Huh? Then why...?”

“We might have accepted the quest, but really we’re just keeping an eye on Scintilla to make sure he doesn’t run off and get himself killed. Even his buddies in the workshop agree that he never knows what’s going on around him. He’s got passion, but it makes him as reckless as a kid. I figured, so I don’t have his death on my conscience, we’d go with him and keep him out of harm’s way.”

“Call it good luck or bad, but we actually found a dragon,” Milleuse added.

“We gave it our best shot, but we had to run away because it was too strong and we wanted to keep Scintilla safe. Then on our way back, we met those wolves. We had the worst luck.”

“I hate to say it, but we might’ve had a chance if Scintilla wasn’t with us,” Milleuse said. “We kept having to look back in case another manabeast attacked him. Problem is, Scintilla’s the only one who knows what parts we need from the dragon. We need him with us so he can extract and preserve them while they’re still good.”

“I warned him it was dangerous.”

Badisch and Milleuse both sighed.

“Well, Scintilla clearly wants your help, but how would you feel about it?” Badisch asked. “I don’t like dragging in outsiders. Your life’s going to be at risk.”

“We’ll help. We can’t walk away now. Besides, I can see Scintilla’s passion for the Full Bloom Festival is real. That makes me wanna help him out.”

“Okay. Sorry you had to get mixed up in all this. It’s just that time’s against us. We’ve got food to think about, and the festival’s not far off. It’s only another three days away. We got lucky and found a dragon after two days of searching, but I’m not expecting another miracle like that.”

“Three days? That’s not much time given the scale of the forest.”

“Excuse me,” Iris interjected. “I have an idea. Do you have anything with the dragon’s scent on it?”

“Um, Badisch, didn’t you grab a scale in the fight?” Milleuse said.

“Yeah, I’ve still got it.”

“Could I please borrow it?” Iris asked.

“Sure, but what for?”

Iris looked at him and smiled proudly. “This’ll be easy. If it’s a manabeast you’re looking for, then it’s a manabeast’s power you need. Right, Jamama?”

“Grrah?” Jamama tilted his head and looked at Iris.



Iris’s idea was to have Jamama track the dragon down.

Wolves had a keen sense of smell—some said even sharper than that of a noble’s guard dog. It was probably the smell of blood that had led Jamama to Badisch’s party in the first place. If so, following a dragon’s scent would be just as easy.

We continued our search, following the scent from the scale. It was a much better approach than trying to comb the entire forest.

Just a few hours later, we came to a steep incline covered in rocks of various sizes. Plant life was sparse, making it a poor place to live, even for a manabeast. Amid the rocks was a red dragon, grooming its scales as if they were fur.

“See the wound on its forehead?” Badisch said. “That’s the same dragon.”

“All right. So it’s the same dragon you attacked once already. It’s fairly young. The tail’s not fully grown. My sword should be good enough.”

A dragon’s tail got broader with age, and its scales harder. I’d heard enough anecdotes about dragon scale armor deflecting iron swords to know how tough they could be.

Since this was a young dragon, there was still a chance that the robust but basic sword I’d gotten from Fabbro would prove effective.

The slope continued beyond the dragon. The scattered boulders would provide cover, as well as ideal places to leap from.

This looks doable. We'd better not waste time or it'll fly away.

I told Badisch and the others to hide among nearby trees, then began my approach.

I breathed softly and kept myself hidden. I couldn't compare to an assassin with the Stealth ability, but it was good enough to avoid the dragon's notice.

I picked up a small rock and threw it so that it landed a little in front of the dragon.

"Krrrrrow?"

While the dragon was distracted, I climbed onto a rock with as little movement as possible, then jumped.

"Spark!" Aiming for a gap between its scales, I struck. It was enough to cut into the flesh and then through the bone, severing the tail.

"Krrroooooow?!" The dragon screeched in response to the sudden loss of its tail. Then it spotted me and opened its lizard-like eyes wide. "Krrroow!"

The dragon lunged and tried to bite me. Its jaws were easy to dodge, but since it was much bigger and heavier than me, I had to avoid its charge completely.

I deftly moved aside, and as it passed me by I slashed through the membrane of its wings. It crashed to the ground, now incapable of flight.

"What's wrong? The ruler of the skies can't handle a single human? Didn't expect that, did you?"

"K-Krreeeh! Krrreeeaaah!!!"

Enraged by my taunting, the dragon ignited flames within its mouth before unleashing them at me. This was what earned winged dragons their reputations for being among the strongest creatures—fire breath.

A burst of searing hot flames was headed at me, but I avoided it by dropping to the ground, and slid under the dragon's jaw.

"Fire breath might be powerful, but too bad that it blocks your vision! **Spark!"**

I drove my sword up into the bottom of its jaw. There were no scales there, so I didn't even have to aim carefully. The dragon let out a screech. Unlike earth dragons and water dragons, winged dragons had very weak jaws. Skewered by my sword, it couldn't open and close its mouth, so it wouldn't be able to use its fire breath. But at the same time, I'd lost the use of my weapon.

I scattered a few of Iris's smoke bombs and quickly moved away to join the others.

Badisch and the others watched the dragon writhe in pain as the smoke irritated its wounds.

I gave Badisch a pat on the shoulder. "I'll leave the rest to you since I've lost my sword. The dragon can't fly or use its main attack anymore, so it should be easy to handle. Just take care not to breathe any of that smoke or you'll be rolling around in pain."

"Huh?! You're stepping down after doing all that yourself?!" Milleuse said.

"All right! Let's do this!" Badisch cried. "A dragon that can't fly is just a big lizard!"

"Yeah," Ranka agreed. "There's nothing to fear if it can't use its breath. Let's pay it back for the burns it gave us!"

"Badisch! Ranka! Why do men always get so fired up at times like this? Don't blame me if we get hurt!"

As I walked over to Iris and Scintilla, I glanced back at the trio charging toward the dragon.

"W-Wow. That dragon barely stood a chance," Scintilla said.

"Nice work, Ayame! You're always incredible!"

"Thanks, Iris. But those three are good too. They might've gotten burnt last time, but not many people would dare challenge a dragon."

A dragon that couldn't fly or breathe fire was an easy opponent for them. They kept it pinned down with superb coordination, then Badisch delivered the final blow by crushing the dragon's head under his war hammer.

The trio raised their weapons in celebration.

Even from a distance, they looked like a perfectly coordinated team well trained in fighting manabeasts, rather than people. I'd made things easier for them, but their teamwork was nonetheless impressive.

What was it Badisch called himself? An adventurer? I hadn't paid much attention to adventurers in my days as the hero, but it looked like they were more adept at dealing with manabeasts than my party had ever been. A newfound interest was growing inside me.

"Here's your sword."

"Thanks."

I took my sword from Badisch, wiped off the blood, then checked the blade for notches before sheathing it.

Badisch urged everyone to begin dissecting the slain dragon. Scintilla joined them, comparing the creature's various organs with his written notes.

"Is this it?" Milleuse asked.

"No, that's a kidney," Scintilla replied.

"Oh, maybe this then? Or maybe not."

"That looks like its bladder. It'll smell awful if you rupture it," Scintilla warned her.

"Huh?! Eww! I actually touched it!"

"Whoa, don't throw it at me! It stinks. What's the big idea?!" Ranka cried.

The dissection continued as Milleuse and Ranka were arguing.

"Here it is! The firebladder!"

Scintilla's face lit up as he tore it out of the dragon. He was holding an organ that filled both of his hands.

Yuck. Dragon innards look disgusting.

Scintilla carefully stuffed the organ into a jar. "It uses mana dissolved in a liquid substance to enhance the power of the dragon's fire breath. Putting a little inside a firework makes it a whole lot bigger. It adds more vibrance to the colors too, so it's great for creating a colorful display."

“Wow. I didn’t know that.”

“Um, Scintilla. Are you keeping the rest of the dragon’s organs?” Iris asked.

“Hm? No, just this one.”

Iris approached the pile of extracted organs. “Dinnertime, Jamama!”

“Grrah!”

Since Scintilla didn’t want what was left, it was good food for Jamama. We’d have to bury anything he didn’t eat to make sure it didn’t draw in more manabeasts.

Isn’t Jamama overeating? Where’s he putting it all?

The way Jamama was greedily devouring the organs reminded me that he was a manabeast. Normally he looked like an ordinary dog.

Meanwhile, Ranka had gotten the dragon’s body ready to be hauled away.

“Okay, it’s drained of blood. All that’s left is to get it on the cart and bring it back.”

“Right. So, Ayame, I was thinking we’d give you eighty percent of the money we make selling the dragon,” Badisch said.

“Huh? Are you sure? Isn’t that basically all the profit?”

“Yeah, but we never would’ve beaten it without you. It’s only fair. If there’s any part of the body you want, let us know. When we report back to the guild, they’ll probably want to sell the body right away. I can’t give you the whole thing, but we can ask them to set some parts aside for you.”

Hmmm, I wonder... As nice as dragon gear would look, I didn’t have any particular need for it, nor did I know where to find someone capable of crafting the gear from raw materials.

What I really needed was money. I’d gotten paid in Ouro Village after slaying the mánagarmr that was Jamama’s mother, but I didn’t have enough to afford new equipment.

Iris often offered to pay for whatever I couldn’t afford, but the more I sponged off of her, the less of my tattered pride would remain.

“It’s fine. The money’s enough for me.”

“You’re sure? We’re talking dragon materials. These aren’t easy to get.”

“I don’t know anyone who can make gear out of it, and I’d have no way to pay them even if I did. It’s a little embarrassing, but the truth is I’m down on my luck.”

“Ah, I get it. Well, let’s head back. You too, Scintilla.”

“Ah, yes, this mucus has qualities that I won’t find elsewhere. There’s nothing better than a dragon. I can’t even imagine all the colors I’ll get from a firework made from this along with a few seven-headed flowers, some blue ore, and a flawless sampo.”

“Well he’s obviously not listening.”

We all laughed as Badisch shrugged his shoulders.



“That’s the trade city of Rikko.”

“Oh, so that’s it!”

We were almost at our destination. It was still some way off, but I could already see it was a major city. The sheer number of carts lined up outside the gate in the extensive city wall was impressive. It was clear that many merchants considered the city worth visiting.

Rikko was located in a mountainous region inhabited by numerous manabeasts. Ever since the city was built on the only piece of level ground in the region, it had been an important stopover for those traveling to the distant nations near the Netherrealm, such as the Soleil Sun Kingdom. It looked like merchants of every kind were passing through at that very moment.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Iris put up her bunny-ear hood. “I’d rather not be bothered by any creeps this time. How do I look, Ayame?”

“Cute.”

“Eh heh heh... That’s not what I meant! I’m asking whether I’ll look out of place.”

The ears on Iris's hood suited her, which made me want to compliment it, but it did look a little odd. Still, I wasn't lying about it being cute.

We lined up behind Badisch's party as we waited to pass through the gate.

It took some time, but eventually we made it through the inspection point and into the city.

There was some argument over Jamama. As a general rule, manabeasts could only enter if they had a contract with a beast tamer, which meant Jamama technically wasn't allowed, even though he was just a pup.

Luckily, some words of support from Badisch and a few coins in the guard's hand smoothed the way for us. We did have to keep him on a chain though, which we also had to pay for.

"Grrroow..."

Now that he was wearing a collar, Jamama really did look like a dog. He didn't like being on a leash, or more likely, he wanted someone other than me to hold it. The problem was, the guard didn't think Iris would be strong enough to stop him if he tried to break free.

Soon after we entered the city, Scintilla said goodbye to us. "I'm going to get this to the master of the workshop right away! I've already left the reward with the guild, so you can collect it there! If you need anything, just stop by Daltis's Workshop! See you around!" He disappeared into the crowd, still carrying the jar that contained the precious dragon organ.

"It sure is busy," I said.

"Right? That's why you need that wolf on a leash. Anyhow, the Adventurer's Guild is this way."

We let Badisch guide us. Along the way, a lot of people turned to look at the dragon body on our cart, and at the people pulling it. We couldn't have stood out more if we'd tried.

Oh, man. I should've made an excuse to run off like Scintilla. I could've come back for the reward later. But it'll look weird if I try to leave now.

I knew my best option at this point was to avoid looking suspicious, so I

strolled forward with my head held high.

Iris, meanwhile, was getting excited by all the unfamiliar sights. “Ayame! Ayame! Look at all this! These buildings are even bigger than the ones we saw in the last town!”

“They sure are. They build them a lot taller in cities. And look at that fountain over there. It’s way bigger than the one in Fiore.”

“You’re right! And what a magnificent statue in its center.”

Badisch overheard our conversation and laughed. “Ha ha ha. A human city must be a funny sight for an elf.”

Ranka and Milleuse also looked back at Iris, curious to hear her response.

“Well, we have our own culture in the forest, but it’s very different from what humans have. For one thing, our homes are all up in the trees, with bridges between them made of vines. We also have these things called firefly mushrooms that light up the village with pale blue light at night.”

“Wow,” Milleuse said. “We’re lucky to even hear about this stuff. So that’s how elves live? I’d love to see it for myself some day.”

As we walked to our destination, Iris continued to chatter excitedly while I held Jamama back as he tried to investigate all the good food he could smell.

“All right, we’re here,” Badisch eventually declared.

“So this is it?”

We’d reached a building taller than the dwellings around it. There was an image of a shield and sword on the sign hanging outside the door.

“This is the city’s Adventurer’s Guild. Not too shabby, right?”

“It’s a tavern and a store too,” Ranka said. “We come by often since guild members can get better deals here than at most places.”

I nodded. “I guess they’ve got to have plenty of equipment available for the adventurers.”

The building really did look impressive.

“Oh, Milleuse, would you tell the workers in the storehouse next door that

we've got a dragon for them?" Badisch asked. "Obviously, it's too big to take into the guild."

"Got it. Ayame, Iris, Jamama, I'll see you around."

Milleuse left us as she dragged the cart off toward the storehouses next to the guild.

"All right, come on in." Badisch led the way as we entered the guild building.

I felt the peculiar atmosphere of the place wash over me the moment I stepped inside. Unlike in marketplaces or knight training grounds, the place was rowdy and oddly tense.

I scanned the room and saw quests posted up on a wooden board and a desk where adventurers could accept them. Around the board were several people who looked just as burly as Badisch.

"Looks like there's a lot of regulars here."

It wasn't just their equipment that made me think so, but the battle-hardened air they gave off. They looked stronger than town soldiers.

"Grrooow." The smell of alcohol was irritating Jamama's nose.

"We won't be here long, Jamama," Iris reassured him.

It had to be tough for a creature with such a keen sense of smell, but he'd just have to endure it. Iris didn't look too comfortable either—she was staying behind me and keeping close.

Badisch paid no mind to any of it as he strode up to the counter and called for the woman working there.

"Hey! I'm back."

"Oh, Badisch. Your party's here. Welcome back. But where's Scintilla from Daltis's Workshop? Weren't you keeping an eye on him?"

"I *was*. Scintilla went home already. But listen, we actually brought back a whole dragon. We'll claim the quest reward obviously, but we want you to sell the materials for us too."

"A dragon?! Are you saying you slew a dragon?" The woman raised her voice

in surprise at the news, but quickly got herself under control like a well-trained employee.

“Well, yeah. A dragon didn’t stand much chance against Tristars like us.”

“Badisch, if you lie in your reports to the guild, you’ll lose our trust, and I’ll have to penalize you.”

“All right. It was just a joke. I wasn’t kidding about slaying it, but these two helped out.”

“These two...?” The woman looked at me and Iris.

I greeted her. “Hello. I’m Ayame. And this is—”

“Iris. Badisch, please don’t forget about Jamama. Without him, we wouldn’t have come across you and couldn’t have tracked the dragon.”

“Grrah!” Jamama, held in Iris’s arms, gave a bark.

The woman was more shocked by the sight of Iris than Jamama. “You’re so beautiful,” she said.

Iris had her hood up, but anyone in front of her could still see her pretty face.

“I see my ladylike charms are having an effect on you. Heh heh. It’s a sin to be so popular.” Iris was looking smug.

She was certainly charming, but ladylike was a bit of a stretch. If anything, she looked like a perfect little doll.

The woman just gave her a bemused smile.

“We don’t know much about the Adventurer’s Guild. Could you tell us about it?” I asked.

“Oh, of course. Pardon my rudeness!” The woman stopped smiling and bowed her head. “What do you already know?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Badisch told me that he comes to the city to accept quests then slays manabeasts. That’s about it.”

“That’s essentially how it works. The city, nobles, and sometimes even governments offer quests through the Adventurer’s Guild. They offer various tasks such as collecting herbs, guarding carriages, killing or capturing

manabeasts, and scouting. And an unusual feature of the Adventurer's Guild is that it exists in multiple different countries!"

"It spans borders? That's amazing."

"Indeed! The institution was founded two hundred years ago by a hero who wanted to prevent manabeasts from causing damage. It's been indispensable to everyone ever since!"

A hero from two hundred years ago...? Oh, I remember! How'd I ever forget?

I recalled there being some sort of organization that dealt with manabeasts back when hunting the *mánagarmr*. That organization was the Adventurer's Guild.

Noah Bran Georgios, a previous hero, had discovered that monsters weren't the only creatures causing mayhem in the settlements he visited. Since manabeasts could also be a problem, Noah made an effort to slay them whenever he could out of concern for common people. Other brave warriors were inspired to follow his example, rather than waiting for a request from the local government. Merchants and governments soon saw the potential value, so they supported these efforts until the enterprise had grown into a large organization, now known as the Adventurer's Guild.

A hero's actions could have far-reaching effects. Even in *The Hero's Story*, the people the hero saved often accomplished important deeds later on.

The woman was giving more details. "We also have a ranking system in the guild that determines what quests you can accept. You begin as Starless, then move up one rank at a time. With each step up, you fill in a point on a star. Once the star is completely filled in, you'll have the highest rank of Astraea. Though few people ever reach that."

"Just so I know, how many people have to be in each party of adventurers?"

"Parties are made up of at least three members, and can have a maximum of twenty, but I'd recommend against forming a large team because the members won't get a large share of the rewards that way. There are also adventurers who've reached the rank of Astraea while working solo."

Exceptionally strong people more commonly found employment with

governments rather than guilds. Gladius, one of the former members of the Hero's Party, was one such example. He'd proved himself by coming out on top in a difficult contest known as the King of Lions Festival.

I wondered just how strong someone had to be to reach the top rank. I was sure they'd have to be stronger than me at least.

"So what rank is your party, Badisch?"

"Us? We're Tristars. That makes us middle-of-the-road overall. But it's good enough to make us one of the best parties in this city."

"That's amazing. I'll bet you've achieved a lot doing quests for the guild."

"You single-handedly cut off a dragon's tail. We can't compare to that," Ranka said.

"Yeah," Badisch agreed.

I couldn't understand why they were being so humble. Even though I'd disabled the dragon, they were the ones that had successfully killed it. I was sure that any top guild member—any Astraea—could've done what I did. There were probably elves stronger than Iris who could've done it too. The skills needed to slay dragons didn't seem all that rare when I thought about it.

"I get the gist, but are the guild's regulations written somewhere for me to take a look at?" I asked.

"Yes. Please wait one moment... Here you go!"

"Thanks."

I took the document from her and began reading.

"Mmh. Mmmh. I can't see."

"Oh, sorry." I crouched down so that Iris could look at it with me.

I quickly read through it, pausing to examine some of the items more carefully. The regulations were surprisingly detailed, so I took care to understand each one before moving on.

I could have regrets later if I don't read it properly. I'd better take this seriously.

“Hm...?” A sentence caught my eye.

Oh, I see.

“So adventurers can make money by completing quests, the city can let adventurers handle their problems, and the government can stay focused on fighting the Demon Lord Army? It sounds like the perfect organization.”

“Indeed! Well, how about it? If you’ve already slain a dragon, you’ll be a promising new member! Are you going to register with the guild?!”

“Well...” I smiled. “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”



After I’d passed up the invitation from the Adventurer’s Guild, we were told that it would take some time until the dragon was sold, so I’d arranged to meet with Badisch the next day.

Badisch had given me all of the money awarded for completing the quest as an advance on my portion from the dragon sale. He’d done it out of kindness, knowing that I’d need money while staying in the city.

As we walked through the fortified city of Rikko, I was once again amazed at how crowded it was. I’d been surprised by how many more people there were in the town of Fiore than in Ouro Village, but this was another level entirely.

Within the city’s strong walls, there were open air stalls everywhere I looked and a huge marketplace with many people coming and going.

“Ayame, Ayame, why didn’t you join the Adventurer’s Guild?” Iris asked as we walked.

“A few reasons. You really wanna know?”

“Yes! If you’re going to be traveling to different countries, then an adventurer’s travel pass would be very helpful. You must have a good reason for turning that down.”

I could tell from the way Iris looked at me that she had confidence in my decision even if she didn’t understand it. That meant a lot to me.

“How about we sit down somewhere while I explain? It’s about time we had

something to eat.”

We decided to grab some late lunch at a nearby café. I ordered my usual coffee along with the café’s specialty pasta. Iris studied the menu intently for a while before settling on a sandwich. She also ordered peach juice to drink and seasonal fruits for dessert.

We asked the server to give Jamama some pieces of ham. Since he wasn’t allowed in, we had to sit outside, but Iris and I didn’t mind that at all.

I talked while drinking my coffee. “Now, as for why I won’t join the Adventurer’s Guild, it’s because I’m worried that information about me could leak out.”

“Information?”

“Yeah. Suppose someone knew who I was. They could go to the Adventurer’s Guild and instantly find data they’re storing on my weapons, fighting styles, and recently visited locations.”

Whatever organization I joined, I’d obviously have to give them some personal information. It was particularly hard to imagine becoming an adventurer since I’d have to list my job. Obviously, I couldn’t tell them the truth. I could give some false details, but since all I could do was use a sword, I’d struggle to deceive anyone. Mages, black magicians, and white magicians could disguise their jobs to some extent, but no amount of sword skills would help with that.

“The other thing is that adventurers aren’t allowed to get involved in disputes between nations. It’s hard to imagine nations fighting each other while the Demon Lord Army is a bigger threat, but it’s still a major drawback for me.”

“Would that really be a problem?”

“Yes. Iris, I’ll warn you right now, if I ever encounter a victim of abuse, and the abuser can’t change their ways, I might be forced to kill someone.”

I recalled a situation where I’d driven the Demon Lord Army out of a nation during my time as the hero. Even before the invasion, the king had subjected his people to heavy taxes.

I'd saved everyone by defeating the demons, but if I'd really wanted to make things better, I probably should have killed their king. Though, there was no denying that that would have led to instability, and the government that formed later might have been even worse.

Even so, I couldn't forget how the people I'd saved struggled under even higher taxes. The king and the nobility had used the reconstruction efforts as an excuse to treat the populace even more harshly and restore their own fortunes.

I didn't want to kill people, but I knew it might be unavoidable someday.

Iris had no trouble accepting that. "All right. In that case, there'd be no getting around it."

"What? Doesn't the idea of killing people bother you, Iris?"

"I know you wouldn't kill anyone without warning. You'd give them plenty of chances. If they won't listen, then you'd have no other choice. After all, you're the one who taught me that there are beasts with desires more twisted than any monster."

"You really get me, don't you?"

"Eh heh heh. It takes more than a little praise to flatter me."

"You're already smiling."

As usual, Iris's reaction was odd, but it put my mind to rest. I'd already decided to do what I had to, but I'd been worried that Iris might reject me for it.

"The quest system at the Adventurer's Guild seemed like a perfect fit for someone aiming to be a savior," Iris said.

"It kinda was. But I want to help whoever's in need, whether they've issued a quest or not. Though I'll feel bad for any adventurers who were planning on completing the quest."

"But you'll still need money. If you'd joined the Adventurer's Guild, you could've opened an account there. Unlike Romeo, you don't have a job that'll let you open one with a trading firm, so there's nowhere to store your money. Won't it get too heavy to carry around?"

"Maybe. Coins could be difficult to carry, but I can exchange them for

precious goods. That might keep the weight down. And I can make money by hunting manabeasts and selling them to other merchants and organizations.”

The Adventurer’s Guild wasn’t the only place where I could sell materials. I could work with weapon dealers, sell directly to merchants, or perform services for villages.

Given my secret identity, I couldn’t join a party of adventurers. If my background was revealed, they’d be caught up in all the trouble. I’d accepted that Iris would travel with me because she wouldn’t take no for an answer, but I’d have to protect her.

Iris nodded her head in agreement several times then gulped down some peach juice. “Yum, this tastes great. If you’ve made your decision, Ayame, then I won’t argue.”

“All right. But if you ever have more questions, don’t hesitate to ask. The idea of deciding everything by myself scares me. I’ll always want a companion who can warn me if I’m doing something stupid.”

“You got it. I’ll question you again if I ever have doubts.”

“I appreciate it.”

Jamama, sitting on the ground below us, pricked up his ears. The server had arrived with our food just as the conversation ended.

Every dish we were served tasted great.



After enjoying the good food, I asked for some directions from an employee behind the counter inside, then left the café. Iris and Jamama were waiting for me outside.

“All right. Let’s get going,” I said.

“Huh? Did you have somewhere in mind?” Iris asked.

“Yep. Somewhere real special. Have you ever been to a clothing store, Iris?”

“A...clothing store?” It sounded like she didn’t even know the term.

A short while later, I led her into a store where her eyes lit up.

“So this is where humans buy clothes! Wow! There’s so much here I’ve never seen before!”

I’d brought her here to treat her to some new clothes.

I’d given up on the idea in the previous town since I’d been too busy dealing with the Romeo incident to find a woman’s clothing store, but I’d been determined to find one here in the city.

When I’d quizzed Iris, she’d told me that she really had been selling herbs while looking for me and gathering information, but that she’d never come across this type of store.

The only clothes Iris had were the outfit she wore each day and two sets of nightclothes. Similar was true of me, but I figured a girl should have a variety of outfits.

Mei had been particular about what she wore. Although she’d always worn the same robe for combat, I could remember her having a lot of everyday clothes.

Yu and I hadn’t cared so much. Though Yu did have a tendency to get excited whenever he found some weird armor that was supposedly a legendary item he’d seen in a picture book. One time he’d said something like “This is what I need to awaken my hidden powers!” Mei and I had to stop him from buying that one. It was a nice memory now.

“Ayame, Ayame! This one shimmers! All these clothes are so beautiful! Look, this too! Ayame...?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just reminiscing.”

Whoops. Now’s not the time for nostalgia. I’m taking a girl shopping and she deserves my full attention.

“Hello and welcome. What can help you with today?” a store assistant asked.

“I’d like some clothes that would suit my companion here.”

“What? You’re not picking them out for me, Ayame?”

“I’m sure the store employees are better at this than me. And they’ll have better taste.”

“Maybe, but I’d still prefer something that you chose.”

I don’t know much about fashion, but all right, I’ll make sure she looks cute. I’d give it my best shot.

“Hmmm, what about this?” I said, gesturing toward a dress.

“This one?”

“Yeah. Your skin’s so fair that white clothes would suit you better than anything red or black. A white dress should look good. And then how about this? A hat to make sure you don’t pass out under the hot sun.” I turned to the store assistant. “Excuse me, do you have this picture hat in her size? You do? Then we’d like one please.”

The assistant quickly picked up each item of clothing while I was talking.

Iris walked over to the changing room with the bundle of clothes. Before entering she stopped and turned to me. “Ayame, I don’t mind if you peek.”

“I’m not going to. Hurry up and get changed.”

“Hmph.” Iris angrily puffed up her cheeks and disappeared into the changing room.

Doesn’t that girl have any shame?

As I waited, I watched another store assistant pet Jamama on the other side of the store. *He never lets me pet him...*

“Oh, that’s right. Could you please not mention the girl’s...*appearance* to anyone?” I asked the store assistant.

She looked confused at first, but then adopted a professional attitude and agreed.

After a short while, Iris emerged from the changing room wearing the new clothes. “So, how do I look?”

I’d chosen clothes for her that looked cute and smart.

She was wearing a white dress that had frills on the chest and was open at the shoulders. The dress alone was probably fine for the current season, but just in case, she was also wearing a pale blue cardigan for extra warmth. The color

complimented her beautiful blonde hair.

Conveniently, the white, wide-brimmed hat would also hide her long ears. It was even decorated with a few artificial flowers that were fitting for an elf.

Lastly, Iris was wearing some white sandals that matched the rest of the outfit. I was a little concerned she might trip since she wasn't used to wearing them, but I'd be there to catch her.

Overall, I considered the outfit a success.

Even the store assistant remarked, "How lovely!"

"Yep, it's pretty. It really suits you," I said.

"Do you mean it?! Yay. Eh heh, eh heh heh." Iris was smiling as she twirled around to show me the whole outfit.

Oh good, she likes it. I breathed a sigh of relief.

While I was looking at Iris's outfit, the other store assistant brought Jamama over to us. "I've picked out something that I think looks good on your wolf," she said.

"Grrah."

Jamama was wearing a stylish red neckerchief that concealed the collar we'd put on him upon entering the city. He must have liked it because he looked kind of proud.

Now I was really going to feel like I was walking a dog. I had to wonder where his pride as a wolf had gone. Seeing him alongside Iris made it look like a noble girl and her pet had sneaked out into the streets.

"Well I'm glad you like your new clothes too... Um?" I realized the store assistants had now turned their attention to me.

"And now for you, sir. Why don't you try something on? Actually, we insist! Please allow us to select an outfit!"

"Uh, whoa, hold on."

I get why they expect me to try something on too, but I wasn't ready for this!

"There's nothing to worry about," the store assistants reassured me as I tried

to refuse them.

Why are they being so pushy?!

“No, seriously! Wait!”

The store assistant began to undress me but then froze.

There was still a scar across my body where Yu had slashed me. Even Iris hadn't been able to heal it completely. When she saw that I was a masked man who'd survived a life-threatening wound, she must have assumed I had a criminal past.

“M-M-M-My apologies, sir!”

“No, it's fine. I'm sorry that you had to see this. I won't need help changing. And I'd still like you to choose an outfit for me if that's all right.”

The store assistant still looked aghast, but she nodded then went to look for clothes.

Well, that was awkward.

“I'm looking forward to seeing your new clothes, Ayame!” Iris was still having fun at least.

Not wanting to disappoint her, I changed into a new outfit too.

“I know I asked them to pick something out, but really? A tuxedo?”

“You look so handsome, Ayame! Like a gentleman at a masquerade! Would that make me a highborn lady?”

“Well, it does give off that impression.”

“I knew it! Now it'll look perfectly natural for us to hold hands! Eh heh heh!” Iris happily took my hand in hers.

Seeing her happy really made me happy too. But there was a big problem.

“I can't go walking through the streets like this!”

You can't pull off a tuxedo anywhere but a ball. People will think I'm weird.

I heaved a sigh.

In the end I had to disappoint Iris by going back to my ordinary clothes, but a

tuxedo just wasn't going to work.

But even though my outfit was a failure, Iris told me that she'd treasure hers, so it wasn't a wasted trip.



The next day, we set out from our inn in the morning and met with Badisch at the Adventurer's Guild to collect the money made by slaying the dragon.

Badisch and his party got excited over the amount, but I wasn't so surprised. I'd been paid bigger rewards in the past for defeating demons. Most of that money had been squandered by Gladius and Mary. What little I'd managed to hide from them I'd later offered to villages where the damage was severe. Maybe I'd just been trying to ease the guilt I felt, but I couldn't resist doing something to help.

This time, I spent the money how I pleased, which was a new experience. After parting with Badisch, I walked through the market with Iris. There was a reason they called this place a trade city—it was dusk by the time we'd finished visiting its many stores. But it was worth the time spent.

"You look quite different after our visit to the market, Ayame."

"I guess so. My gear's a little better now."

The reward money was enough for me to buy some new equipment. It was amazing that I'd gotten by with just a sword and a dagger until now.

I'd bought gloves and iron boots, along with some lightweight protectors for my elbows and knees. I was also wearing chain mail under my clothes now. I'd chosen chain mail because full body armor would need to be custom made, and because lighter armor wouldn't stop me from using quick movements to confuse enemies in combat.

An enchanted set of armor would have been even better, although it would have cost a fortune. Sadly, I hadn't been able to find the right set.

Though my armor had improved, the rest of my equipment was largely the same after we were done shopping,

"It's amazing how quickly I spent the money I got for defeating that dragon."

“It’s not your fault. This pouch was more expensive than we expected.” Iris prodded the leather pouch that was hanging from my belt.

Although a reward for slaying a dragon would normally be enough to pay for more than a few basic pieces of equipment, it hadn’t stretched very far for me because of this particular purchase. It didn’t look special, but it was no ordinary leather pouch. It was a magic bag. It could hold anything small enough to fit through its opening.

In the past, someone with the job of alchemist had spent years writing symbols onto the bag that somehow increased the space inside. I didn’t get how it worked.

These days, there were no alchemists left, so the only way to get a magic bag was to buy an old one—which commanded a high cost—or to search for one among the ruins of an old building or city.

The advantage of a magic bag was that it made everything a lot easier to carry. That was important to us. In particular, it meant we could carry much more food. The pouch couldn’t stop food from spoiling, but I’d only feel the weight of the pouch itself, and not the items stored inside. It was a good use of the money that I’d gotten for fighting the dragon.

“Now we’ve got a way to store the clothes you bought me without getting them dirty,” Iris said.

“That’s right. Though I’ve got to wonder how the pouch keeps clothing and accessories separate from all the food.”

“Oh, hmm... I wonder how that works?”

“Well, we’re not experts on magic, so there’s no point in giving it too much thought.”

Having said that, human nature made it difficult to stop thinking about it now that I was curious.

As I was peering into the bag, Ranka appeared from out of the crowd behind me.

“I’ve finally found you! Ayame! And Iris, you too!”

“Hey Ranka, what’s up? Is it about the money from the dragon again? I hope there wasn’t a mistake.”

“No, it’s not that. But would you come with me?”

“Both of us?” Iris asked.

“Yes. There’s someone who’d really like to meet you both.”

Iris and I looked at each other.



We reached a collection of workshops some distance from the city’s commercial district. Workers here made many of the items people needed day to day, while blacksmiths made weapons for adventurers and soldiers.

In the middle of it all was an area surrounded by high walls, completely blocking the view from outside. The region within the walls contained no houses. This was where artisans of fire did their work.

Ranka explained that Daltis’s Workshop, the place that made fireworks, was inside.

We passed through a gateway made of thick iron plates and found Badisch and another man were there waiting for us.

“Ranka, you found them.”

“Yep. Where’s Milleuse?”

“She’s still out searching. When I see her, I’ll let her know she can stop. Anyway, Ayame, hello again. Looks like you’ve got a full set of equipment now.”

“Hello again, Badisch. And, um, is that you, Scintilla?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s me,” replied a man with a swollen face standing beside Badisch and Ranka. He looked so different that I struggled to recognize him.

“What happened to you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t ask.”

“Are you okay?” Iris asked. “We’ve got remedies that can help.”

“Don’t mind me. I consider this my punishment.”

“Punishment for what?” I asked.

We were interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps coming our way. “Ah! There you are!”

A heavysset man with bulging muscles and a body shaped like a barrel approached us. His face and his thick white hair were both covered in black soot, but what stood out most was his bushy beard.

“You’re finally here. I’m the master of this workshop, but you can call me Daltis. No titles please. All that stuff gets right up my nose. Now I heard my idiot apprentice here caused you all sorts of trouble. You’re owed an apology. I’m sorry.” Daltis suddenly bowed his head in a way I wouldn’t have expected from someone with such a stern face.

The mismatch provoked some awkward laughter from Badisch and Ranka.

“He apologized to us too,” Ranka told me.

“He needn’t have,” Badisch added. “We’re adventurers, so risking our lives for a quest is everyday stuff.”

Daltis shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I know you only took that quest to stop this idiot from charging off by himself.”

“But Master, we killed a dragon without any serious injuries,” Scintilla protested.

“You moron! You’ve no idea how much trouble you caused! Dragons are more dangerous than you seem to think! Be thankful you weren’t burned to a crisp!”

“Ouch!”

Daltis hit Scintilla across the head. Daltis was the shorter of the two, but he leaped up to hit him. The result was a loud smack that sounded like it had to hurt.

“When I got the story from these adventurers, your name came up,” Daltis continued.

“Yeah, I guess I helped them slay the dragon,” I said.

“I thought so. You have my gratitude for taking care of my apprentice.”

“It’s just a coincidence that I was there. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Well it’s because of that coincidence that he and the others didn’t get themselves killed. He might be an idiot, but he’s still my apprentice. I wouldn’t want to lose him like that.”

There was sincerity in Daltis’s words. It was clear to me how much he valued Scintilla.

The light returned to Scintilla’s eyes. “Master, I had no idea you—”

“If you’re going to die of idiocy, then blow yourself up making a failed firework instead of getting roasted by a dragon.”

“Master?!”

Daltis let out a guffaw when he saw the surprise on Scintilla’s face. “That was a joke. No apprentice of mine makes mistakes like that.”

I could tell Daltis had a big heart.

Daltis shook my hand firmly. “As idiotic as he was, we did get a dragon’s firebladder out of it. We’re going to make the grandest firework in all of history. The Full Bloom Festival’s in just a few days. Make sure you’re here to see it light up the night sky!”

“I’ll make sure I’m watching.”

Daltis grinned, revealing a set of white teeth that stood out against his soot-covered face. He was nowhere near as frightening as I’d first thought.



“He was far too much for me,” Iris said.

“He’s just passionate about what he does, that’s all.”

“All that passion was so overwhelming I couldn’t find a chance to speak. On top of that, the place smelled of smoke. It was no place for a lady.”

“I’m not used to the smell either. Wow, my hand still stinks from the soot.”

Shaking hands with Daltis had left soot on my hand, along with a powerful smell. Though it was neither me nor Iris who’d suffered the most.

“Is Jamama over it yet?” I asked.

“The body odor from the workers got to him almost as much as the smoke. They all smelled of sweat.”

“Grrraaaah...”

Jamama was repeatedly rubbing his nose and hiding his face. From the Adventurer’s Guild to the workshop, the city was full of bad experiences for him. I decided we’d leave Jamama behind if we ever visited Daltis again.

But still, Daltis’s excitement about the Full Bloom Festival had ignited my curiosity. His passion had turned my mild interest into strong anticipation.

“The Full Bloom Festival... It should be fun.”

“I think so too,” Iris agreed.

The thought of a festival like nothing I’d ever seen put me in high spirits. Just a few days later, the long-awaited festival began.

Attack of the Ice Mist

See her skin? This is a sign of evil.

Indeed, what a frightful color.

This one is unlike us. She must be tainted.

Even the spirits have rejected the girl.

There’s no place in our tribe for one like this.

But what can be done?

I say we kill her.

Yes, I agree.

Wait. We cannot allow her tainted blood to stain our sacred land.

Why not take her to the unclean place and dispose of her there?

Yes, that would be ideal.

A filthy girl belongs in a filthy place.

From the world of the highborn to the realm of the wretched.

Let's dispose of her there.

Yes, I agree.

"Lady Sway, all units are in position," said a coarse voice.

Sway shook off her drowsiness.

The gravelly voice of the monster—an unfinished demon—was hard to understand. It gave Sway one more reason to be annoyed.

She tsked. The memories irritated her. She wished she could forget the past because the recollections always annoyed her.

Unlike Sway, the demons were all in high spirits. They were smiling, seemingly oblivious to her foul mood.

"We lust for blood, Lady Sway," a demon said. "Our drive to slaughter humans has reached a peak. With the Ice Mist at our side, there's no chance of defeat. Your powers—"

"Shut up. I'm not in the mood. Unless you wanna be an ice sculpture, you'll keep your mouth shut."

"Yes ma'am."

Despite their disappointment, the more intelligent of the demons bowed their heads in agreement. They knew that any attempt to argue would result in them being frozen.

Sway then added, "And let me warn you all. Stay focused on the soldiers and adventurers that stand in our way. Don't touch any fleeing civilians."

"But why—"

The unfinished demon never got a chance to finish its sentence. It became a block of ice, bigger than its original body. When Sway snapped her fingers, the monster-turned-ice statute shattered into tiny pieces.

"I won't tolerate dissent. If you've got that, then start preparing already."

The other demons nervously bowed and then hurried away.

Sway scowled at them and then took another look at the city from her vantage point on her ice rose. “The trade city of Rikko...”

As the festival got underway, these streets represented prosperity of all kinds. As thunderous roars rang out in the sky to signal the festival’s opening, Sway could hear the distant laughter of the city’s inhabitants.

These sights and sounds made her clench her teeth in displeasure.

“Ahh, I’m so jealous. I’m gonna freeze the whole thing.”

The flames of envy burned cold in the eyes of the Ice Mist as she gazed down at the city.





It was the day of the Full Bloom Festival.

The festival had a long history and drew many attendees each year. People came from all over to see it. There were merchants who saw it as a business opportunity, people there to enjoy the spectacle, and those who already lived in the city. The trade city of Rikko was packed full of all kinds of people.

Although it was only noon, the city was already alive with activity. The festival wouldn't be in full swing until nightfall, but the attendees were enjoying good food from the city's many shops and stalls as they waited.

"Look at all these people," I said. "The city was crowded to start with, but this is on another level."

"It really is," Iris replied. "Oh, there are beastkin here too! You don't see them often."

"Huh? Oh, you're right. I didn't think I'd see them in a human nation. They couldn't have come all the way from the Beast Pride, so they must be from a different beastkin settlement."

Beastkin were a rare sight that caught my eye as I walked through the streets with Iris.

We weren't on a main street, but the crowd had already spilled out into the side roads.

It would be easy to get caught up in the festival atmosphere and buy things that I didn't need. It was all part of the fun, but I'd have to reign myself in to avoid running out of money.

"The Full Bloom fireworks are going to be amazing with all these people here to enjoy them. Though it's going to be hard for everyone to find a good viewing spot," I said.

"Good thing we've got these."

Iris was holding our tickets to the viewing platform. Daltis had given us these hard-to-get tickets to make up for the trouble we'd been through.

“Right. But make sure you don’t lose them.”

“I won’t! I’ll keep them in this bag with the drawstring tied tight. Oh, Ayame, how do I look?”

Iris twirled around in front of me. She was wearing the dress and picture hat that I’d bought for her. With the hat hiding her pointed ears, she looked just like a human.

“It really suits you.”

“Eh heh heh. Thank you! Oh, and another thing, Ayame!”

“Hm?”

“It’d be awful if I got lost in this crowd. We’d never find each other with all these people around. We’d better make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Iris held out her right hand expectantly. I’d been traveling with her long enough to guess what she wanted.

“Eh heh heh.”

“You really like being pampered, Iris.”

“Tee hee hee. I wouldn’t do this with anyone but you, Ayame.”

“I’m flattered. Jamama, make sure you don’t get trampled.”

“Grrah! Grahrrah!”

“Jamama, don’t make too much noise or they’ll tell us to put you in a beast pen,” Iris warned.

“Grah... Grrooow.” Jamama’s tail drooped.

I’d considered leaving Jamama in a beast pen, but Iris said she couldn’t bear to leave him by himself. I didn’t really want to exclude him either. We did of course get the proper permits first. It had been yet another expense, but it was a small price to pay to keep Jamama with us.

“I’m still amazed by the number of people,” Iris said.

“Yeah. Is it your first time at a festival like this, Iris?”

“That’s right. Elves have a lot of festivals. There’s Omnis Spirit Gracias-tio

where we pray to the spirits, and then there's the Tree Spirit Conference where we form our first ties with the tree spirits or deepen existing ties. But I've never been to one with so many people around. Elves aren't as numerous as other species."

"That's interesting."

"I bet you've been to plenty of festivals like this," Iris said.

"Well, I have been to a lot. But I don't think I've ever been there just to enjoy it. This might be a first for me too."

In the past, rather than celebrating, I was being celebrated. Those events had been generally intended to give hope to the people or to raise morale. It had always pained me because I was pretending to be something I wasn't.

Not that I hated the attention. Just like most people, I liked having my efforts and achievements recognized. But unfortunately, there was always more to it. Many influential people had attended those events, and they often wanted to meet me. I hadn't minded so much, but it meant that I had to behave in a certain way and I couldn't relax.

Today's festival felt like a whole new experience. To my surprise, I was actually excited.

"Ayame, Ayame, you're smiling."

"You noticed? Yeah, I'm kinda enjoying myself."

"Really? Heh heh. I am too! Oh! Ayame, Ayame! Something smells good over there! Come on Jamama, let's go!"

"Grrah!"

Iris was so excited that she kept saying my name. I started running as she pulled me to a street lined with stalls whose owners were calling out to passersby.

"How about some freshly roasted corn? Every kernel's full of texture and flavor!"

"Step right up! We've got baked potatoes freshly made! They taste best right off the hot stones!"

“Candy apples! Red apples with a sweet coating! Lick them or bite them! They taste amazing either way!”

“Candy apple?” Iris reacted like she’d never heard the term before.

“Would you like one, little miss? I make them by melting candy syrup over fresh apples and letting it harden. It’s a Full Bloom Festival favorite.”

“Oh, really? Ayame, Ayame! Let’s try them.”

“All right. We’ll take two.”

“Here you go! Since the little lady’s so adorable, I’ll give you the biggest ones we got.”

“Yay!”

The stall owner passed us the biggest two candy apples he had. The red candy coating on bright red apples made them look like jewels.

“Aren’t you glad, Iris?”

“Yes! Yes I am, Ayame! When a man and a woman enjoy a festival like this, isn’t that what people call a date?!”

“Huh? Uh, I guess so.” *I guess it technically counts.*

When most people heard the word date, they imagined a couple of about the same age walking through the streets. But Iris and I looked very far apart in age. Though, contrary to how it looked, it was me who was younger.

That made me think it wasn’t a proper date. Still, I was walking through the street with a girl, so it wasn’t far off. It was a tough one to call, but seeing the look on Iris’s face, I couldn’t bring myself to disagree.

“Yay! Uh, what’s that?!”

Iris and Jamama both jumped in surprise at the sudden *BOOM! BOOM!* in the sky above.

I looked up. “Oh, those are the cannon blasts Scintilla mentioned. It means it’s time for the festival events to start. I can’t believe how loud it is.”

“Wow, that gave me a fright. I almost dropped my candy apple.”

“Grrah.”

“You’d better get used to it. Tonight’s fireworks will probably be even louder,” I warned.

“I’m not sure I can get used to this.”

Iris didn’t seem to like loud noises, and Jamama had made his ears flat.

“Hey! Look at that!” someone cried.

It was a cry of concern that stood out from the excited chatter of the crowd. A moment later, people began pointing at something, and soon most people were looking upward.

When I followed everyone’s gaze, I saw a single rose formed from ice floating in the clear blue sky.



Sitting on a throne of ice in the shape of a rose was Sway the Ice Mist, a member of the Eight Warlords.

As Sway gazed down on the people looking up at her, a twisted smile appeared on her face, shadowed by her hood.

*Oh, I’m so jealous. Their happiness, their wealth. I’ll take it all away. I’ll show them all that there’s no such thing as ****.*

She raised her arms high and gathered her mana.

“Heed my orders and grant my desire. Chill and freeze all into a form eternally unchanging. Hear me. I am ruler of the forever-frozen lands and the ice that surpasses all.”

Sway’s incantation wasn’t a necessity, but reciting it gave her more precise control over her magic. As she spoke the words, the gathering of mana grew more powerful and swelled to a greater size.

A large shard of ice formed above her like a giant snowflake. Then more just like it appeared, like sparkling flowers stacked one atop the other, high above the ground.

With enough mana gathered and her fine adjustments complete, Sway finally

lowered her arms. **“Freezing Breath, Cocytus.”**

An instant later, an icy wind descended on the city from the giant snowflakes.

The people in the crowd closed their eyes tight in response to the sudden gust of cold air, and what they saw when they reopened them left them speechless.

“Huh? Wh-What happened?”

“The buildings are frozen?!”

“Not just the buildings! Everything! And it’s...c-cold.”

Buildings, stalls, roads, plants, food, furniture, enchanted items, towers, plazas, flowers—everything her spell touched had frozen in an instant. The people were left bewildered and trembling as the cold threatened to freeze their bodies too.

There was no doubt who was responsible.

“I am Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist. Now run in terror, humans.” Sway laughed softly and the crowd froze in terror.

The silence was quickly broken when everyone tried to flee at once. The hustle and bustle of the festival was turned to yelling and screaming. There was good reason to run—the natural enemy of humanity was upon them.

“They’re here! The Demon Lord Army!”

People collided with one another and pushed each other aside as they tried to escape. They wanted to get out of there as quickly as they could.

Sway’s cold eyes watched it all from above.



Unlike everyone around me, I stood my ground and kept my eyes on the figure above who had created ice on a massive scale. There was only one entity capable of such powerful ice magic.

“Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist of the Eight Warlords... What’s she doing here?!”

“Y-You know who that is, Ayame?”

“Yes! She’s a master of ice magic! I once knew a powerful mage who fought

against Sway. Her fire magic should have given her an advantage, but not even that could break through Sway's ice!"

Sway used a form of magic that belonged to very few, and she was as powerful as the highest-ranking mages—those with the title of Archmage. More powerful even. Mary Susie was an archmage, but even her fire magic was no match for Sway.

Now the question was why Sway was here in this city. It had to be an invasion. Nothing else would make sense.

"Now what?!"

Our opponent was one of the Eight Warlords—the highest ranking members of the Demon Lord Army. I knew as well as anyone how powerful they were. I'd only been strong enough to beat the Blast Wave because I'd relied on the holy sword's power and on my companions.

At that moment, I had no holy sword, no abilities, and no party. *Can I really take her on?*

"I can't waste time doubting myself! If I can save just one person who's in danger, it'll be worth it!"

That's the whole reason I'm trying to be a savior! If I don't stand my ground and fight now, then when? If I can't save the people in front of me, who can I save?

Now that my heart was set, a scream from someone ahead of me caught my attention.

"Aaahhh! Monsters!"

Monsters and demons descended from the sky as if Sway had called upon them herself. They began destroying any building that wasn't frozen as people scattered in all directions.

"This is bad!"

We had to escape quickly, but it was hard to move as people fled in all directions. I could use walls and rooftops to move above everyone else, but I couldn't leave Iris. She wouldn't be safe by herself.

“Sorry about this, Iris.”

“Huh? Whoa whoa whoa?”

“Grrahh?!”

With Iris cradled in my arms and Jamama sitting on her stomach, I leaped onto the canopy of an open air stall and used it to spring up onto a rooftop, where I had a better view of our surroundings. The frozen buildings around me sparkled as if all was at peace. They were beautiful. For a moment, I was surprised at myself for even thinking such a thing, but then I realized there was a reason that it all looked so peaceful.

“Why’d she use up so much mana just to freeze the buildings?”

Not a single person was frozen. I would have given this discovery more thought, but I had to prioritize Iris’s safety.

I placed her down in an area where I couldn’t see any monsters.

“I’ll be back in a moment. Wait here for me.”

“Oh, um... You won’t hold me a little longer...?”

I ignored Iris’s response and ran toward someone who was being attacked. He was a soldier, losing a fight against a demon. He was still holding his sword, but he was badly wounded.

“Ugh... It’s too strong.”

“Geh heh heh! Pathetic human weakling. Fear me! Demons are—”

Before the demon could finish its sentence, I drew my sword and jumped from the rooftop, decapitating the demon from behind as I descended. Its severed head fell to the ground, an expression of shock frozen on its face. To make doubly sure it was dead, I kicked off against a nearby wall to leap up and destroy the heart in its headless body.

Monsters and demons carried a robust life force, but destroying the heart was a surefire way to kill them.

The soldier that had been fighting the demon stared at me blankly as I landed back on the ground.

“Lead everyone somewhere safe,” I told him.

“Uh... Ah, thank you!”

The soldier was left dumbfounded by my quick victory against an enemy he’d been powerless to fight, but he soon remembered he had a job to do and began helping the city’s people get to safety.

I grabbed another soldier to question him. “Quick, what’s the situation?”

“It’s total chaos! Adventurers are helping us fight off the monsters and demons, but based on reports, there’s too many of them, and our forces are spread too thin! An elite squad was headed for the one that froze the streets...but I don’t know what happened to them!”

“All right.” I thanked him then jumped back up to the rooftops.

There were no monsters anywhere around me. With the area clear, I returned to where I’d left Iris.

“Ayame!”

“Iris, we need to get out of here. I’ve taken out the only demon nearby, so the risk should be low for now. But it’s total chaos. Make sure you don’t get swept away by the crowd.”

“What are you going to do, Ayame?!”

“Me...? I’m gonna fight. That way I can at least reduce the amount of casualties.”

Since I had no magic or abilities with an area of effect, I’d have to handle each enemy one at a time. But for each one I took out, there’d be less harm to the city’s people.

As I tightened my grip on my sword’s hilt and felt its texture clearly, a memory from my past came to my mind. Streets reduced to rubble after a demon attack. People on their knees, mourning the loss of their loved ones. The general feeling of despair.

I wouldn’t let the same tragedy play out again.

“It’s too dangerous!” Iris cried. “I know you have your sword arts, Ayame, but

you can't use any abilities! Demons are always powerful and there are so many of them. This isn't anything like Ouro Village. I don't think it's going to be so easy this time!"

"I know. But the soldiers are already out there fighting to protect everyone. I won't be in any more danger than they are."

"Then take me with you!"

"No. I can't focus on fighting if I have to protect you. I want you somewhere safe. Daltis's Workshop should be ideal. Right now, you'll be crushed by the crowds if you try to escape through the city gate, but you can get inside the reinforced walls around the workshop. It should be well fortified."

"But Ayame, if anything happens to you, I'll..." Tears began to well up in her eyes.

I know. It's me she's worried about.

"Don't worry. I know I can handle this. I've faced three Warlords at once and lived. I'll survive this too. No matter what."

I spoke confidently in an attempt to put Iris's mind at rest, but I couldn't honestly guarantee that I'd survive. I couldn't be sure I'd win. Still, I had to try. I was, after all, a savior. It was what I'd once promised Iris I'd become.

Iris sobbed. "I know I can't stop you. I know it, but I'm still worried. I found you in time once before, but what if I'm too late this time? Just the thought gives me a crushing pain deep in my heart."

"Iris."

"Please promise me." Iris raised her head. Despite the tears, she was smiling bravely. She held up her little finger. "We'll pinky swear. It's a ritual for making a promise between two people. Do you know it? If you break an elf promise, I'll curse you until I die."

"That'll be a whole new crisis."

"Yes, it will. So please don't leave me with a grudge against you. Don't make me hate you. Please tell me no matter what happens, you'll come back alive."

I nodded then wrapped my little finger around hers, sealing the promise.

“I’ll go to Daltis’s Workshop, just like you said. Please contact me if anything happens. We can talk through the communication device you took from the bird demon.”

“All right. Likewise, if anything happens, contact me, Iris.”

“I will. Let me give you one warning. The spirits have been terrified ever since the streets froze. That’s how powerful your opponent is. So be careful.”

“Okay.”

I nodded then crouched down to get on Jamama’s eye level.

“Jamama, I’m counting on you. If Iris is in trouble, it’s up to you to save her.”

“Grah... Grrah!”

“Good boy.”

Jamama’s courageous growl made me smile. I knew Iris would be fine with him by her side to steer her away from monsters on the way to the workshop.

“Ayame! I believe in you! Please don’t lose!”

“I won’t!”

With Iris behind me cheering me on, I leaped toward the battlefield.

“Goh boh boh boh boh bhoooooh.”

A disgusting fishlike monster was destroying the surrounding buildings as it chased people through the street. Despite having a fish’s body, it walked on four legs. Its scales were tough enough that it didn’t so much as flinch as buildings crumbled around it.

Unlike demons, this creature had purple eyes that looked devoid of intelligence. Unlike manabeasts, it was driven entirely by its malice toward humans.

Monsters were created by the Demon Lord to serve as his infantry in his attempts to eradicate humanity. They emitted a substance known as corrupting essence that polluted the world. Before long they’d render the soil here incapable of supporting life. It was a process relentlessly eroding away humanity’s territory.

The terrifying sight of the fishlike monster would make most people give up right there with their spirits crushed. But I felt no despair whatsoever. All I felt was calm anger, directed toward monsters making innocent people suffer.

I felt no terror. It didn't bother me that I didn't have the holy sword or any abilities. I was where I wanted to be. I'd come here willingly.

There's no need for fear! Why would I back off now?!

I once more jumped from the rooftop, thrusting my sword into the monster's head. **"Spark."**

"Goh boh boh bhoooh?"

The scales were so tough that even with the extra momentum from my fall, my sword only penetrated a short way. But still, my sword was inside the monster's body.

Looks like its scales are too hard, but its insides have to be softer.

"Your rampage is over. **Moonlight Flower.**"

I spun around and changed my grip on the sword hilt. Then I swept the sword sideways, tearing open the monster's flesh, cutting through its bones, and ending its life.

Swordsmen had an ability known as Light Slash. The user's blade would tear through the air with enough power to cut iron. There were few humans or demons that could block such an attack. Some believed it was an ability that cut through space itself.

My sword art was an imitation. My blade would have bounced off the monster's tough scales, but after penetrating them with Spark, I could cut through its flesh with Moonlight Flower.

I jumped clear and landed on my feet as the monster crashed to the ground. There were many more to deal with.

"Hwiiiin ghooohn."

"Guuh goh ghooohn."

"That's right! Come at me! I'm right here!"

I'd attracted the attention of several monsters that saw me as a threat, and they all rushed at me.

It was exactly what I wanted. It would buy more time for the city's people to escape. It was why I'd made such an attention-grabbing entrance.

I readied my sword then sliced an approaching monster into two halves.

"Come at me! I won't let you harm anyone else!" With that aim in mind, I ran through the battlefield.



While Ayame was dispatching monsters, other battles were raging elsewhere. Civilians fled as soldiers held back monsters, and adventurers were taking it in turns to unleash their attacks at demons.

It had taken some time to determine just how numerous the Demon Lord Army's forces were, but it was becoming increasingly clear that there weren't quite so many monsters or demons as first thought. But any number of monsters was of course a threat, and demons even more so. As many as ten human combatants might be wounded taking down a single monster.

Fortunately, the trade city of Rikko was home to many capable adventurers. Groups of adventurers ranked Bistar or higher were working together to take down each monster. Badisch was among them.

Once the soldiers were confident that they could leave the adventurers to hold back the monsters, they moved to take on the enemy's commander.

Sway watched the fighting from above. "Those humans are more stubborn than I thought. I should've guessed this wasn't enough demons."

The battle was closer than she'd expected. She'd known little about adventurers, and now she was learning how difficult they could be.

But demons could be trusted to deal with them all eventually. A demon's power was far beyond that of any human. A little cooperation between adventurers posed no real threat.

Sway assisted her forces by occasionally using ice magic to destroy a church or a tower. Not only did it weaken the city, it showed the humans her

overwhelming power.

Sway noticed a group of soldiers gathering near her.

“Hah. They think they can fight me? Don’t they have more immediate things to worry about?”

Sway deliberately let her ice rose float lower and cast her cold gaze over the soldiers around her.

“Surround it! Surround it! That’s their leader! And it’s alone! We can defeat it!”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to ignore all the monsters?” Sway asked.

“You can’t fool us! Once we’ve dealt with you, it’ll all be over! **Thrust.**”

One of the more confident soldiers thrust his spear at Sway. The spear’s point landed with a dull thud.

The soldier grinned. A moment later, however, he realized something was wrong.

Sway was unharmed. Something had stopped the spear before it could reach her. In an instant, she’d used magic to create a wall of ice between herself and the soldier.

The soldier tried to withdraw his weapon, then realized that he couldn’t feel his arms. “M-My arrrrms!”

His spear was frozen and his arms along with it. Fear quickly spread among the other soldiers. They’d seen Sway use her magic, but they hadn’t even seen her move.

“Get back! We need to fight from a distance! Let us mages handle this! I call upon flame, feed upon my life force and come forth with the power to burn my foe. **Fireball.**”

“Flames, pierce and burn my foe. **Fire Arrow.**”

“Burn away those who stand in my path. **Fire Blast.**”

Jets and balls of fire—a form of magic superior to ice—engulfed Sway. The heat was so intense that the soldiers could feel it even from a distance.

“Did that kill it?!”

On seeing the effect of the fire magic, the soldiers began to cheer.

But those cheers quickly died down when the flames and dust settled. Every spell cast by the mages had hit a wall of ice and failed to even melt its surface.

“What?! Why can’t our flames melt it?!”

“You all bore me. **Piercing Ice Spear.**”

“Aaaah!!!”

A giant spear of ice erupted from the ice wall and skewered a mage. They didn’t die, but they were left with ice covering their neck and much of their body, leaving them unable to fight.

The soldiers still held their weapons ready, but the difference in power set their teeth chattering in fear.

“It’s pointless. Pointless, pointless. None of you compare to me. Give up and abandon the city. Leave now and I’ll spare your lives.”

“This city’s ours!”

The soldiers that remained were assaulted by more ice-based attacks. Dozens of frozen spears slowly took form behind Sway. Each one then pierced a shoulder or a leg of one of the soldiers surrounding her.

These soldiers were the best the city had to offer. In adventurer terms, they were on the level of Bistar or Tristar. But none could compare to Sway.

With a series of crackling sounds, ice began to spread out around Sway. It crept across the ground, freezing everything in its path.

“Ice can freeze everything. Your flesh, your souls, the ground itself. Everything. I’m known as the Ice Mist of the Eight Warlords. Now that you know how inferior you are, bow to me, throw yourselves down at my feet, and beg for your lives.”

“Eeek!”

“Damn! It’s hopeless!”

“Abandon the city! Retreat! Retreat!”

With their morale completely gone, every soldier ran from the scene. All they left behind were broken spears and ruined swords. The soldiers who were supposed to defend the city had abandoned their posts with their spirits crushed.

“They talked big, but didn’t do much to defend the city,” Sway said to no one in particular. “Well, that’s humans for you.”

She moved away, looking for more gatherings of soldiers, when she encountered a crying girl in an alleyway.

“Mommy! Where are you?!”

The tearful girl was lost. She’d been swept away by the fleeing crowds.

“Mommy! Ngh. Where are you, Mommy?!”

“Forget it. Your mother’s not coming.”

“Wh-Who are you?”

“Does it matter?”

The girl cowered when Sway appeared before her.

“Poor you.” The little girl’s situation had caught Sway’s interest. “You’ve been abandoned.”

“Aban...doned?”

“Yes. All people really care about is themselves. That’s why your mother left you and ran. She won’t be back. You’ll be alone forever.”

“But... No... Ugh. Ngh. Waaaaah! Mommy! Mommy!” The little girl began to wail.

“Ah, what a pathetic child.”

*Mommy! It’s me, *****. Where are you going?! I’m sorry. Ngh. Please don’t leave me!* Sway hesitated as a memory from some other time and place entered her mind.

While she was distracted, something was thrown at her, exploding with a cloud of smoke in front of her face.

“What?!” Caught off guard by the sudden burst of smoke, Sway enclosed herself in ice to block any incoming attacks.

No attacks came. Then Sway realized that the child was gone.

She looked around and saw a masked man with red hair holding the girl in his arms.



“You all right?” I asked.

“Uhh? Who are you?” The girl stopped crying and looked at me in her confusion. Her eyes were puffy, but to my relief, she wasn’t injured in any way.

I’d seen the fleeing soldiers and hurried here, thinking that another monster had appeared. Instead I’d found a little girl with Sway right next to her.

I’d thrown smoke bombs so I’d have a chance to get her to safety.

The girl’s confusion soon turned to relief when she realized I’d saved her. Sway, on the other hand, was far from pleased.

“Who do you think you are?” Sway asked. “How dare you interrupt me? You’ve really ruined my mood.”

“Who do *you* think *you* are, making a little girl cry?” I shot back. “Were you bullying her?”

“I was being honest with her. That girl’s mother’s never coming back.”

“And whose fault would that be? You made this whole mess.”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“I’m telling it how it is.”

As we argued, I was studying her closely.

Sway the Ice Mist. I’d met her before, along with the Thunderbolt and the Mighty, when they’d attacked my party. Nonetheless, I knew very little about her.

Sway was unusual among the Warlords in that her invasions never targeted people directly. Though she was still capable of destroying whole cities.

I sensed Sway's eyes narrowing within her hood.

"You've sure got a smart mouth. But I'll bet you're as cowardly as everyone else. **Piercing Ice Spear.**"

Spears made of ice shot out at me with more speed than any soldier's Thrust attack.

But I saw them coming. Onyx's attacks had been even faster. With the girl still in my arms, I evaded each one.

Sway was a little surprised. "You dodged them? Was that an ability?"

"M-Mister," the girl stammered.

"Go hide somewhere safe."

I had the girl take cover behind a building, then turned to face Sway with my sword held at the ready.

"Sway! Your attacks are aimed at me, right?! Then stay here and fight me!"

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere. Now how's this? **Crawling Glacier.**"

With a series of cracking sounds, a wave of ice carrying sharp spikes swept across the ground toward me.

I held out my sword as I ran at it.

The moment the wave was about to reach my legs, I leaped onto the wall of a building and then thrust my sword at Sway as I drew close. "**Spark!**"

"You won't get near me that easily. **Ice Wall.**"

A wall of ice sprung up from the ground between us, blocking my attack. Spark, combined with the power of my leap, was enough to put a notch in the ice, but not enough to break through it.

It was never going to be that simple, was it?

Before the ice could spread to my sword, I kicked off from the ice wall to put some distance between us.

"Those are some impressive reflexes. You've been avoiding my ice the whole time. But you should've been more careful. You've left yourself nowhere to run.

It's over. **Piercing Ice Spear.**"

Spears of ice flew at me again, but there were more of them this time. I had to jump into the air to dodge the first few, leaving me unable to dodge the rest.

No problem. If I can't dodge them, then...

"I'll just counterattack! **Summer Rain!**"

I swung my sword at an incoming ice spear.

No matter how much I practiced my sword arts, they'd never be as good as abilities. Sure, I'd dispatched countless monsters and demons, but now I was trying to take on someone with the power of an archmage using nothing but a sword. Normally, I wouldn't stand a chance. But I had advantages over my opponent—my insight, physical strength, and agility.

I searched for the weakest points in the spears flying toward me. Once I'd identified them, a precise sword swing would be enough to destroy each one. Summer Rain was the perfect sword art for the task.

The basis for this sword art was a series of movements that I'd practiced with the holy sword to make up for my fading abilities. Whenever there'd been rain, I'd tried to repel each raindrop with my sword as it fell. I'd kept up the habit even as the holy sword grew heavy in my hands.

Even without abilities, I'd continued practicing my sword swings. Day after day. My consistent efforts were now paying off. The ice spears couldn't reach me as long as I was using this sword art.

Every last ice spear was sliced apart, shattered, or deflected before it could reach me.

"You broke them all?" Sway said in surprise. "I know it wasn't tough ice, but you're just one man."

As Sway spoke, my attention turned elsewhere. "No!"

My art might have held off her Piercing Ice Spear, but the sword I'd gotten from Fabbro was never designed for this. It was robust, but not particularly sharp, so rather than cut through every spear, it had smashed some of them apart instead, resulting in rather large fragments. One such fragment had

knocked a tile loose from a roof, and it was falling toward the little girl.

I've got to get to her first!

"Ahh!" she screamed.

"Ngh!" I successfully grabbed the girl and moved her out of the tile's path. However, the tile struck my mask, knocking it from my face.

"Ah! You're..." Sway trembled at her sudden realization. "Ah ha! Ah ha ha ha! Now I get it. I see what's going on. I can't believe you survived. Well, now it all makes sense. That's why you've got the skills to smash through my attacks. This is way more interesting than destroying a city. You're the fake, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am. What's it to you?"

I hadn't been ready for this, but perhaps I should have been. Sway, Bestreben, and Tordön all knew my face. Not wanting Sway to realize how shaken I was, I had to feign calmness.

Suddenly there was a rumbling beneath my feet, and then a demon broke out from the ground and grabbed the little girl. "Lady Sway!" the creature snarled. "I've got her. Going to eat her head first."

"Eek!"

"What?! Let her go!" I cried.

"Flash Freeze."

Before I could even raise my sword, the ultracold magic emitted from Sway's palm froze the demon whole, except for the hand it used to hold the girl.

"You were supposed to be fighting soldiers, not getting in my way."

When the frozen demon shattered, I rushed over and caught the girl.

Sway glanced at me but did nothing.

Why'd she attack her own kind? As far as I could tell, the demon hadn't done anything to provoke Sway.

For a short while I stood in front of the girl to protect her. But Sway remained motionless.

“Hey, Fake. How’d you survive? They said you were dead.”

“You think I’ll talk that easily?”

“Not really. Let’s finish this so I can interrogate you properly. I’ll freeze your whole body first...”

Sway was aiming right at me.

Keeping her attention on me was just what I wanted, though I couldn’t suppress a shiver as an overpowering chill came over me. Cold air was pouring from her, and it felt like I was freezing from the inside out. But even then, I had a bigger concern.

“Eek.”

“It’s fine.”

I was worried about the girl behind me.

Shaken by the demon’s attack, she didn’t want to run off alone again. Defending her and fighting at the same time was going to be tough. But I couldn’t just abandon her.

Before I could come up with a plan, I heard a voice calling out. “Selia! Selia, where are you?!”

“Mommy!”

It was the girl’s mother. She’d been searching for her daughter through streets overrun with monsters.

The girl left me and went to hold her mother.

“Mommy! Ngh. Ugh. Waaaah. I was scared!”

“Selia! I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have gotten separated from you!”

The mother and child, both overcome with emotion, cried as they held each other. The mother must have braved all kinds of danger to reach her daughter. She certainly hadn’t abandoned her as Sway claimed.

“Looks like you guessed wrong. The bond between mother and child isn’t as weak as you thought, is it?”

Something about Sway's reaction was odd. She watched closely, constantly mumbling to herself. "She came for her? But she could've died. That doesn't make sense. A mother's love isn't that strong. Why? Why? Why?"

Sway's wasn't looking at me. She was looking in the direction of the mother and child, though she seemed focused on something beyond them.

"Why?" She muttered once more, her voice sounding lonely. "Why...? Was it just me?"

What's Sway looking at? I wondered.

Sway raised her hands to her head and gripped her hood as ice began to collect around her. Even the ice she'd created during her initial attack was coming back to her. A new rose formed under her feet, much larger than the one she'd originally ridden.

I felt a fierce chill envelop me.

"Gaaah. Shut up. Shut up. I'm jealous. I'm envious. They keep rubbing it in my face. It's ticking me off. I'll freeze it all, everything, everyone."

Eerie, whistling winds began to build around Sway's feet.

The ice from Sway's original rose joined the rest, as did the masses of ice that had frozen the buildings. And so too did the ice that had hardened the ground beneath us. Once it was all in one place, a massive ice crystal had formed beneath Sway.

The atmosphere left me unsettled, and I felt the presence of something unnatural. "What's happening?!"

I tried to prepare myself for whatever might come next.

"Ice Colossus."

An ice giant took form with Sway's ice rose at its head.



The Demon Lord Army's commanders were far superior to ordinary demons. Many tales were told of them single-handedly defeating armies of entire nations.

For example, there was Downburst the Blast Wave. During our fight, he unleashed powerful gusts ferocious enough to damage the historical buildings around us. In comparison, a human mage could create a single tornado at most. Such was the gulf that lay between demons and humans. It was fortunate that Downburst's attacks hadn't injured any of the escaping civilians.

I'd already guessed that Sway's control over ice would be similarly powerful, but I hadn't anticipated an ice giant like this.

"No way could I have seen this coming!" I yelled as it towered above the buildings.

Sway had called it an Ice Colossus. It was a huge figure with a flower as its head, and it was about to use its massive size to destroy everything around us. Nowhere was safe. This thing was a threat to the entire city at once.

I hadn't thought I was underestimating Sway. I'd been constantly on my guard. But now I realized that I hadn't been thinking enough.

"Get far away from here!" I told the mother and child.

"All right!"

"M-Mister!"

"I'll be fine! Just go!"

They turned and ran after seeing the serious look on my face.

All the while, Sway waited patiently. "Looks like there's nothing in the way now. Should we get started, Fake?" Her voice echoed as though she was inside a cave.

After watching the mother and child go, I turned to face Sway.

She immediately threw a punch at me. Her increased size made it hard for me to judge the distance between us, and she was moving the ice giant fast. But I managed to dodge.

There was a roar as the enormous ice fist hit the ground, effortlessly shattering the surface. And not only that. The crater she'd made instantly froze over.

“You’re freezing everything you hit?!”

If I didn’t get out of the way, I’d end up just like the demon. I’d be fine if the giant’s fist flew over the top of my head, but I couldn’t stay near the hands for too long.

“**Piercing Ice Spear.**” As Sway spoke her incantation, countless spears fired from the surface of the giant’s arm.

“Whoa!”

I could avoid them if I kept running, but any building or patch of ground they hit froze.

Sway’s laughter echoed. “You’re pretty good. Now I know how you survived a fight with Bestreben. But how long can you keep it up? **Ice.**”

A moment later, icicles, each about the size of a church pillar, came raining down at me. Each one was so hard that it embedded itself into the ground on impact, rather than shattering.

Dodging them was easy because they weren’t accurate, but they sealed off various paths, and ice spread out from the ground where they hit, limiting my range of movement. I had to avoid them lest the ice spread to my feet.

Sway was rapidly taking control of the city around us.

“That’s some area of effect those things have.”

I need to figure out something fast!

If this kept up, I’d eventually fail to dodge one of her attacks. But I couldn’t counterattack—I’d probably be defeated the moment I stopped concentrating on my defense. Sway was dominating the fight entirely. A sense of urgency filled me, but I didn’t have any ideas.

At the back of my mind was one thought: *If I just had the holy sword.*

“No! I can’t keep relying on the holy sword!”

I was such a fool that my mind always went to that same stupid thought. Wishing for the holy sword would get me nowhere. Rational thinking told me I’d better retreat and regroup, and my instincts agreed that right now, there was

no hope of victory. But—

“I’m abandoning everyone again?!”

I’d seen this before. I’d watched people get trampled by the Demon Lord Army while I was incapable of saving them. I’d vowed never to watch it happen again.

“I can’t give up now!”

“Well, you’ve got more backbone than those soldiers. But you’re finished now. You’re backed into a corner... Huh?”

The ice giant was suddenly struck by a massive bolt fired from a ballista.

“Where’s that attack coming from?!” I shouted. “Didn’t all the soldiers flee?”

It had to be coming from atop the walls that fortified the city. Thick, heavy bolts began raining down at us.

Although iron bolts could only just barely pierce the ice, they were having an effect.

“That’s irritating,” Sway’s voice echoed coldly. “You think those toys are going to work against me? **Frost Space.**”

The temperature of the air around the giant dropped sharply, covering the ballista bolts in ice in midair and causing them to drop to the ground because of the extra weight.

To Sway’s annoyance, the ballistae continued firing bolts at her regardless. “Quit using tricks and retreat already.”

Sway moved the giant’s arm over the ballistae while firing her Flash Freeze spell from its fingertips. Each ballista froze as the arm swept over it. The ruined contraptions then fell silent, but none of the operators were killed.

“Damn!” The sight made me grit my teeth in frustration at my own incompetence. She was unstoppable.

Sway looked around from atop the giant, then focused on the fleeing people. They’d been watching her fight, and now they’d seen her destroy their ballistae, sending them into a panic.

“Idiots... You should’ve known you couldn’t beat me. Keep running and never forget how powerless you are.” Sway’s voice echoed through the city from above, filled with arrogance and conceit. Next she turned to me. “Shall we continue? I’m not tired of you just yet.”

With a great rumbling sound, the giant’s arm began to move.

As I tried to figure out what she was planning, her arm smashed through the nearby houses. Rubble from the destroyed buildings came at me like a hailstorm. Each piece was like a bullet from a slingshot.

I can’t dodge all these! There’s too many!

“Summer Rain!!!”

I used the sword art that could repel raindrops.

With no one around me, I didn’t have to worry where the pieces of rubble flew off to. But I was leaving myself vulnerable to more attacks.

“Flash Freeze.”

I felt a whoosh of air as Sway unleashed the same magic that had frozen the demon. I couldn’t let it hit me.

I stopped intercepting the rubble and leaped clear. At the same time, a large piece of rock bashed into my head.

Blood poured from the wound, but before I could worry about that, I realized that I’d misunderstood the intention behind Sway’s attack. The Flash Freeze fired from the giant’s five fingertips hadn’t been aimed directly at me. *What’s she firing at?*

Before I could figure it out, I felt pain run up my left arm. It was starting to freeze.

“I’m hit!”

The icicles embedded into the ground behind me had formed a collection of mirrors that reflected the Flash Freeze attack. My left arm was gradually freezing where the attack had hit me.

“Ice Mirror... Ice can reflect all kinds of things. Too bad for you. You were

doing so well. Don't worry, I won't kill you. I'll only..."

I wasn't even listening to Sway. I was trying to find a way to free my arm. I whacked it against a wall but nothing happened. I wondered whether my sword could cut the ice away, but that would take too long. The ice was rapidly creeping toward my shoulder.

At this rate, my whole body would freeze. I had to do something.

I looked about me and then realized my surroundings were familiar. During the fight, we'd made our way to the place where I'd been enjoying the festival with Iris.

"What if..." I looked around, searching for something. *That should work.*

I started running.

Sway was close behind me. "Think you can escape? I'm not letting you get away."

I was heading for the baked potato stall near where we'd bought candy apples. I was sure to find the hot stones used to bake the potatoes.

The stall owner was gone. He had no doubt fled. But I didn't need him. I stood in front of the heated stones.

The effect of magic grew weaker farther away from the caster. Sway had the power to freeze me whole just like the demon, but as long as she held back out of consideration for the weakness of the human body, I still had a chance.

I thrust my frozen arm into the stones.

"Ngh. Aaaarrggh!" I tried to hold back, but couldn't stop myself from screaming. *It hurts. It hurts. It's burning me. Roasting me.*

Once I thought I'd endured enough heat to melt the ice, I took my arm out. My gamble had paid off. But the result was horrible—my skin was blistered, the flesh roasted, and my fingertips almost numb from the serious burns.

It hurt just to hold anything, but it was only pain. I could still fight. I could still hold my sword. That was all I needed.

I smiled.



“Are you an idiot? No sane person would put their hand in those hot stones.”

“Hah! I’m fighting a Warlord. Sane methods aren’t going to work, and there’s no way I’m getting through this uninjured. But too bad for you you couldn’t freeze me.”

“I held back, that’s all. Next time I’ll freeze all of your limbs before you get a chance to thaw yourself.”

Sway moved the giant’s arm toward me once more.

I gritted my teeth and readied myself, determined not to overlook her attack this time.

“Hm?” Sway was caught off guard by an arrow that hit the giant’s shoulder.

Her Frost Space attack had ended, allowing the arrow to reach her. It did no real damage to the giant, but it was enough to divert her attention.

“Uhooooh! **Pulverizing Blow!**”

A figure appeared from the shadows carrying a war hammer as big as his own body. He swung his weapon at the ice giant, scoring a direct hit on its leg.

That heavy attack had been powerful enough to crush the head of a dragon, but the giant didn’t even lose its balance.

“Ugh! I should’ve known its knee wouldn’t be a weak point!” Badisch shouted.

“Because it’s like a golem! It’s not a person!” came Milleuse’s reply.

“The damage from the ballista healed already. This thing can withstand anything,” Ranka added.

“Now’s no time to be impressed!” Badisch shot back at him.

I called out to the three people who’d come to my aid. “Badisch! And Ranka and Milleuse! What are you doing here?”

“We’ve finished off all the monsters and demons in the streets!” Badisch told me. “There weren’t too many of them, and all the adventurers and soldiers worked together! None of them took hostages either. Hm? What happened to you? So that’s the face you’ve been hiding under that mask? Actually, forget

that, what is this thing?!”

“She’s Sway Ka Senco of the Eight Warlords.”

The three adventurers looked at me, stunned.

“The Eight Warlords?! I knew we were in trouble, but you’re telling me there’s a Warlord in our city?!”

“No way!” Milleuse cried. “We can’t take on a Warlord! Let’s run! Let’s get out of here right now!”

“We can’t do that. Our attack drew her attention right to us,” Ranka replied, accurately describing their situation.

“Heh. Looks like the beating I gave her just ticked off her,” Badisch said. “You two can run if you want.”

“Looks like it...but I’m not running,” Ranka said. “I grew up not far from here.”

“Uh... Well, it’s not the first time we’ve followed you into danger, Badisch,” Milleuse agreed. “I’ll hang tight too.”

“You guys... All right. Just don’t get yourselves killed! Hey, Ayame! We’re all by your side from here on out!”

Sticking around was both reckless and stupid. But I couldn’t be the one to tell them that because I was the same way.

They’d known the risks when they came to me. They knew they might die here. But they wanted to protect the city and their homes. I could feel their determination and I knew I couldn’t argue with them.

My response was simple. “Thanks. I could use the help.”

All three of them grinned at me.

“Again?! Why does everyone keep getting in my way? You could’ve just abandoned him! I’m so annoyed I’m gonna crush you all! **Gigantic Hail.**”

Sway sounded enraged or frustrated, but I didn’t understand why. She was acting like a child throwing a tantrum while we were in the middle of a battle.

Numerous lumps of ice formed above us as Sway cast her spell. Hailstones, each about the size of a melon, then came falling toward where I was standing.

“Don’t worry! I can shoot them out of the air. **Precision Volley.**”

Ranka reached for his bow then unleashed multiple arrows all at once, shattering the falling hailstones. They might have been numerous, but they clearly weren’t tough, and not a single one of Ranka’s shots missed.

“I’ve had enough of all your tricks. **Grand Ice Block.**”

The hailstones gathered together to form a massive chunk of ice as big as a bolder.

“I can’t destroy that,” Ranka warned us.

“Here it comes! Scatter!”

At Badisch’s command, the three moved to new positions. With an echoing boom, a house next to where they’d been standing was completely crushed.

“Hey, Milleuse! Ayame! I’ll make an opening! Get some hits in!” Badisch cried as he got closer to the giant and swung his war hammer. “Urraaah! Come on, you big ugly statue! I’ll carve you down to size!” he yelled with rage.

Milleuse used that opening to brandish her staff and cast a spell. “Pressurized wind, come forth and cut my foe, sharp, deep, and quick! **Cutting Wind.**”

Milleuse hit the giant directly with her sharp winds, but they did no damage.

“A feeble breeze. You don’t compare to the Blast Wave, so why bother?”

“Should’ve known it wouldn’t work! I’m done with this!” Milleuse shouted.

“Me too!” Badisch agreed. “This damned thing! It’s gonna attack! Run, run, run! If you get frozen, you’ll wind up as some noble’s ice sculpture!”

“Anything but that!”

As Badisch’s party ran, Sway gave chase and began charging her mana in the giant’s right hand. It gave me just the opening I needed.

While Sway’s attention was elsewhere, I scrambled atop a building and leaped onto the giant’s back as I thrust with all my might. “You forgot all about me, didn’t you? **Spark!**”

My sword bounced off the ice surface with a clank. It was like trying to cut through a block of metal.

The properties of materials formed by magic varied depending on the power of the caster. Although Sway had to stick close to her creation and control it directly, she clearly had exceptional skill to give ordinary ice the toughness of steel.

“Ugh. Guh...!”

When my sword bounced off the tough ice, it sent a jolt of pain through my burned hand. The skin broke and began bleeding.

Undeterred, I attempted another swing, but my sword merely clanged against the hard surface once more.

This is getting me nowhere... But I'm not giving up!

As tough as the Ice Colossus was, its humanoid form had to have a weak point somewhere. The elbows, groin, neck, and eyes were likely candidates. I just had to try them all.

I ran across the giant, striking it as often as I could. I had to keep moving or I'd be frozen feetfirst. I traveled as quickly as I could with small, efficient movements, keeping up my attacks all the while.

“Quit scuttling around. You're way more trouble than those other weaklings.”

Sway noticed me running up the giant's back and created icicle projectiles in the air that she then fired at her own Ice Colossus. Somehow I dodged them.

Next came her Piercing Ice Spear, which fired at me horizontally. As countless spears flew at me, I countered them with Summer Rain.

I couldn't stop running, but it was getting me closer to Sway's ice flower.

“Almost there!”

I heard Sway casting a new spell. “Cold winds blow, scatter flowers and freeze even souls for all eternity. **Falling Ice Flowers, Antenor.**”

Flowers of ice appeared all around me, each one spinning rapidly and giving off cold air. The flowers were also emitting small, sharp petals that flew at me. On top of all that, there was a cold wind threatening to freeze me.

Petals came at me from up ahead, then more from behind me and to my left

and right, leaving me nowhere to dodge.

“No, there’s still one place!”

“Now you’re... What?!”

I leaped as high as I could. I got clear of the freezing wind, then kicked off from one of the flowers in midair. That put me much closer to the flower at the giant’s head and Sway.

“Moonlight Flower.”

As I landed, I slashed. *I have to find somewhere—anywhere—where my attacks actually work.* That was my thought as I used my sword art.

There was a cracking sound. I’d actually broken the ice a little.

“Okay, that— Whoa?!”

Sway had had enough of me. As the giant’s arm came flying down at me, I managed to dodge just in time, but I had to leap into the air in an awkward posture. If Sway followed up with her Piecing Ice Spear, it would all be over.

Rather than take chances, I threw all of the smoke bombs I’d gotten from Iris.

“What? Smoke again?”

They did no damage to Sway while she was encased in ice, but it blocked her vision well enough that she lost sight of me. I used that chance to recover my posture and land on a rooftop, where I hid behind a wall.

“Haah, haah. This is tough.”

I knew it would be.

Most of my attacks were ineffective against Sway. And not just that. I was losing blood from my various wounds. The longer the fight went on, the more I’d be at a disadvantage.

“But I did get something out of all those failed attempts.”

I’d learned a little about Sway’s Ice Colossus.

I couldn’t put a scratch on it at first, but after Badisch appeared and created an opening for me, I’d found a place where I could make a tiny crack.

The area corresponding to a human's head, where Sway's ice flower was located, was more brittle than the rest. I hadn't gotten to Sway inside, but I'd cracked the ice at least. I had to let everyone else know.

I dropped down into an alleyway and kept myself hidden.

When the smoke finally cleared, Sway was standing there alone. "Ugh. Where'd he go now?"



After meeting up with Badisch and the others in an alleyway, I stopped to catch my breath. I also took a moment to patch up my bleeding wounds with some bandages I was carrying.

"Haah... Haah... Hey. How'd it go?" I asked.

"No good. I'm...almost out of mana..."

"I don't have many arrows left either."

Badisch's party members were as tired as I was.

I knew they would be. It was a stroke of luck that they'd survived fighting that huge opponent.

Things weren't looking good. We'd been exposed and vulnerable while our opponent was entirely immune to our attacks. It was both mentally and physically exhausting for us to keep going while knowing it was pointless.

The difference in mana capacity was huge. Sway had made liberal use of her magic, and yet she didn't seem tired at all. Milleuse's use of magic, meanwhile, had left her exhausted.

"This isn't going to be easy..."

I'd always known that, but things kept looking worse.

Badisch informed me that the monsters and demons were all gone, but the city's complete destruction remained inevitable as long as Sway was here. We had to find some way to defeat her, but no ideas were coming to mind.

"What can we do? I don't think she knows where we are," Badisch said.

"A big thing like that should have plenty of blind spots. But the ice doesn't

leave us many places to hide,” Milleuse said.

“Even if she doesn’t find us, we can’t hide for long,” I said. “If we leave her alone, she might attack the city’s people.”

“But we can’t face her again without a plan,” Ranka said.

I told them what I’d learned during the fight a short while ago. “I did figure out one thing. The flower at the giant’s head. Sway’s in there, and the ice around it’s more brittle.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it. I made a small crack when I struck the surface. It was the only place I could damage at all.”

I didn’t know whether it was down to Sway’s conceit or a weakness of her magic, but even without abilities, I’d been able to damage the flower at the head with my sword arts. That was the place to attack.

“That might be a weak point, but there’s no way to attack it,” Ranka said. “We can’t get near it ourselves, and the only large ranged weapons we had were the ballistae, but those were all destroyed in the fight.”

“My magic was useless against her too,” Milleuse agreed. “I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help.”

“If I could land a hit there with my Pulverizing Blow... But that’s not worth talking about if I can’t get near.”

That was the problem. We’d found a weak point, but we had no way to target it. And Sway was no fool. I knew she’d deal with me quickly if I tried the same thing twice. We still didn’t have a viable strategy for fighting the giant.

If only Yu was here... No! I can’t think like that!

The bleakness of the situation had lowered my spirits so much that my mind went to the childhood friends that I’d lost. Yu would probably have come up with a plan to get us through this. Just like when he gave us the hope we needed to fight the Blast Wave.

Wishing for help from people who aren’t here won’t get us anywhere.

I shivered from the cold around us. “Haah... Sure is cold here.”

The longer we spent talking, the more of our body heat was sapped away. The places Sway attacked had frozen and were giving off cold air. It was making everything around us freezing cold, like it was the middle of winter.

Our only chance of beating Sway is to attack the giant’s head somehow. But my muscles and my sword combined don’t have enough power.

“The one source of hope is that her ice should be at least a little vulnerable to fire. But...” I trailed off.

Much like when I’d thawed my arm, we could melt Sway’s ice with enough heat. Unfortunately, we had no means of making a fire big enough. Even Mary, the powerful Archmage of Fire, hadn’t managed it.

Simple fire won’t do it. It has to be something bigger. Or maybe something explosive...

“Oh!”

The other three looked at me.

“What is it, Ayame?”

“Did you think of something?”

“Well... Maybe. Tell me what you think.”

Thoughts of Yu were still at the back of my mind. He’d talked this way whenever he’d formed plans. I’d never be like him. But I’d always watched him closely, and I could at least imitate him.

When I shared my plan with the others, they were surprised by what I had to say, but they nodded in agreement.

“That could work,” Badisch said. “It might’ve resisted our attacks and the ballistae, but it’s still just ice. It has to work.”

“Yeah, I think so. But it’ll put the workers in danger.” This was my biggest problem with my own plan. “They’re not soldiers. I’d rather keep them out of this. Besides, they’re probably far away by now.”

“I doubt that,” Badisch replied. “They’re as stubborn as they come. It’ll take

more than a little danger to scare those guys away.”

Ranka agreed. “They had a chance to sell the workshop to rich merchants from another city one time, but they wouldn’t hear of it.”

“You wouldn’t believe how stubborn they are,” Milleuse added. “Even Scintilla used to complain that the others refused to explain their methods to him. They just told him to watch and learn. They’ll do things their way even if it means going against the goddess.”

“But we’re not just talking about something a little risky here. Sway’s no fool. She’ll try to crush them the moment they fire at her. Then they’ll be—”

“Ayame,” Badisch cut me off. “This city isn’t just our home; it belongs to those workers too. They’ll do whatever they can to defend it. You’re worrying too much. We’re not as weak as you think. Besides, what’s the alternative?”

“Well...”

I knew I couldn’t defeat a Warlord without help. I didn’t have the power to take on Sway alone. With the others by my side, I’d at least have a chance.

But even so, I hated the idea of dragging anyone else into this foolhardy fight. Unfortunately, this was the only reasonable idea I had.

It just wouldn’t be right, I thought, even though I was the one who’d suggested getting them involved.

Badisch, seeming to sense my feelings, slapped my uninjured right shoulder. “It doesn’t matter what you say anyway. If the workshop’s at risk after we’ve failed, those old folk are gonna fight with their lives to defend it. That plan of yours will at least give them a better chance. This way we can all survive.”

“You can count on me to protect them,” Milleuse assured me.

“Same here,” Ranka agreed. “It’s always better to regret the attempt than to regret not attempting anything.”

They’d already made up their minds. Now I just had to do the same.

If Badisch’s party and the workshop staff died, the responsibility would be mine. I’d carry the guilt my whole life.

If we're doing this, we'd better do it fast. We have to ask them right now.

I raised my head and said, "All right. Let's ask the workshop to help."

"Sure thing," Badisch said. "I doubt they'll say no, but if they do, my party's out too. Now who'll go tell them?"

"Hold up. We can send word using this enchanted item. I'll get Iris to pass the message along."

"An enchanted communication item?" Ranka said. "What a nice thing to have. Not even armies or governments have many of those."

"Ah ha ha... I just got lucky when I found it." I wasn't lying. I'd taken it from Onyx the Speed Talon.

I pressed the button on my bracelet and waited for it to connect to Iris. In no time at all, I heard her voice.

"Iris, can you hear me?"

"Ayame! Are you all right?!"

"Grrahgrrah!"

"I'm fine."

I smiled despite myself when Iris's first concern was for my safety.

"You are...? That's a relief. But what is that thing?! It's so misshapen, with a flower for a head."

"That's the part we're gonna attack. Now I need a favor. You're at Daltis's Workshop, right? Can you give Daltis a message? Ask him whether he'll shoot fireworks at the ice giant."



Sway looked down on the city from atop the Ice Colossus. "Where'd they go?"

Her vision was limited because her Ice Colossus had no eyes other than Sway herself. She saw no trace of Foyle or the others as she scowled at the ground.

She could use Ice Mirror to search, but the city of Rikko was packed with irregularly shaped and haphazardly placed buildings with narrow alleyways

between them. Even the city's own soldiers would struggle to find someone hiding. Sway's vantage point gave her some advantage, but finding a few humans was still a struggle.

After a little thought, she considered using Freezing Breath, Cocytus to drive them out. Alternatively, she could fire Piercing Ice Spear in every direction to destroy any streets where they might be hiding.

Sway shook her head. Neither idea appealed to her. *That might kill him and then it'll all be for nothing. But I can't afford to lose track of him like this.*

Sway was done underestimating Foyle. She didn't know how, but he'd definitely gotten stronger since their last encounter. She knew that she might be vulnerable to his sword attacks.

Her Ice Colossus was what kept her safe. Foyle wasn't carrying the holy sword. That meant he didn't have the power to break through its ice and his attacks would never reach her. Besides, she wouldn't be careless enough to let him get so close to her a second time. That was one reason she persisted in trying to locate him.

"I'll catch him, no matter what. Hm?"

With a thud, an arrow hit the colossus and stuck into the ice by just the tiniest amount.

Sway searched for the source of the arrow and then smiled broadly beneath her hood.

It wasn't Ranka she saw in the ice mirrors she'd created throughout the streets, but Foyle. Sway immediately unleashed a Piercing Ice Spear in his direction.

Although surprised by the attack, Foyle dodged successfully. Then he readied his sword and approached Sway.

Sway was glad. She just wanted to make sure he didn't run away again.

"Ha! Not running this time? I commend you for that!"

As long as he couldn't break through her ice, Sway was certain she'd capture him. Then she'd learn his true intentions.

Maybe he's the same...

As the fight resumed, Sway had a certain hope hidden deep within her heart.



The fighting had so far been intense.

We'd shown ourselves to Sway once again after Iris told us she had Daltis's agreement. Almost everywhere was frozen now, leaving us few places to stand.

The safe areas grew more confined, and with each new attack, Sway made the terrain around us increasingly treacherous.

Just a little longer, I reassured myself.

Since the preparations weren't finished, our job was to buy some time. We couldn't go on hiding in case Sway began attacking the city at random.

But Sway wasn't making things easy for us.

"Ngh. Ugh! My legs!"

Milleuse had stepped onto a frozen surface and slipped while dodging an ice spear. With a series of crackling sounds, the ice moved like a living thing, spreading to her legs and leaving her unable to move.

"Milleuse!" I yelled.

"You really think you can get to her?" Sway taunted.

"Ugh."

Massive icicles rained down on the road ahead of me, blocking the way forward. The buildings around me were also frozen, leaving no other routes I could take.

"Those weaklings are nothing. You're the difficult one. Give me a moment to deal with them, then I can focus on you. She's first!"

"Eek!"

"Milleuse!" Badisch yelled.

"I can't hit anything from here! Get out of there!" Ranka cried.

Both knew there was nothing Milleuse could do. But they couldn't abandon

her.

Milleuse tried casting Cutting Wind, but she knew it was useless—not even Badisch’s war hammer had affected the ice giant.

Suddenly there was an explosion near the spot where Milleuse was trapped. The heat was enough to melt the ice that held her down, and then the shock wave sent her tumbling.

“Waah! I’m still alive?! I’m actually alive?!”

“You certainly are,” Ranka said.

“But you’re not looking great,” Badisch added. “Your underwear’s showing.”

“Huh?! Ahhh?!”

While Badisch and Ranka were helping Milleuse, I looked in the direction the attack had come from.

“It’s starting!”

I watched as several orbs flew through the air and landed on the ice giant. Then there was a series of fresh explosions.

“Ugh. What’s going on?!” Sway cried.

The explosions hadn’t broken the ice of the giant’s hand, but she was surprised to feel the heat reach her.



“Master, one shot missed!”

“Don’t you know how to aim, you brainless fool?!”

“Ouch!” Scintilla cried as he was hit. It was hard to believe that the deep thunk accompanying the impact of Daltis’s fist had come from Scintilla’s head.

Daltis called out to the workers. “Get the next round loaded! You’re acting like you can’t handle a ball! Didn’t you play ball games as a kid?!”

The firework makers sprung into action.

“Give us a break! We’ll hit it dead-on next time!”

“Light that fuse!”

“All right! That’s the spirit! Come on, hurry it up!”

The area around Daltis’s Workshop was somewhat elevated compared to most of the city. The workshop was surrounded by walls, but they were launching from the area just outside.

They’d set up a row of tubes made for launching fireworks. Aiming them was hard because they were all designed to fire directly upward, but once a tube was set up correctly, they didn’t have to reposition it. The target was so big that there was no excuse for missing.

Iris and Jamama stood near the firework makers who were rushing from one tube to another. With each launch came a thunderous roar that made Jamama jump with fright in Iris’s arms, but it wasn’t enough to drown out Iris’s voice.

“Excuse me! Please don’t hit Ayame and the others!”

“You don’t need to tell me!” Daltis roared back at her. “Do you know how many years we’ve been doing this? We know what we’re doing!”

“Master!” Scintilla said tearfully. “Why’d you agree to this? Let’s run away! I’d already started packing when you called for me!”

“Don’t be stupid! This here’s our home! And the Full Bloom Festival goes way back! We can’t run when there’s a tradition to uphold! Isn’t that right, you brainless clods?!”

“Aye, sir!” the other workers all said in chorus.

With the exception of Scintilla, not a single one of the firework makers showed any fear, and Daltis knew he could rely on them.

“Never thought we’d be firing them at a demon instead of straight up.” For just a moment, Daltis looked troubled, but he quickly shook it off and returned his attention to the task at hand. “But now’s no time for whining. Put the angle right!”

With a series of explosions, fireworks erupted from the tubes and then blossomed like flowers one after another.

Now that Iris felt she could trust the workers to do their part, she turned her attention to the colossus rampaging through the streets. “At this rate, Ayame

and the others won't survive long enough for the plan to work!"

She knew that Daltis's team still had another trick lined up, but she wasn't sure Ayame could afford to wait for it. When they'd last been in contact, Ayame had been out of breath, and although he hadn't said so, Iris could tell he was badly wounded. And yet he was still trying to draw the ice giant's attention.

"But— But if I go to him, I'll only get in the way. Think. Think! Ayame and the others are in danger. What can I do for them? I have to think of something."

Iris thought as hard as she could, but nothing came to her. She felt she was completely powerless.

"Grrah."

Jamama brought his face close to hers as if to soothe her. He'd pulled out a flower that had been in Iris's bag. It was from the bouquet that Romeo had given her in Fiore.

"Were worried about me? Thank you, Jamama. Huh...? What are you doing here?"

A tree spirit was sitting right in the middle of the flowers. It was the same one that had been there when Romeo gave her the bouquet. It must have decided to follow her when she'd gone back there to collect some begonias for making a crown of flowers.

The tree spirit was making gestures in the air as if trying to tell her something. It was gesturing toward more spirits.

Iris suddenly realized something. "I'm an elf. One of nature's arbitrators. That means..." She took a deep breath. "I'd like to make a request to all of the spirits in this city!" she yelled.

As spirits began gathering around her, she spoke to them.

"I know you're afraid of our opponent! But I'm going to swallow my pride and beg for your help! Someone precious to me—a good friend—is fighting against her! He wants to save as many lives as he can! I can't do anything to help him, so that's why I'm asking you!"

Iris clenched her fists in frustration, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Please aid him and the others in their brave struggle against evil!”

As she tried to find the words, she felt she was unworthy of their assistance. She was asking the spirits to help Ayame after she’d taken refuge without him. But asking for help was all she could do.

A silence fell, a silence between Iris and the spirits despite the ongoing roars of fireworks.

Then, finally, the flowers in Iris’s hair began to sway. Anyone watching would only have sensed a gentle breeze, but to Iris, it was a sign of agreement from the spirits.

“Thank you!” Iris said as she wiped away her tears. “I’ll send signals to guide you all. Please follow them, but take care.”

Iris looked at them directly. Greater spirits could take physical forms, but only elves like Iris could see the smaller spirits that surrounded her.

Human mages created mana within their own bodies as they inhaled the etheric energy permeating the air around them. They could then use this mana to bring about physical phenomena. Spirits, however, worked their magic by drawing upon etheric energy directly.

This allowed spirits to skip the conversion process that humans relied upon. But that wasn’t entirely advantageous. Although spirits needed etheric energy to live, they struggled to harness it. And while they could bring about phenomena on massive scales, they could only do so in places where a plentiful supply of etheric energy was already available.

Though spirits were innocent beings, free from malice of any kind, they could easily drain vast regions of the energy with destructive consequences unless their powers were used with restraint. It was for this reason they relied on elves to serve as nature’s arbitrators.

Elves used a form of magic known as animancy that drew on the power of the spirits. To help the spirits control their powers carefully, the elves would cooperate with them as the spirits supplied etheric energy.

“I call upon the ancient beings that live among us. The deep ties we share through the cycle of the life force of this world make us kindred. I bid you to

join our fight and draw upon the currents of the life force as we oppose the ice breath bringing disaster upon this city.”

Iris almost sang as she spoke the poetic words, weaving a spell with her voice. Bursts of flames and wind sprung up around her, hinting at the presence of spirits. The picture hat was knocked from her head, but Iris continued despite revealing her ears. The risk of exposing her true nature to Daltis and his workers was nothing compared to the danger that Ayame and the spirits aiding him faced while fighting Sway.

Iris continued her incantation. Her concern for Ayame and the others was so great that she had to help however she could.

“Defeat the threat upon us and restore peace to this place! **Spirit Song of Life Force, Aerial.**”

Through her animancy, Iris gained the cooperation of the spirits. Invisible to everyone but her, they headed into the battlefield to assist Ayame and the others.





I watched as fireworks launched one after another. The explosive impact of each one was so powerful that Sway felt it even from within the colossus.

Her ice wasn't melting, but it couldn't completely block the shock from the explosions.

"That's so irritating. I was giving them a chance to run! Ugh... I'm losing control." Sway couldn't hide the frustration in her voice.

With a great rumbling sound, the ice giant began to move. It looked like she was about to crush the workshop's workers under the colossus's hand. But I wasn't going to give her the chance.

"What's wrong?! Wasn't it me you were after?!"

"Argh! I've had it with you, Fake!"

The ice giant swung its arm. The flailing limb was massive, but otherwise unimpressive. I had no trouble dodging as it smashed through the roof of a house.

"You think you'll hit me with wild attacks like that?! You're an embarrassment to the Eight Warlords!"

"I can't stand you anymore! Stop resisting! Let me catch you!"

Sway was desperate to bring me down. I was glad because it took the attention off the workshop.

Great. Luring her should be easy.

The main problem now would be getting the timing right. But that didn't depend on just me.

Badisch, Milleuse, Ranka... I'm counting on you all!

The fireworks stopped as Sway and I faced each other once more. She didn't even notice as the three adventurers disappeared from the battlefield.



Bombarding Sway with fireworks from Daltis's Workshop was only the first

part of the plan.

Despite how many fireworks had already hit her, Sway remained unharmed.

The Ice Colossus was massive, and although each firework did a little damage, the ice regenerated so quickly that there was no chance of destroying it. They could have used a bigger firework, but that wasn't sure to work because Sway could use Frost Space once again to disable it before it could explode.

The situation called for a surprise attack that wouldn't give her a chance to cast any spells.

While Sway was focused on Ayame, Badisch slipped into the shadows and watched the two fight.

"He's still going after all that? Just how tough is that guy?"

Ayame was using buildings as shields and platforms. He made use of ropes to move from one building to another, and sometimes he bounced high into the air using the tops of stalls. He was rushing here and there in all directions. And all the while he was fending off Sway's attacks. It was hard to believe he was doing it all with a burned arm and other serious injuries.

Such movements were far beyond Badisch.

"That's fine. I've got my own job to do," Badisch said to himself. Then his thoughts turned to his companions who were playing their own roles elsewhere. "You too, Ranka, Milleuse. Give it all you've got."

The ice giant chased after Ayame. Its movements were increasingly desperate as it fired ice attacks incessantly, destroying entire buildings. Then an arrow whooshed through the falling rubble and dust, embedding itself into the Ice Colossus's back.

"Now for the shoulder!" Ranka said.

He followed after Sway as he launched another arrow, perfectly aimed at its target.

His arrows couldn't break through the ice. The arrowheads barely penetrated the surface. But each arrow Ranka fired had nuts tied to it.

Ranka remembered his instructions from Ayame.

“Ranka, I want you to attach these to your arrows.”

“What are they?”

“Exploding nuts. I got them from Iris along with the smoke bombs. One by itself doesn’t have much power, but pack a bunch together and they’ll have enough force to crack open a rock. All you need to do is shoot them at random places and some should fall into the cracks made by the fireworks.”

Ordinary arrows didn’t have much effect against Sway within the Ice Colossus. At most they could distract her. It had been enough to make Ranka grit his teeth in frustration. He’d felt his skills and his bow were both pointless. Then came the request from Ayame.

Ranka knew he might not survive, but he was willing to accept Ayame’s plan if it bolstered their chances of success even slightly. He was willing to gamble his life.

“My arrows are never going to be as powerful as ballista bolts. I’ll trust in your idea!”

With a series of whooshing sounds, Ranka fired more arrows into Sway’s ice. As each arrow hit, a water spirit added water to the arrowhead, which would then freeze, holding the arrow in place.

Sway noticed them, but unlike a soldier’s spear, they wouldn’t hurt her even if they made it through her ice. Since she was preoccupied with Ayame, she completely ignored the arrows. She didn’t realize she was walking into a trap.

Ayame continued to dodge Sway’s wild attacks while heading for a certain spot—the biggest bazaar in the city of Rikko. Wares of all types had been scattered by panicking people fleeing the attack.

Ayame rested his back against an open-air stall and stopped to catch his breath. “Haah. Haah. Phew...”

His breath was white as he exhaled because Sway’s constant use of magic had lowered the temperature of the whole city, and his body was covered in wounds.

“Ah hah! Now you’re cornered. There’s nowhere left to hide!” Sway declared

triumphantly while resting the Ice Colossus's hand against a building. "Now let me freeze you! **Flash**— Huh?!"

As Sway positioned the giant's arm ready to freeze Ayame, she suddenly felt a powerful gust of wind.

It was an unnatural wind that lifted dust, powders, and other small things into the air, creating a thick cloud that made her lose sight of Ayame.

"Fine! Just don't bill me for the damages later!" Milleuse said as she watched the result of her magic.

There'd been a lot of wheat flour on the ground, as well as a pile of metal powder created by a blacksmith sharpening blades for customers. A single spark was all it would take to trigger a huge explosion. The wheat flour would cause a dust explosion while the metal powder would cause a metal fire.

Although that sort explosion couldn't normally happen outside enclosed spaces, Milleuse was using an ability known as Dust Devil that picked up both types of powder and turned them into a dense, swirling mixture. Not only was Sway's view impeded, she was also engulfed by the powder.

Milleuse remembered Ayame's instruction: *"I want you to block her vision with your wind magic. It won't damage her, but it'll stop her in her tracks."*

Milleuse had agreed. She knew that her magic wasn't useful if used offensively. But she'd never considered using her wind magic like this before.

"If I get a bill for this, I'm making it Ayame's responsibility too!"

Milleuse poured all of her remaining mana into the whirlwind she'd created.

"Just watch this! You've got no idea what's in store for you! Wait, why'd my magic get so strong all of a sudden?! Did my true power awaken?!"

Milleuse watched as her whirlwind turned into a massive tornado that engulfed Sway's Ice Colossus. She didn't realize it, but the wind spirits were responsible.

"Ngh. Go ahead and make all the wind you want!" Sway cried. "It can't melt my ice!"

As powerful as this wind attack had become, she knew it couldn't hurt her.

Still, she couldn't hide her irritation when the dust blocked her view.

"There's no way a lone mage made wind this strong... Oh!" Sway finally noticed the spirits helping Milleuse. "You gotta be kidding! Why are they helping?! They ran from me! They ran scared! Why are they helping humans now?! Do they just want to annoy me?! Stop messing with me like this!"

Sway's rage had reached a peak. At the same time, she sounded so sad that she might cry.

She raised one arm of the Ice Colossus, but for some reason she didn't cast any spells. It was as if she was reluctant to kill anyone.

As Sway was hesitating, Badisch appeared next to the house that the ice giant's hand was resting on.

"Hey there. Allow me to pay my respects, Miss Warlord," he said with a daring smile and his war hammer held in both hands.

"I'll lure her in. The moment she rests on a building, I want you to destroy it, Badisch."

That was the role Ayame gave to Badisch after Ranka and Milleuse. The memory made Badisch smile.

"Maybe I can't break your ice. But even if ice is too much for me..." Badisch's shoulders tensed in anticipation. He mustered up more strength than ever before. "I can still smash these buildings! Take this! **Pulverizing Blow.**"

Badisch hit with all of his might. It was more than enough to make the stone building crumble.

"Aaah! What is it this time?!"

Since the Ice Colossus had been resting its weight on the building, it began to topple. At the same time, the earth spirits caused the ground to give way so that Sway couldn't easily recover.

The Ice Colossus stumbled far more than Badisch had expected. Though of course, the ice was undamaged.

But now that the Ice Colossus was off-balance, Sway wouldn't be able to dodge their attacks. The pieces were all in place ready to break the ice. One

decisive blow was all that was needed.

“Iris, now!” Ayame gave the signal through the communication bracelet.

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“I’ve heard from Ayame! They’re all set!”

Daltis yelled at his workers. “All right! Listen up, dogs! Now’s the time!”

“Aye, sir!” they all said in response.

They’d prepared another tube larger than any of the others. As the Dust Devil was building, they’d been waiting for the signal to launch the next firework.

This particular tube was huge. It was originally designed to fire the finale to the whole Full Bloom Festival, and a firework orb was already loaded inside. Everything before it was tiny by comparison.

The tube was already oriented and angled correctly. With Sway off-balance, she wouldn’t be able to dodge. All that remained was to fire, but there was a problem.

“Huh...? Why didn’t it launch?”

It was Scintilla’s job to light the fuse, but he was cowering and wouldn’t move.

Daltis roared at him, “What are you doing, Scintilla?! They risked their lives to give us this chance and you’re wasting it?!”

“Eek! B-But we’ve all been firing everything at that ice giant and it did nothing. There’s no way this can work.”

Scintilla had lost his nerve. He’d been daring to the point of recklessness when he went hunting for a dragon, but he couldn’t contain his fear after seeing the ice giant in his own city. He was terrified. It was an instinctive response.

Daltis knew exactly how Scintilla felt. He understood so well that he had to laugh. “Bwah ha ha ha! You’re worrying over nothing! My idiot workers put their hearts into making this thing, and they did it using materials you got when you made an idiotic decision to be an idiot and fight a dragon with the help of a few kindhearted idiots! Hold your head up high! It’ll be the grandest thing

we've ever made!"

"Master..."

"If you've got that, then light it! Let that giant have it!"

"Yes, sir!"

Now that Daltis's pep talk had brought Scintilla back to his senses, he lit the fuse on the tube.

"Hmph. Maybe that Warlord can handle just about anything, but this firework contains a dragon's firebladder mixed with a heap of exploding nuts and then packed into a flawless sampo recovered from a dungeon! It's our Crowning Kaleidoscope! A fine way to end the festival! The power, the size, and the roar it makes are going to be like nothing you've ever known!"

The fuse began to fizz as it carried the flame. Then came a rumbling from within the cylinder.

"Fire!!!"

The explosion that followed was astounding. The pride and joy of Daltis's Workshop was taking flight. The giant was surrounded by Milleuse's cloud of flour and metal dust and peppered with Ranka's exploding nuts. When the gigantic firework erupted, it would be the spark that set it all off.

The Crowning Kaleidoscope hit its target with a massive impact. The Ice Colossus had been immune to the smaller fireworks, but this time it felt the collision.

Sway couldn't see what was going on as the Crowning Kaleidoscope smashed into her. An instant later it exploded, blooming into an inferno big enough to completely engulf the Ice Colossus.

Then the flames pouring from the firework ignited the flour and metal powder, turning it into a ferocious blaze.

The Crowning Kaleidoscope continued to draw power from the special mucus in the firebladder that fueled a dragon's fire breath. The flames grew even hotter when combined with the powders that Milleuse had lifted up to block Sway's view. Then the fire spirits responded to Iris's request by adding even

more intensity to the blaze.

The explosion was a storm of heat and shock waves like nothing anyone had ever seen.

Sway screamed for the first time. “Ngh. Aaaaah!”

The ice sizzled as it began to melt.

Then came the exploding nuts that Ranka had embedded in the ice. They detonated one after another as the powerful shock waves set them off.

Sway couldn’t do anything against this much power. Her entire colossus was melting and cracking, but the heat was too intense to allow any regeneration. As the nuts exploded the fissures across the ice’s surface grew larger still.

“Again?! It’ll take more than this to defeat me!!!”

Even now the Ice Colossus remained standing. It was enduring the blaze, and regeneration would take less than a minute.

The attack consisted of merely heat and shock. There wasn’t a single Warlord weak enough to succumb to those alone.

“That’s all you’ve got? Well then, now it’s my—”

“Sorry, but you’re not getting a turn.”

The savior had arrived to deal the final blow.



I jumped up from a rooftop, brandishing my sword in front of the ice rose.

Within the rose, Sway’s initial reaction to the sight of me emerging from the storm of flames was one of shock.

“This is the end! **Scattered Petals.**”

I gripped the sword’s hilt tightly with both hands and thrust the blade into the ice rose, concentrating the momentum of my fall at a single point.

This art that I called Scattered Petals was an imitation of a high-level soldier ability known as Castle Breach Thrust. It was similar to Spark, but had increased power because I twisted the blade for a drilling effect, allowing me to bore into

my opponent rather than just stabbing them.

There was pain in my left arm as the burned skin split open. My right arm felt like it might break as the frozen skin cracked. Every bone and every wound was screaming at me to stop.

But I couldn't do that.

I have to strike deeper, harder, heavier! I relied on everyone's help to get here. Badisch, Ranka, Milleuse, Daltis, and the workshop staff. If I don't finish this now, they're going to get hurt. Everyone could die. This has to be it. It ends here!

"Uhhoooooh!"



Reach her! Reach her!

There was cracking. Then a snap.

This time I'd put a real crack in the flower at the Ice Colossus's head. It spread across the ice like forks of lightning, growing bigger, wider. The moment I saw the ice break open, I leaped back.

A volley of fresh fireworks landed at the spot where I'd been standing and then exploded.

The heat and the shock was more than the Ice Colossus could withstand. It was over in an instant.

With a resounding crash and a cloud of dust, the Ice Colossus finally collapsed.

The light of the fireworks and broken pieces of ice lit up the sky, creating a dreamlike scene in front of me.

I caught my breath as I watched, then kept my eyes on the destroyed remains of the Ice Colossus.

"Haah... Haah... We beat it...?"

I was still on my guard. I was sure we'd beaten the Ice Colossus, but I hadn't felt my sword hit Sway. Destroying Sway's ice didn't mean victory if Sway herself was unharmed.

For that reason I still held my sword, ready to land a final blow the moment I saw movement. But there was no sign of the ice regenerating.

"Did we really get her...?" It felt unlikely.

"We did it!" Badisch cried. "She got what she deserved!"

"I can't believe we actually won," Milleuse said.

"Ha. Ha ha. I can't stop shaking," Ranka said. "I didn't think we had a chance."

The three came walking toward me.

While everyone else was celebrating, I continued to stare at the place where Sway had fallen.

"Hey, what's wrong? You look angry. Are your wounds hurting?" Badisch

asked.

“It’s not that. I’m just worried that she might still be alive.”

“Oh come on. After that blast? Didn’t you see the fireworks? They were huge, and so were the flames. She couldn’t have survived that. Even if she did, she’d have been squashed flat by her own ice.”

Badisch sounded confident, but I still had my doubts. We might have defeated the Ice Colossus, but that didn’t mean Sway was beaten.

But still, time was passing and the ice wasn’t regenerating.

Maybe I’m worrying for no reason?

“Haah,” Milleuse exhaled. “That sure was hard work. Feels like I’m working harder than ever lately.”

“I know how you feel,” Ranka agreed. “First the dragon and now this. It’s like we’re always in danger.”

“I thought I was done for when she almost grabbed me,” Milleuse added.

“But we’re alive,” Badisch said. “And that’s not all... We took down one of the Eight Warlords! We’re sure to get a promotion from the guild! We’ll be Tetrastars! No, Astraeas! That’ll make us the first Astraea-ranked adventurers this city ever saw!”

“Hold on a moment,” Ranka said. “We only won against the Demon Lord Army because we had help from Ayame and everyone from Daltis’s Workshop.”

“Okay, you’re right. Hey, Ayame! Smile, would you? It’s the first time anyone besides the hero won against a Warlord!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah... I guess.”

I looked around. The buildings near me were destroyed and the streets in ruin. But more importantly, I’d saved lives. I’d saved the people I wanted to save.

“Was I...a savior?”

Badisch laughed at my lack of confidence. “What? Of course you were. You saved this whole city.”

“I guess... Wow, that’s a relief. Seriously.”

I clenched my fist while looking at my numb right hand. *For once, these hands protected the people I wanted to protect.*

“Hm...? It’s getting noisy around here.” Ranka said.

“Looks like all the soldiers came out of hiding after seeing what happened.”

“Heh heh,” Milleuse laughed. “They show up after we’ve already won?”

“Oh... Uh-oh.”

As we were talking, I remembered something important: my mask was gone. I still had the cloak that Iris had handmade for me, but the hood alone wouldn’t hide me well enough.

I couldn’t let countless people see my unmasked face. Someone might realize that I was actually Foyle. I made a quick decision and left the area.

“Well, I’ll be seeing you!”

“Huh?!”

“Hey, wait up, Ayame!” Milleuse said.

“You can’t seriously be running away now!” Ranka said.

The three adventurers called after me, but I ignored them and kept moving.

Sorry, but it’ll cause problems for you guys too if someone realizes who I am.

Without looking back, I headed to the place where I’d dropped the mask. As I ran through alleyways, I put up my hood and spoke to Iris through the enchanted bracelet.

“Iris, it’s over. I’ll meet you where you are. Give my thanks to everyone from Daltis’s Workshop. I’ll thank them personally later.”

“You got it. Oh, and, Ayame?”

“Hm?”

“You were really cool.”

“Ha ha. Thanks.”

My body was thoroughly chilled from our battle, but Iris's words had just warmed my heart. I was surprised by my own simple nature.

The Savior's Role

From the deserted street where I'd gone to rest after Iris healed my wounds, I could hear the voices of returning people. After healing me, Iris had disguised herself as a human and gone looking for anyone heavily wounded so she could use her healing powers as the saint.

Iris had been angry with me. What bothered her were the burns I'd given myself on top of the frostbite, after I'd recklessly tried to thaw Sway's ice magic using hot stones. By the time the fight was over, my hand had turned purple and I couldn't move my fingers properly.

Now I was in this empty street because Iris had insisted, "It's time you rested!"

"Ayame, I'm back."

"Grrah."

"Oh, Iris, Jamama, welcome back."

Iris had returned with Jamama following her.

"That was quick," I said. "You're done walking around the city?"

"Yes. I only checked nearby, but I didn't find anyone with life-threatening injuries. There's a lot of damage to buildings, but no deaths at all."

"None at all?"

I found that hard to believe. It was good news if true, but I wasn't optimistic enough to believe such a thing could be down to good luck.

Was the Ice Mist deliberately holding back? No... That can't be it.

The Demon Lord Army was our natural enemy, determined to eradicate humanity. Sway had no reason to show us any concern. And yet there were things about her behavior that made me wonder.

She'd told people to run whenever she was attacking. And then when she

created her ice giant, she could have used it to destroy the city gate and prevent anyone from escaping. I'd seen her use attacks with enough range to reach the city walls, so I was sure she could have trapped everyone in the city if she'd wanted.

"Ayame? What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

My thoughts must have shown on my face. As my expression grew pensive, Iris looked at me with concern. I smiled to reassure her.

"Ayame, did you hear? They're still planning to launch the fireworks tonight right on schedule."

"What? Can they do that?"

They'd already used up a ton of their fireworks fighting Sway.

"Yes! We're certain that the Ice Mist was defeated in the fight. And no one was killed. They decided to launch the remaining fireworks as a victory celebration."

"Things sure are moving fast."

It felt rash to declare victory before we'd found Sway's body, but given that we'd seen no sign of her or her ice since the battle, it was hard to imagine she'd survived.

"And, well, you know... After everything that happened around noon, we didn't get to look around. So, maybe..."

I smiled and nodded when I realized what Iris was trying to say. "You're right. How about we watch the fireworks together tonight?"

"Oh! Okay!" Iris's face lit up with a big smile.

I just need to make sure no one realizes my identity while we're enjoying ourselves.

"I need to go visit the other side of the city," Iris said. "I checked nearby that no one was seriously injured, but it's possible I missed someone."

"All right. Got it. It's unlikely, but there could be survivors from the Demon

Lord Army lurking around too, so be careful.”

“All right! If I see any monsters hiding anywhere, I’ll deal with them!” Iris adopted a fighting stance and threw a few punches at the air.

“Grrah!” Jamama also responded by clawing at the ground.

I felt they’d be all right without me, so I decided I’d better take care of some business of my own now that I’d rested. I got up and said goodbye to both of them.



“Heh heh. I can’t wait to watch the fireworks with Ayame.”

Iris was in high spirits as she walked through the city. The fact that no one had died put an extra spring in her step.

“Achoo. Uuh. It’s cold all of a sudden... Wait, cold?”

Iris sensed that something wasn’t right.

Cold? It shouldn’t be cold in this season. And what happened to all the spirit activity around here?

Then the realization hit her.

“Grrah! Grrahgraah!” Jamama snarled.

Everything had fallen silent and they were surrounded by a white mist. It was the same mist that had covered the city a short while earlier.

“No! It can’t be!”

“Hey, you’re good friends with the fake, right?”

Iris saw a pair of shining red eyes looking at her from deep within the mist.



With a boom, another firework rose into the night sky. An array of dazzling colors appeared above me, like shining artificial flowers.

The trade city of Rikko had endured an invasion by the Demon Lord Army. There’d been damage to the city, and that damage was far from minor, but by some miracle, no one had died.

Many put their survival down to the blessings of the goddess. They wanted to go ahead with the Full Blossom Festival and launch the famous fireworks as originally planned. Any suggestions of delaying the event by city administrators were brushed aside.

Firework orbs weren't in short supply. Daltis's Workshop still had plenty in reserve even after using many against the colossus. They could still light up the sky in a dazzling display of artificial flowers of all sizes in a rainbow of colors.

Witnesses to the display felt thankful to be alive, and cried tears of joy at having been saved. The city had suffered a lot of damage, of course, but the repairs could wait for tomorrow. As long as people lived, buildings could be rebuilt. Now was the time to appreciate their good fortune.

The city filled with sound as fireworks continued to take to the sky.

"Hey," I said.

"Oh, it's you."

I was relieved to have finally found Daltis. He wasn't inside the workshop. Instead he was a short distance away where he'd have a better view of the fireworks.

"I expected to find you at the launch site," I said.

"Hmph. I might be master of the workshop, but there's nothing left for me to teach. Rather than stick my nose in, I should be out here where I can appreciate their good work."

"Oh, I see."

I didn't get it, but Daltis sounded sure. I was about to thank him again, but his next words took me by surprise.

"I've decided I'm done making fireworks."

"What? Why?"

"Fireworks are for people to enjoy. A firework maker never launches them at anyone. Not even a demon. My reputation was ruined the moment I accepted that request."

“But...” Then it’s my fault?

I couldn’t have defeated Sway without Daltis’s help. Without him, we never would have broken through Sway’s ice. But I’d made him give up his career as a firework maker in return. I felt regret, and it showed on my face. *I’ll never be able to put this right.*

“Hah!” Daltis cried. Running toward me, he leaped into the air, then slammed his fist into my head as he landed.

“What...? Ouch!”

That really hurts! Is this what he’s always doing to Scintilla?!

“I just want you to know it’s not your fault. I don’t blame you.”

“Ow... Huh? What?”

“You gave me a way to protect my city. I ought to thank you, not hold a grudge.”

“But I forced you to quit.”

“I’m an old man anyway.” Daltis showed me his hands. “I’ve been hiding it, but my hands shake when I’m making fireworks lately. Honestly, it’s bound to cause an accident some day. Now’s the time to quit.”

Growing old was a fate that none of us could escape. I knew that I couldn’t go on fighting forever. And nor could Daltis go on fighting his old age.

“I’m done making fireworks. I’m putting my efforts into training the next generation. Scintilla shows promise, but he’s got a long way to go! Wah ha ha! There’s still work for me to do! Wah ha ha! I can’t wait!” Daltis laughed merrily, his face lighting up at the thought of his new ambition.

I felt relieved to know he was excited about his future.

“Daltis.”

“What now?”

“Thank you. We couldn’t have defeated Sway without you. Please give my thanks to everyone from the workshop too.”

“Thanks to you too for protecting our city.”

We both smiled and then shook hands firmly.

As I was walking away from the workshop, I saw Jamama.

“Grrah...”

“Oh, Jamama. What’s wrong? Weren’t you with... Don’t tell me.”

I hadn’t brought Jamama with me because he hated the smell of the workshop. He should have been with Iris.

Jamama sounded distressed, and Iris wasn’t at his side. I began to fear the worst. My heart was pounding and a cold sweat came over me.

Jamama collapsed to the ground.

I hurried to him, picked him up, and then saw a letter frozen to his collar by ice.

The message read, “I’ve got your precious girlfriend. What are you gonna do about it, Fake?”



The first thing Iris felt upon waking up was a sensation of cold. The feeling was especially intense in all four of her limbs.

“Uhh... Where am I? Did I pass out...?”

“I see you’re awake.”

As Iris opened her bleary eyes, she saw a girl wearing a black cloak. She’d never seen her close up before, but she recognized the voice well enough.

“Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist.”

“That’s right. Heh heh heh. Did he tell you my name?”

“You tricked us into thinking we’d defeated you?”

“Not going to answer my questions? Yes, you’re right, though I’ve never had such a close call before. I learned a few things while I was hiding. You’re important to him, aren’t you? That’s why I’ve kidnapped you. I sent off your little dog to inform the fake.”

Iris understood immediately why Sway had captured her.

“I’m your hostage? That’s cowardly, even for the Demon Lord Army.”

“What? Doesn’t your side take hostages too? I’m hardly the first to do it.”

“It’s cowardly either way. And if you need a hostage, you’ve basically admitted you can’t beat him in a fair fight.”

“You should watch your mouth.”

Iris hid her fear well. If she showed any weakness here, Sway would surely use it to her advantage.

As they talked, Iris glanced at her surroundings. The spirits around her were giving Sway a wide berth. Sway would never let them get close anyway.

Iris pursed her lips tight. *I’m fine. I’m not scared. If I’m a hostage, then Sway won’t kill me yet. All I need to do is buy some time and learn what I can.*

Iris raised her head and saw Sway was close by her side.

“The spirits were getting in my way a while ago. If it wasn’t for them, the Ice Colossus wouldn’t have taken so much damage. That was your fault, wasn’t it?”

Iris saw the eyes beneath the hood. She couldn’t help but gasp at the sight. They were red and filled with anger.

Sway gently touched the flower in Iris’s hair. “Elves give their children flowers that symbolize the child’s name. They say the flower blooms more beautifully the more the child’s loved. They must really love you if this flower is so pretty... Ah, that’s making me jealous.”

The flower in Iris’s hair froze solid then broke into pieces.

Iris felt a burst of anger when she realized that Sway had just destroyed the flower her parents gave her.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Don’t waste your energy whining at me, or I’ll freeze your disrespectful throat next.”

“I’d...rather you didn’t. Why did you join the Demon Lord Army anyway?”

“What?” Sway laughed. “Do you have a problem with me serving the Demon Lord Army?”

Iris had realized something some time ago. "The spirits are all afraid of you."

For just a moment, Sway looked startled.

"They've been that way since you arrived in the city," Iris continued. "I've never seen an ice user in person, but if I'm not mistaken, you're not a demon. You're..."

"Don't say another word!" Sway grabbed Iris's slender neck.

"Agh."

Her ice cold fingers applied enough force that Iris found it had to breathe.

Iris then noticed something else. *She's trembling?*

Sway's hand was shaking. But her grip was tight enough that Iris couldn't breathe.

Sway seemed to realize it and took her hand away.

"Ugh." Iris began to cough.

"I was just playing around," Sway said. "You'd die if I froze your throat."

Iris gasped for breath then looked at Sway. "What's your real goal?" she asked between coughs.

"Why were you with that man?" Sway asked.

Iris didn't understand why Sway was answering her question with another question.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"What? Don't you know? Ah ha ha. Poor you. You want to know who he is? They called him the hero, but even that was a lie! He's a world-famous fraud! He fooled everyone!" Sway said gleefully.

Sway didn't know that Iris was already aware of Ayame's true identity.

"Looks like he really had you fooled, but he's just going to abandon you. He's the fake. Didn't you know? A guy like that won't save you. How could he? Now you'll never look at him the same way again. The whole world hates him! Let me see your fear. Let me see you cry. The one person you thought could save

you—”

“He’s not fake.”

“What?”

“I said he’s not fake. Ayame—no, Foyle—is the real thing.”

Sway looked into Iris’s eyes. She saw no fear. Only unwavering faith.

“Why? Why would you believe in a—”

Sway was interrupted by a cry from one of the few monsters who’d been stationed outside the city. She spun around and looked into the forest that surrounded her.

Although Sway was shocked, Iris reacted calmly. “He’s a genuine savior,” she said as Ayame appeared before them.



No sooner than I’d taken out the monster, I caught sight of Iris and Sway.

Just as I’d feared, Sway was still alive. We’d done no more than damage her clothing a little.

I gritted my teeth. Parting with Iris before I’d made sure Sway was dead had been a stupid mistake.

I readied my sword, determined to save Iris and defeat Sway. I wouldn’t underestimate her this time.

I’d left Jamama behind since it was too dangerous. He’d tried to come along, but I’d made him stay.

Now that there were no monsters around us, Sway was the only opponent that remained.

“So we meet again. Sorry, but I’m taking Iris back.”

“Gah. You actually came? I didn’t think you were that stupid.”

“You’re the one who sent the message luring me here. Why are you making that face at me?”

“Don’t get smart with me! Wait... You recovered?” Sway’s anger was replaced

with confusion as she realized I was uninjured. She took a moment to compose herself and then smiled in her usual taunting way. “Heh heh. Well, that’s fine. And you’re right. I should have known you’d show up after reading my letter.”

“I wasn’t surprised to learn that you’d survived. I never felt my sword cut you.”

“Liar. I saw the frustration on your face just now. Well, now you know that I don’t die so easily. But really, how stupid are you? You’ve come alone. You only won last time because you had help. You don’t stand a chance this time.”

“Honestly... I’m not sure how I can win.”

“Ah ha ha! And yet you’re still here? You really are a fool!”

“Either way, I’m not going to give up, Sway Ka Senco. I’ll keep trying as long as there are people who believe in me.”

“Ayame...” Iris looked at me with teary eyes.

When I noticed that the flower in her hair was gone, I knew Sway must have been responsible.

But I suppressed my building rage as I faced Sway calmly.

Rage will dull my sword. Anger-driven attacks are unfocused. I have to be calm if I want to save her.

“This time we’ll settle this, Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist. I’ll use this sword to smash through your ice if that’s what it takes to protect her.”

“Ahh! Now you’re getting on my nerves...! If you want to be frozen so badly, then so be it! **Fantasm Whiteout.**”

As Sway yelled the words, I was assaulted by a vicious snow storm.

“What is this?”

When I reopened my eyes, I saw nothing but white. Everything was featureless to the extent that I couldn’t tell what was just in front of me. The scenery from a few seconds ago was gone, replaced by whiteness everywhere and for as far as I could see.

I’d been expecting a straightforward attack, but now that I couldn’t see

anything, I worried I'd overlooked some trick.

Sway's voice echoed around me. "All of your past will be shown here. You cannot fight it."

I instantly readied my sword, but I saw no sign of Sway. *She's not here? But I was right next to her just a second ago.*

Thoughts raced through my mind, but I had another urgent concern. "It's so cold!"

The white snow and chilled air were slowly but surely sapping my energy. I felt chilled to my core.

It was as if everything had frozen. Or perhaps everything really was frozen. Snow carried on the wind was collecting on my clothes and starting to freeze into a fine layer of ice. My numb body trembled, making it hard to move.

I had to do something. I had to find Sway and defeat her fast.

But everything around me was white. I didn't know where I was or which direction I was facing.

Even so, I had to keep moving or I'd freeze. I began to walk.

The howling wind continued to blow as the snow around my feet crunched with each step.

But no matter how far I walked, nothing changed. Even the footprints I'd made were already covered up with fresh snow.

"This doesn't make sense."

Sway couldn't be far away. And yet I couldn't reach her no matter how far I walked.

What if I'm not actually moving? When I looked back to see what progress I'd made, I saw that my footprints had already been restored to a flat white surface by the blizzard.

I don't think I'm getting anywhere. How long have I been here?

"This has to be an illusion. Damn. Nothing's changing. If it's an illusion, then I don't have a way of getting out of it."

I knew a little about illusion magic. Countering it was difficult. The only options were to preemptively use an ability that blocked illusions, or to defeat the caster.

The former obviously wasn't an option since I didn't have any abilities. But the latter wasn't easy either. I was against a notorious Warlord. And there was no way to defeat Sway when I couldn't even find her.

The never-changing white scenery surrounding me was wearing me down mentally as well as physically. I was under constant assault from the blizzard, and it had already made my body numb.

"Haah... Haah... Ngh."

When I was too weak and too cold to carry on, I dropped to my knees with my teeth chattering.

It's cold. So cold.

There was no heat left in my body.

"Not...yet... I...have to...save...Iris."

I tried to climb to my feet, but fell flat on my face. No matter how much I tried to get up, I couldn't. My limbs were completely numb.

I forced myself to keep moving, dragging myself along the ground, but before long, even that was impossible.

The wind continued to howl, and snow began to pile up on top of me.

I couldn't move at all. My consciousness was fading. I wasn't even sure whether I was still breathing.

Is this how I die...? Without accomplishing anything?

Then a vision suddenly ran through my mind.

"You really are weak!"

"Gah... I lost again."

I saw myself, proud of my victory against Yu after a fight with sticks.

Is this...one of my memories?

More memories soon followed. Times when I'd played with Yu and Mei. The night when I'd sneaked outside. The time when I'd been assigned my job in the church. Me training to be the hero.

They were all events from my past. Even now, the memories of time spent with Yu and Mei were enough to make me smile.

Those were good times. I can't believe how stupid I used to act.

Then it all changed. I saw myself sitting with Mary and Gladius. We were facing Yu, who was looking alarmed.

I felt my blood run cold. "Stop..."

"Yu, I'm removing you from the party."

"Don't do it!"

"You've got to understand, Yu, that a person's job is everything."

"Don't!"

"I can't stand being around an unassigned any longer, Protagonist!"

As I saw the wounded look on Yu's face, I was overcome with shock and despair.

No. I thought it would help you. I never wanted to hurt you.

The scene changed again. Now I was on a bridge with Mei. Mei looked sad as she walked toward me with tearful eyes. There was disdain in her voice.

"Liar."

The word almost broke me.

"Ha ha. Ha ha ha." I laughed humorlessly as I cried, my tears freezing in the blizzard the moment they fell.

I lacked the strength to stand. I was going to disappear forever beneath the snow.

Then the scene changed again.

There's more...?

But this was a different type of vision. I heard a childish voice as I watched the

image.

“Wait. I’ll try harder. I’ll try. Please. Please, don’t leave me.”

I saw a small child reach out toward someone with their hand, and unbearable sadness washed over me.

What was that...?

A figure appeared in front of me. I was lying on my stomach and my vision was blurry. But I didn’t need a clear view to know it was Sway.

“And so he became the True Hero. That’s why you were branded as a fake.”

“So...what...?”

“Just saying. You poor thing. After all that work, you were still a fake. You poor, poor thing.”

Yeah. That’s right. Yu was the True Hero. There’s no denying that.

I watched him grow. I’d watched Yu from afar as he spent time with Mei. I was always watching. I saw how he matured. I saw how happy Yu and Mei were together.

Meanwhile, I was always... But I’m stronger than him. I should have been the hero.

No, wait. What am I thinking? Yu’s my childhood friend. But it’s because of him that I can’t be the hero.

No, that’s not right. But it’s true.

No!

My thoughts made no sense. I was an emotional mess.

What am I thinking? Are these really my thoughts? It’s Sway. She’s making me think this way... But these feelings are real.

No... But... Even so...

I saw a vision of my younger self sharing my ambitions.

“Hah! I wanna be a hero, obviously!”

I was a young boy, full of pride on the day of my oracle.

A hero? That's right... That was my dream. The thing I worked so hard for.

But I was a fake hero. An imitation that could never compare to the real thing. I've never been genuine. I only existed to trigger the True Hero's birth.

No one missed me, no one wanted me, no one accepted me. That was my life. My role.

A viscous mix of emotions built up my heart. It was like sludge, weighing me down and eating away at me.

No, I can't give in to this. If I let these feelings swallow me, I'd never get up. Something important inside me would break and be lost forever.

But it was so tempting to give in. There was a part of me that wanted to accept these feelings.

No, I can't. If I give in, I'll...

"That's right," said Sway. "You were never the real thing. How sad and pitiful you are. But what if you killed him?"

She was encouraging me to give in. It was like a sweet poison in my ears.

"Only one person gets to be the hero. If you killed him, then you'd be the only one left. You'd be the hero."

"Would I...?"

"Yes."

"I guess so..."

"Heh heh. So pick up your sword. Take his life. You hate him, don't you?"

"Hate him?"

"That's right, It's his fault that you couldn't be the real hero. How could you feel anything for him but hate? So pick up your sword. Stab him with it. Then you'll be the hero for real!"

Sway spoke like this was a play, and she was the director.

I slowly brought my sword forward, holding it in front of me.

"Now use it to take his place. You'll be the real hero!"

“That’s right.” I gripped the sword and climbed to my feet.

Sway looked at me and smiled.

My response for her was obvious. “But I won’t do it,” I said simply.

She initially sounded surprised. “Why? Why not? Don’t you hate him?”

“No. I’ve never hated Yu.”

That’s the truth. I’ve never hated him. I lamented the job I’d been given. I often despaired at my lot in life. I envied Yu for his ability to save the people that I couldn’t. But that was all. I never hated him for it.

I’d wanted to be the hero and save people. But I knew it couldn’t be. I’d known it all along.

Even while surrounded by enemies, with no one around to believe in me, I’d kept on fighting. It was because I still had a dream. I still wanted to be like the hero. That’s why I took up my sword. It was never for the sake of hurting my two friends.

When I kept on fighting, it hadn’t been an act of self destruction. No matter how pathetic I might have been, and even though no one had asked anything from me, I’d kept fighting because it was what I wanted.

I’d fought because I wanted to save people and because I wanted to be like the hero. And above all else, there was the simple fact that my two friends, Yu and Mei, were precious to me.

That’s right. They’re precious to me. Even when I dreamed of being the hero, saving those two meant more to me than saving the world.

That feeling was never fake. It was something real. It wasn’t a lie.

No one can take that feeling from me! This is the path I chose!

“He’s fighting to save the world right now.” I lifted my head. “What kind of friend would I be if I let myself give up here?”

I was proud to know that my friend was fighting to save the world at that very moment. How could I give in and bear a grudge against him? That would be truly pathetic.

“No...” Sway replied. “That can’t be right! I don’t get it! I can’t understand this!”

“You don’t have to. I’m glad I was your opponent, Sway. If it was Yu, that crybaby might have been overwhelmed by all the regrets you made him feel over me. Though he’d probably have made it through as long as Mei was by his side.”

“Gah. You don’t know anything. You’re a worthless fake.”

“Fake? No, you’re wrong.”

At some point the blizzard had stopped. The warmth had returned to my body. And to my heart.

I’m not lost anymore. Even when I couldn’t become the hero, Iris offered me her hand. For her sake, I can’t lose.

I can already see the path ahead. I can say it proudly.

“I’m a savior.”

I swung my sword, feeling entirely at peace with myself.



My sword connected with Sway herself, such that she screamed and collapsed to the ground.

The whiteness around me cleared the moment she fell. We were back in the dark forest. The deep snow was completely gone.

It turned out I hadn’t taken a single step from my original spot. It really was all an illusion.

Not only did my vision clear, the ice restraining Iris’s limbs also broke. She jumped up immediately and ran into my arms.

“Ayame!”

“Sorry if I made you worry, Iris.”

“You did! You collapsed, and then Sway got close to you. I thought she’d freeze you to death! I’m glad your heart’s still beating! You’re alive!”

“Yes, I’m alive.”

Iris wrapped her arms around me and held me so tight it hurt as she listened to my heartbeat. When I stroked her hair she held me even tighter.

I hate that I made Iris worry. But everything’s fine now. I put my arm around her and held her tightly too.

I heard a groan. “Guh... Ah...”

Even as I hugged Iris, I was still holding my sword ready.

Sway was still alive, and her hood had torn when I attacked her, revealing her true form. Her skin was dark and her hair pure silver. But what I noticed first were her long ears.



Iris was shocked when she saw Sway without the hood. “I knew it... She’s a dark elf,” she said, her eyes going wide with surprise.

I hadn’t heard the term before. “Dark elf? That means she’s a member of your kind, right? Do you know anything about her?”

“Well...”

“Please. I need to know.”

Iris thought for a while, then began to explain. “You know a little about elves, don’t you? We act as nature’s arbitrators and draw upon the power of the spirits when we use animancy and Converse with Tree Spirits. All elves share a close connection with the spirits. But...”

Iris hesitated like she found it hard to say. Her expression was a complex mix of sympathy and other emotions.

“Dark elves are forsaken by the spirits from birth... She’s the elf my mother called ‘the ice wielder with the power to kill spirits.’”



Cold. So cold. It hurts. I can’t take it.

My illusion had been broken, and various pains were running through my body.

I tried freezing the wound, but I felt no relief. The true source of the pain was my troubled heart.

How did he break out of my illusion? Doesn’t he hate the hero?

How? How?

Why did he look happy—proud even—when I mentioned the True Hero? I don’t get it. I don’t get it.

Ah, my head’s a mess. I can’t think straight. Why didn’t it work? Why? I thought he was like me. Why? Why’s it always like this? I don’t get it. Why? I don’t get it. I hate this. I don’t get it.

I couldn’t calm my thoughts, nor my heart. All the while, I was seeing visions of that day, two hundred years ago.

The disparaging eyes of my father. *"You are a failure. Can you not even control the spirits?"*

The hateful glare from my mother. *"You're unclean. How can you be my daughter?"*

The look of terror from my elder sister. *"It's frightening. You scare me. The others haven't noticed it, but there's power in you that scares even the spirits."*

My mother, my father, my sister, and everyone in the village all said the same thing: *"You should never have been born."*

I clawed at the gritty soil, tasting blood as I crawled.

"Not...yet..."

"Accept me."

"I...haven't lost..."

"I'll do my best. If there's something wrong with me...I'll fix it."

"I can't despair... I'll lose everything. It'll all be gone. All my efforts. My hard work."

"So please..."

"I'm begging you..."

My voice and the voice of ***** in my head became one. *"Don't leave me!"*

I stretched out my hand as if reaching for someone. But there was no one there to accept me. There never had been.

Finally, I heard the crunch of a footstep. I looked up, with a defeated expression on my face. As I'd expected, the man was looming over me with his sword in one hand.

Ah, I can't stand him.

His flame-like red hair was unmistakable, as were his eyes, filled with strong will. After all that had happened, his will hadn't weakened at all. Just looking at him made me feel so much envy.

"Iris told me that the elves refer to your kind as dark elves."

“So what? Come to laugh at me?”

“No. I heard that dark elves can’t use animancy like others do. Is that true?”

“That’s right... I couldn’t do it. That’s why they cast me out.”

“But you can control ice. Did the Demon Lord give you that power?”

“Hah. No, it’s a power I developed myself. The Demon Lord had nothing to do with it.”

On the day I was discarded, I created ice through my own blood, sweat, and tears. Humans gained powers through their jobs, but they never understood them. I’d learned ice magic by myself. But it made no difference—I was still a dark elf.

Animancy was an innate power that all elves shared. As long as the spirits accepted them, that is.

The spirits had rejected me completely. They feared me and wouldn’t come near. But I did have a plentiful supply of magical energy, just like any elf.

That was why I practiced my powers, refined them, mastered them, and recreated myself. Through efforts driven by my desires, and by my emotions, my magic took form as ice that could freeze anything and everything.

Creating ice hadn’t been my original intention, but I recognized it as a symptom of my frozen heart. It influenced the mental images I worked with, and thus the form of the magic I created.

And so I learned to use ice magic—something that no ordinary elf could do by cooperating with the spirits.

“Okay... Then why are you with the Demon Lord Army?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“You don’t have to. I just want to know.”

“You just...want to know?”

I thought he was weird. *Why would he care about his enemy?* It struck me as pure idiocy.

To vent my anger, I yelled at him. “Fine. I’ll tell you why. I... I wanted to

destroy everything! The things people make, nature, the world, everything! That's why I sided with them. That's all!"

The day I was cast out, I understood. I knew the world was unreasonable. I knew it was unfair. The kind world that people spoke of didn't exist.

I decided that the solution was to be the one taking things away from others. Strength was all that mattered in this world. Become strong and everything is yours. I needed nothing else.

Parental love? Friendship? Peace and harmony? Who needs them! I don't care about them! I don't even want them!

I'll take them all away! I'll show everyone they're not real! I'll reject them!

I can't accept that they exist! I don't want them to exist! If they were real, it would mean I was...

"What drives you?" I asked. "Is it disdain? Contempt? Anger? Is it indignation? Then just kill me with that sword. You're like all the others. You'll never understand me."

"No, I want to praise you. Honestly, I'm impressed. Regardless of why you gained your power or what you did with it, learning magic through hard work is amazing."

"Huh?" My jaw dropped.

The elf by his side—the one whose parents actually loved her—started yelling at him. "Ayame?! She's part of the Demon Lord Army!"

"I know. But hard work is worth praising, whether I'm talking to a human or a demon. It's proof of the life someone lived. I can't look down on anyone for working hard. No matter who or what they are."

It was what I'd always wanted someone to say to me. I'd wanted honest acknowledgment. But my first reaction wasn't happiness. I was too confused.

"What are you talking about? What good does it do if you acknowledge me now? We're enemies. We have to kill each other, no matter what you say."

"That's right. You're Sway Ka Senco the Ice Mist of the Eight Warlords."

“Exactly. You might acknowledge me, but we’ll never understand each other.”

“I know. But only because we’re enemies. Why don’t you quit the Demon Lord Army, Sway?”

“Huh?”

The elf reacted like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Ayame?!”

The man ignored her and continued looking at me. “I want to save you.”

“Save me?!”

I felt the blood rush to my head. *What does he mean?* I wanted to yell and tell him he was stupid.

“You said it yourself! I’m the Ice Mist of the Eight Warlords! I’m responsible for countless deaths! Why would you save me?! Have you lost your mind?!”

“No. As long as I’m a savior, I can’t abandon anyone who wants to be saved.”

“Ha. Well, I’m not asking to be saved.”

“You did. I heard it.”

The man looked at me closely. There wasn’t a hint of malice in his eyes. I’d never seen such eyes before.

What is this? What’s going on?! Why is he looking at me like that?! It wasn’t the look of hate or disdain that I was used to. I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it!

“Besides, I’m as much a killer as you are,” he continued. “I tricked them, stole their hope. I turned my back on those I should have helped.”

The man clutched at his own chest. His expression was bitter, painful, and full of sadness.

“I won’t tell you that it’s okay. Nothing changes the fact that killing is evil. It’s a burden that a killer has to carry their whole life. But still. You were never fully on the side of the Demon Lord Army. You only dipped your toes in the water. Yes, you did try to destroy the city. But you didn’t want to kill anyone, did you?”

My heart leaped. *How did you know?* I tried to ask, but the words got stuck in my throat. At no point had I displayed my mercy openly.

“The first time you used your magic, I thought it was beautiful. At first, I couldn’t understand why I felt that way. But now I know. You had the power to freeze the entire city, and yet you didn’t freeze a single person. You only froze the buildings.”

“That’s just...because I wanted to see humans despair and flee in terror.”

“It happened again later. You ordered your demons to get in the way of the soldiers, but you didn’t let them touch the civilians. You even froze the demon that tried to eat the little girl. You can’t deny saving her.”

“It wasn’t for her. I was punishing a demon who disobeyed my orders!”

“And with the ice giant, you only destroyed buildings. You didn’t hurt anyone. Your magic had enough range and power to take out the ballistae, and yet you didn’t freeze the city gates. You don’t make any sense. You say you hate everything, but you keep giving everyone chances like you’re hoping for something. You showed everyone your incredible power, but then let them escape once they gave up on fighting. That can’t be motivated by hate. It’s more like—”

“Stop! Don’t say it! Don’t say another word!” I shook my head in disagreement, but the man didn’t stop.

“You were just jealous, weren’t you?”

The ice began to crack.

“You were jealous because happy people had things you could never have.”

“No...”

“No one accepted you. You were isolated, and you were jealous of the warmth in the world.”

“No! That’s not how it is!”

“When you deliberately targeted parents and their children, it was to show that parental love doesn’t exist, so you’d feel better about yourself.”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! I’m not like that! I’m fine by myself! All I need is power! Don’t act like you know me!”

I shook my head and then raised my arm to use my magic, but the man grabbed my wrist. Even when my half-formed magic began to freeze his hand, he didn't let go.

While my eyes were shaking, his were steady and full of conviction as he stared at me.

"You're right. I don't know you. That's why I need to figure you out."

"What...?"

"Your cold ice. It looks like a rejection of everything. But I get it. Those aren't your true feelings."

"Stop... Don't...say it..."

*If you say it, I can't go on like this. I won't be Sway anymore; I'll go back to being K****.*

"All you really want is love, right?"

The ice inside me shattered.

"Ugh... Uhh. Aaahhh." I'm finished. It's melting, and I'll never put it back together.

I slumped over, weak and sobbing. Rather than lift my hands to wipe my tears, I let them drop to the ground.

"I told them not to leave me."

"What happened?"

"All they had to do was be by my side. My mother, father, sister, and everyone else all left me alone... They all left...Kikyo alone."

"Kikyo... I see."

"Would they have left me if I was born a normal elf? Would they have stayed? I don't even know. Why did they leave me? I don't understand it. Why? Why? I was left all alone with no answers. Everyone said it. They all said something was wrong with me. So I thought I had to work to grow as strong as they were. But even then I was alone. When I saw that people weaker than me were happy, I couldn't take it. I was jealous. I wanted to freeze it all."

Why am I not loved like everyone else? That question had long eaten away at my heart. It was why I was jealous of anyone from a happy family. Why I envied them so much I couldn't take it. I couldn't have ordinary happiness for myself. I didn't know love.

Despite knowing how pathetic it was, I let myself grow resentful. The sadness I felt was unbearable. I had to take it out on someone. And so I'd decided to ruin the happiness of others.

But it always left me feeling sad and empty. That had been especially true when I'd seen the mother and daughter reunited in the city. I envied the mother's love that everyone else took for granted.

I'd always known. My actions were pointless. They wouldn't bring me comfort in my isolation. But I couldn't help myself. I felt I couldn't go on any other way.

I didn't care about the Demon Lord Army's aims. Attacking cities was just a means of venting. I didn't really want to hurt people. I was just trying to make them notice me.

I only joined so I'd have a place to go, and then I couldn't bear to go back to being alone. I hated being alone.

Growing stronger as part of the Demon Lord Army hadn't fixed anything. They were merely using my power. They didn't care for me.

"I hate it... I don't want to be alone anymore..."

"I know. But people won't forgive you for all that you've done. Even if you haven't killed anyone, you've made countless people homeless, and you've robbed them of precious memories. That's a weight you'll always carry."

"Uhh," I sobbed.

"But we can atone for it all together."

He said it so bluntly that my surprise made me raise my head. That's when I saw the kind look in his eyes.

"If you can't erase your sins, you'll just have to save more people than you've hurt. I know you were lonely and suffering by yourself. I know how much it hurts when no one understands you. But I'm here now. Save as many people as

you can and make some good memories doing it. And maybe eat some good food along the way too.”

“Ugh... Save people? How can I...?”

“It’s not hard. Knowing that one girl believed in me was enough to save me. Now I’ll believe in you. You’re not alone anymore.”

“Ugh. Aaahhh. Waaaah.”

For the first time since I’d come to be known as the ice witch, my frozen heart had thawed.



I gently stroked Sway’s hair as she slept on my lap, having cried herself to sleep.

Iris was beside her, looking at me. “Ayame, what made you want to help Sway? It sounded like you knew about her past.”

“I did. When she used her Phantasm Whiteout, I saw lots of different memories. Most of them were mine, but there were some I didn’t recognize. Sway said something about showing the past when she first used the magic. If they weren’t from my past, I figured they had to be from Sway’s. She probably shared some of her memories with me without realizing it.”

I hadn’t seen all of her memories, but I’d seen enough to know she was sad and hurting.

The way she’d cried herself to sleep afterward seemed so innocent. Now she just looked like an ordinary girl.

I’d seen feelings of hers that she’d probably never spoken aloud. She was strong. But she was unfortunate.

“Everyone knows that members of the Demon Lord Army are evil,” Iris said. “Helping one of them isn’t something a hero could ever do.”

“Right. But I’m not the hero, I’m a savior.”

I’d heard the call of someone who wanted help. The voice of a young girl. I had no choice but to save her.

“If someone wants help, that’s reason enough for a savior to help them. Though she was a commander in the army that’s threatening humanity. It would be easy to kill her right now, for humanity’s sake.”

I drew my sword. Cutting Sway’s throat while she lay defenseless and sleeping would be easy, and I knew it was the right thing to do in the eyes of society.

“But...I can’t do it. Not after seeing how she cried from loneliness. I know it’s taking a risk, but I want to save her anyway. When I saw her seal away her heart in her past, I decided I’d save her. I know it must sound naive. Are you disappointed in me?”

Iris smiled at me in her usual way. “No, you’re always this way.”

“I think the only reason she couldn’t make use of the spirits is because they sense her ice magic and know it can kill them. That’s why they run from her. I don’t blame them. The spirits want to live just like we do. But it meant she was left alone.”

Iris looked at Sway with eyes full of sympathy. “I think she’ll be fine now. You’ll be at her side.”

Iris believed in me completely. I wondered whether she knew just how happy it made me to have her support.

“Huh?” I suddenly fell sideways, my head colliding with Iris’s chest.

“Ayame?!”

“Ha ha ha. I’ve barely had a moment to rest... I guess I’ve...found my...limit...”

I’d been fighting hard in the cold for so long. All my strength was gone. My eyelids felt heavy. I was falling asleep and couldn’t fight it.

“You’ve done enough for today, my hero,” Iris assured me just as I drifted off.

Fireworks exploded, filling the night sky with flowers of many different colors. The people below were singing festival songs and making merry. But the sound was distant, and the light of the fireworks couldn’t light up the forest.

There’d be no stories told of what had just happened here, but this was the battle’s true conclusion.

Intermission 2: The Threat of the Thunderbolt

To the northeast of the Soleil Sun Kingdom was the Sodome Warfare Nation. The mines there produced many magic sampos, as well as ores that skilled blacksmiths used to forge the finest weapons. The nation's surplus of such materials made it an important source of resources for the Soleil Sun Kingdom.

Since Sodome was an obvious target for the Demon Lord Army, Yu and his party had traveled there under orders from the king.

A force led by a higher demon known as the Thorn had captured the warrior capital in the center of Sodome. But Yu's party had defeated that force, briefly freeing the city.

However, Yu's initial victory had made his party careless. With a bolt of lightning from the sky, there had appeared a Warlord covered in white fur—Tordön Lloyd the Thunderbolt.

His notoriety matched that of the Infernal Flame. This powerful commander with the ability to control lightning had been in a different town, but he'd felt the power of the holy sword from afar. He'd raced to the capital with speed that made him worthy of the name Thunderbolt and engaged Yu in combat.

"Haah. Haah. Haah." Yu panted with exhaustion. So far, he'd been fighting a losing battle, unable to withstand Tordön's lightning power.

"Oh, come on. You had my hopes up. I thought the True Hero was going to be something special."

The city was in ruin because of Tordön's lightning, and Yu and his party had been knocked to the ground.

Only Faupan and Quanos were unscathed, but a bird of lightning created by Tordön had chased them off, and it was still preventing them from returning to the battlefield.

"Is this really it? You're the chosen ones! The Hero's Party! I was hoping for a little more fun than this! **Snaking Whip, Brionac.**" Tordön's lightning sprang

forth like a writhing snake, scorching the buildings and trees around it.

“Uh-oh.” Yu forced his exhausted body into action as he warned his party members. “Everyone get back!”

Rather than disappear quickly like ordinary lightning, the snakelike lightning was causing continuous damage.

“We have to stop it!”

Tordön’s Snaking Whip had changed direction and was heading toward the civilians who’d been freed when the Thorn was defeated. There’d be countless more casualties if it reached them.

“Ugh...” Though bruised and exhausted, Christina maintained her grip on her priest staff and prepared to cast a miracle. She coughed and then began an incantation. “O, merciful Goddess, may your love guard us from calamity and impede the impure. **Holy Barrier.**”

Holy Barrier was a miracle of greater power than the Barrier spell. But even it couldn’t withstand Tordön’s lightning. It cracked and failed to contain the snaking whip.

So Christina cast the same miracle three times, creating a triple-layered barrier. It was a huge drain on her power that left her unable to stand. “Haah... Haah...”

“Oh? You blocked Snaking Whip, Brionac? You must be a priestess or the saint. You know your sealing miracles, whatever you are. But I doubt you’ve got the strength to cast another.”

Tordön paused and looked around. When he saw no one was on their feet, he sighed.

“You call yourself the True Hero? Oh, come on. You’re no better than the other hero. You’re crawling in the dirt, just like his party did.”

Tordön’s words provoked a strong reaction from Yu and Mei.

“Other hero?”

“You mean...?”

“What was it they called him? The ‘fake hero’ or something. Ha ha ha! You should’ve seen it. He barely put up a fight against us!”

“Foyle...lost?” Yu asked.

“A miserable loss at that! Bestreben knocked him off his feet with a single blow! He had a swordsman with him. That one was pretty full of himself, but his confidence disappeared fast when I chopped one of his arms off. And then there was a mage. She started crying over how easily she lost to Sway. It left us wondering, ‘Why are these weaklings calling themselves heroes?’ Of course, we know the answer now! That hero was a fake!” Tordön laughed, his sneering laughter filled with malice.

There was a particular word that bothered Yu. *A fake? No, he wasn’t. Foyle was always...* In his mind’s eye, Yu saw Foyle walking ahead, leading the way as always. *“Hey, Yu, are you all right?”*

“Shut...up...”

“What?”

“You know nothing about Foyle. You—know—nothing!!!”

“Oh, nice. That’s the kind of rage I like to see. Now if only you were fast enough to—”

“Accel.”

Accel was an ability usable only by the hero who wielded the holy sword. It was one of the hero’s greatest powers, increasing his physical performance.

Foyle had already lost the ability when he encountered Tordön, so the demon was witnessing Accel for the first time.

Yu vanished from Tordön’s view, moving so fast that even sound couldn’t keep up with him. He closed in on Tordön, then swung the holy sword with enough force to decapitate him.

But Tordön was a seasoned warrior. He’d sensed something was coming and had the foresight to dodge. Not quite fast enough to avoid the attack completely, however. Yu dealt Tordön a major wound to his shoulder.

Tordön retreated and then paused to look at his bleeding shoulder. The area

that the holy sword had touched wasn't regenerating. His blue blood was pouring out and soaking into his white fur.

Yu's body carried a faint white glow, and the holy sword was shining even brighter. "Gah! I missed!"

"Wow... I never thought you'd land a hit on me. And you're as fast as I am. Well, now I know you're a threat. I'm not taking any more chances with you."

The mood changed as Tordön faced the fight with a clear intent to kill. The air buzzed with static electricity as if it too were charged with his murderous intent. Tordön approached Yu with electricity crackling in his right hand, but he hadn't noticed the shadow looming toward him from behind.

"I'm not finished yet!" Owen yelled.

"You should have died already! I'm done toying with you. I'll roast you to death! **Plasma Sword.**"

Although Owen attacked from behind, Tordön had no trouble dodging his massive sword. When Owen's weapon hit nothing but air, he left himself wide open to a counterattack from the Plasma Sword. Or so it seemed.

"Hah! **Hit.**" Owen landed a basic punch on Tordön's cheek.

"Ugh. That was dirty."

"Thought I was a swordsman? Well, too bad, I'm a warrior. I don't just use weapons, I punch and kick! Dodging my sword wasn't enough, was it?!"

"I'll show you! **Kugel—**"

"Holy Airslash!"

Tordön was forced to abandon his next attack to dodge Yu's sword slash. His wariness of the holy sword was clear from the way he dodged completely rather than trying to block.

"Owen! Are you all right?! Don't be so reckless. You had me worried."

"Ha ha ha! I don't need any concern from a youngster. You just focus on yourself, Master! Besides, how am I supposed to support you if I don't dare get in close?! But listen, we've got to keep him busy! He charges up his attacks.

Don't give him the chance!"

"Hah!" Tordön laughed out of disbelief. "You still think you can beat me?! It's time you learned your place."

Yu could keep up with Tordön's speed, and Owen could land powerful blows when Tordön stopped. Since Tordön would struggle to deal with attacks from Owen and the holy sword at the same time, he was sure to be outmaneuvered. But there wasn't an easy way to deal a decisive blow. They had only a small advantage that could be lost at any moment.

As the three were fighting, Mei overcame her exhaustion and made her way over to Christina.

"Chris...are you all right?" Mei asked.

"Y-Yes," Christina replied.

But when she tried to climb to her feet, Mei rushed to support her before she fell over again.

Christina was at her limit. Since Mei still had mana remaining, she would have to support Yu and Owen by herself.

"He's too fast," Mei said. "I can't find a chance to do anything!"

Mei saw no opportunities to use her magic as she watched the dizzying movement of the fight. And if she cast a spell carelessly, she might accidentally aid the enemy.

As Mei was grinding her teeth, Christina was carefully analyzing the situation. *Why doesn't Tordön release another large burst of electricity like he did before?* she wondered.

If Tordön could shoot lightning from his entire body, he'd win easily. At the very least, he'd knock down Owen. And yet he didn't do it. Christina knew there had to be a reason. It was then that she noticed that Tordön's lightning was coming from every region of his body except one.

"Could it be..."

"What is it, Chris?"

“The wound Yu made. I think it’s stopping Tordön from releasing lightning from his entire body. His lightning’s as deadly as ever, but perhaps it’s a danger to himself too.”

Mei felt Christina was right. Owen had struck Tordön with his Hit ability a moment ago. In other words, he’d touched Tordön. And yet he hadn’t been electrocuted.

“He clearly doesn’t want to electrically charge the wound,” Christina said.

“You’re right,” Mei agreed. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be holding back.”

Mei thought quickly. Then she looked at the snaking whip trapped inside the Holy Barrier.

“Chris, the lightning’s still there inside the barrier, isn’t it?”

“Um, yes. I’m sorry. Magic trapped inside a barrier will gradually weaken, but Tordön’s power was too much for me to erase in my current state.”

“No, I mean, could you release it?”

“What? Well, yes, but...”

“In that case...”

Mei’s plan came as a surprise to Christina, but she agreed: “That could work.”

They both felt it was worth a try.

Mei raised her mage staff. “May the blessings that fall from the heavens converge upon us, becoming a flow, a torrent, a surge that washes all away.”

As she gathered her mana and spoke the words of her incantation, Mei couldn’t forget what Tordön had said.

We saw Foy die. He fell from the cliff after giving Yu the holy sword. But we couldn’t find his body.

He never told us what a difficult task he’d been given. Was it his love for me and Yu that made him endure the burden?

I wish I knew. It’s so sad to think that he didn’t tell us anything. If only I’d realized it sooner. If nothing else, I should never have called him a liar.

I've got too many regrets to count. I don't know how many times I've cried. He was an irreplaceable childhood friend of mine. Now it's too late to apologize. I'll never talk to him again. I'll never hear his voice again.

Tordön looked down on Foy. He called him a fake and a fool. I can't forgive him for that. He laughed at Foy's determination. He called him a fake! I won't let him get away with it!

Mei gathered the mana in her body as she recited her incantation. Just as she was about to finish, she stopped, and then instead of casting, she prepared herself to begin another incantation. But first, she warned the others. “Yu! Owen! Get back!”

They both looked a little surprised, but they felt something from the look on Mei's face and moved away from Tordön.

We're fighting a Warlord. Half-hearted magic won't cut it. He'll just dodge. But I know the answer. If he moves as quickly as lightning, I'll just have to stop him from moving!

“Let's see you block this! **Naga's Waterfall.**”

A giant mass of water appeared above Tordön's head. As Mei unleashed her most powerful water magic, a dragon in the form of a waterfall descended from the sky, aimed at Tordön.

“You think I can't block this? Did you forget who I am? Don't make me laugh! **Grand Kugelblitz.**”

Tordön unleashed a ball of lightning into the sky. With ease, he blasted the descending water away, turning it into a shower of droplets around him.

“Ha. Proud of that attack, were you? In my eyes, it was nothing but a trickle. Looks like you're—”

Tordön was about to start moving when he realized something felt wrong. A small amount of water on the ground was holding him in place. He realized too late that it had been gathering at his feet. And not only that. Somehow, his own lightning had escaped the priestess's barrier and was above his head.

Tordön's smile vanished. “Wait, when did you—?!”

“You can have your lightning back!” Christina said.

Mei had an ability that few other mages had, known as Double Incantation. She could recite one incantation, stop just before finishing, and then recite another so that both spells would cast simultaneously.

Mei had deliberately provoked Tordön before unleashing her Naga’s Waterfall at him. She knew he’d destroy it, but he’d be distracted, and with so much water around, he wouldn’t notice her Aqua Gel—the other spell she’d cast—forming at his feet. The result was that Tordön allowed himself to get stuck in place.

When Christina released the Snaking Whip, Brionac from her Holy Barrier, she made it fall into the water Mei had created, and it was guided straight to Tordön.

“Arrrgghh?!”

Tordön tried to speak but couldn’t form words. Electricity flowed through the blood on his fur and into his open wound. When it reached the electricity-generating organ within his body, the result was like a short circuit. The same powerful lightning that had ruined the city filled Tordön’s entire body.

The incredible heat was turning him from silvery white to charred black. His blood bubbled and the roasting of his flesh was evident from the unpleasant odor.

“I’m...not...done! **Lightning Dash.**”

But Tordön was a Warlord. He was tougher than any ordinary demon. Using his Lightning Dash, he closed in on Mei and Christina, intending to kill them. He was so fast that neither of them had a chance to react.

Just as he was about to reach them, a figure appeared, blocking the way. It was Yu, holding the holy sword.

“I won’t let you touch them!”

“True Hero!” Tordön snarled. “The sword might have chosen you, but you’re still a human!”

He knew Yu could easily block his Plasma Sword, but he attacked with it

regardless.

Yu struggled to stand his ground as he blocked with the holy sword. The two weapons created a shower of sparks as a sword that dispelled demonic energies met a blade formed from corrupt demonic power.

What played out next was a sword fight at such high speed that no ordinary human could see it happen. The only thing a bystander would know for sure was that their swords had clashed, creating successive showers of sparks.

Any other human couldn't have kept up with Tordön's speed. Much like Gladius, they'd find their sword hitting nothing but air. But Yu had Accel. It narrowed the gap between the two, allowing him to put up a fight.

Then it became a contest of strength as their swords met and each tried to push the other back. Tordön tried to give out more electricity. Static gathered in his eyes, turning them bloodshot and purple. He was determined to give more power to his Plasma Sword, even if it meant damaging himself further. He was enraged and determined to kill his target. He was so focused on this single goal that he became blind to all but Yu.

"Finally, an opening! **Grand Slash.**" Owen attacked from behind with his massive longsword.

"Guh?!"

Both of Tordön's legs were severed below the knee, robbing him of the impressive speed that had earned him the name Thunderbolt. He collapsed, unable to stand. Yu was never going to miss this opportunity.

"Guh... How could I..."

"It's over! **Divine Light Incarnate.**"

Divine Light Incarnate was a high-level ability that could erase demonic creatures. The holy sword shone with white light as Yu called upon its power.

Tordön's eyes went wide. He had no means of dodging.

The sword lit up the surroundings as it hit Tordön's body.

"I...can't...be..." As Tordön hit the ground, the light faded from his purple eyes.

“Is he...dead?”

“Urgh! He’d better be! I can’t move another inch!” Owen slumped onto his back with his arms and legs outstretched.

Similarly, Yu fell to one knee, supporting himself on the holy sword. He remained alert, but Tordön wasn’t moving. A direct hit from the holy sword had proved fatal.

Christina approached, resting on Mei’s shoulder for support.

“Yu! You did it! I knew the True Hero couldn’t lose!”

“No, that was a close one... I couldn’t have done it without everyone’s help.”

It really had been a close call. If Tordön’s thinking had been just a little calmer, he would have used his speed to take out Yu’s party members one by one, making his victory certain. He’d been powerful enough to pull it off.

“Brother!” Faupan had returned riding Quanos, and he was looking proudly at Yu.

“Faupan! You’re all right?”

“Yes! Just when I thought that lightning bird had me, it suddenly vanished. That’s when I knew you’d won!”

“Krrr. Krrr.”

“Faupan, I’m glad you’re safe...” Christina said. “But I haven’t forgotten the way you used a statue of the goddess as a shield to help you escape! As a priestess, there’s no way I can let you get away with that. I’ll make sure you confess your sins later. You too, Qu!”

“What?! If I’d done anything else, I would have been roasted whole along with Quanos!”

“Krrrew?!”

“Ah ha ha!” Owen laughed. “Bad luck, Little Fau. The young lady’s a stubborn one.”

“Owen, I’ll need to talk to you too. I’m not stubborn! Not at all!”

“Me?! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Yu remained silent as his party members were laughing. He was remembering something Tordön had said. *“That hero was a fake!”*

“Foyle...”

For a moment, Yu had lost himself in anger at Tordön’s words. He’d given in to his hatred in a way no hero should.

His hands trembled as he held the holy sword. Tordön’s blood was still on the blade. It brought back memories of his last encounter with Foyle.

While the other three talked, dark feelings were building up within Yu.

“Hi-yah!” Mei flicked Yu’s forehead.

“Ouch.”

“What are you spacing out for?” she asked as she studied his face. “This was a huge victory. If the star of the show looks gloomy about it, it’ll make everyone worry.”

“Huh?” Yu lifted his head and saw strangers approaching.

“Are we...saved?”

“It’s the hero. His party rescued us.”

“Does that mean the Demon Lord Army’s gone?”

Yu realized that the city’s people had seen the holy sword’s light and were gathering around him now that the battle was over. They were looking at him and at Tordön where he lay.

“If you want to talk, you can come to me later,” Mei said. “For now, you need to reassure everyone.”

“You’re right.”

Thanks to Mei, Yu put aside his exhaustion and faced the crowd. He held the holy sword high and spoke with authority, his voice echoing through the city.

“The Thunderbolt of the Demon Lord’s Eight Warlords has fallen to Yu Protagonist!”

“Huzzah!!!” the crowd roared.

Most buildings in the city had been reduced to rubble. Many people had been injured, and of course, some had been killed. But those who'd survived could still cheer for the hero's victory.



Meanwhile, in the Gorrahm Knight Nation...

"Someone help!"

"It's...so hot..."

"So much smoke... Where can we go?"

"There were explosions from over there! Argh."

"The ground's melting. Is this lava?!"

"Buh heh, heh, heh. Burn, burn up. Every human! Feed my flames. Your bodies fuel my fire and even your bones are my kindling. Return to pure ash. Buh heh. Buh hell, hell, hell!"

Braciola Gen Vulcan the Infernal Flame of the Eight Warlords engulfed the people in flames as he spoke.

His fire was a calamity that reduced everything to ash as he led the Demon Lord Army through the city.

Historical sites, new buildings, young people with promising futures, and elderly people near the end of their lifespan all met the same fate.

The people prayed. "Send us the True Hero. Or anyone. We need a savior." But neither appeared. Their prayers turned to screams, and their screams were swallowed by the flames.

The Gorrahm Knight Nation fell that day. Reinforcements from surrounding nations would arrive to find Gorrahm's royal capital reduced to a smoldering ruin filled with charred figures that only vaguely resembled human forms. The nation's other towns and cities had met a similar fate. Even the smallest of villages were devoid of human life. The Gorrahm Knight Nation had ceased to exist.

There were no survivors.

Bonus Short Story

The Secret Ingredient of Wild Plant Soup

“I messed up. I got our rations wrong.”

We’d decided to set up camp for the night, but a glance inside one of our packs while we were getting set up made me realize we had problems. We weren’t totally out of food, but it was going to be tough to make it to the next town.

Iris stopped playing with Jamama and peered over my shoulder into the pack. “Are we running out of food?”

“Kinda. But we’ll be all right. We won’t have much today, but if we can catch a manabeast tomorrow, it’ll make up for what we’re missing. No need to worry.”

“Heh heh heh.” Iris put her hand to her chin and said, “You’re so sweet and naive, Ayame. Like a sweet red apple dipped in honey!”

Judging by her reaction, Iris had a better idea.

“You can never be sure that you’ll catch a creature like a manabeast. But take a look around. We’re in the middle of a forest. It’s nature’s pantry! And if you need someone to tell you what’s safe to eat and what isn’t, well, who better to ask than an elf?!” Iris looked pleased with herself at the best of times, but now she looked positively smug. “There are nuts, berries, leaves, mushrooms, fish, wild vegetables, and bugs. We’re surrounded by the forest’s blessings!”

“Well, if elves call themselves nature’s arbitrators, then I suppose they would know about— Wait, did you say bugs?”

“Yes. What about them?”

“Uh, I know there are humans who eat them in some countries, but... Do you eat bugs?”

“I don’t mind touching them, but I don’t like eating them. Lots of elves from

my generation are the same way.”

I wasn't too hung up on the dietary habits of elves, but the sight of Iris munching on a mouthful of bugs would've taken some time to come to terms with.

“We should aim to finish our foraging before it gets too dark! It's still light enough to find plenty of fresh wild plants! Let's go!”

Jamama and I did our best to match Iris's enthusiasm.

“Grrah!”

“L-Let's go!”

We spent some time after that searching for food in the forest, under Iris's leadership. With her knowledge and Jamama's sense of smell combined, we had a good selection of edible plants and nuts in no time. Then came the time to prepare our dinner.

Iris had her hair tied back safely in a ponytail, and she was stirring the pot gleefully. “Give the pot a good stir. Get it boiling. Now drop in all the chopped plants so that all the ingredients are in there getting along nicely. And I'll add my secret ingredient too. Now to just let it boil and bubble. Heh heh heh.”

It would normally be tough to keep the pot at a consistent temperature, but Iris could rely on the power of fire spirits to keep the flames under control.

My job had been to prepare the ingredients, peeling and chopping all the plants while Iris was cooking.

“And it's done! I call it ‘wild plant soup!’ Give it a try!” Once the soup was done, Iris put some into two wooden bowls and passed one to me.

“Th-Thanks,” I told her.

When I gave it a try, I was hit with an assortment of subtle tastes.

“Wow, it's good. I don't know any fancy words for it, but it has a gentle but tasty flavor.”

“That's right! I picked the tastiest plants that would give us the best soup broth! I'm proud of how it turned out!”

Iris seasoned a third serving a little differently, especially to suit Jamama.

“Here you go, Jamama. I’ve made a milder version for you!”

“Grrah!” He began hungrily lapping it up while also taking in enough air to avoid burning his mouth.

“You really made things easy, Iris. Thanks. I’ve never had such good soup while camping.”

“Isn’t it great? You know, I could make food like this for you every day!”

“No, we’re only doing this because I messed up. In the future, I’ll make sure not to trouble you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that! Hmph!”

I didn’t understand why Iris was suddenly annoyed. We’d gotten into this mess because I hadn’t managed our food properly, so it was obvious that it should be up to me to stop it from happening again.

Iris sighed for some reason then took a seat next to me. “Ayame, did you notice that I made it with a very special secret ingredient?”

“What? Is there something rare in the soup? What is it?”

“Heh heh. It’s a secret!”

“Now you’re just making me curious.”

“I’m not telling! I’m keeping it secret! I would’ve let you know if you hadn’t misunderstood me just now.”

It seemed Iris had only brought it up to tease me as a form of revenge. I still had no idea what I’d done to annoy her.

“I hope you’ll add a little of the same next time you make food for me,” Iris said.

She seemed to be enjoying herself. She smiled and watched as I grew increasingly confused.



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The Fake Hero Crashes the Party: Volume 2

by Shinonome Kousyaku

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