

BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,

I Decided to Live a **Quiet Life**
in the Countryside

12

ZAPPON

Illustration by
Yasumo

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A young woman with long, straight orange hair and bright blue eyes is the central figure. She is holding a small, square blue gift box with a gold ribbon bow. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with ruffled cuffs, a red high-collared turtleneck, and a dark red skirt with a black belt. Her right hand is near her mouth, and she has a slight, shy smile. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The entire image is framed by a light orange border.

**“Thank you
for this
past year.
There’s
something
I wanted to
give you.”**

Torahime

A Jade Kingdom princess who crossed the sea with a strong will and a secret in her heart. When she reached Zoltan, she was in an emaciated, half-dead state.

Habotan

A ninja and an earnest, curious girl who crossed the sea from the Jade Kingdom with her beloved Lady Torahime. She is searching for Ruti the Hero on her master's orders.



Chapter 1

Interlude

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Prologue

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Epilogue

Design Work: Shindousha

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New York

Copyright

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Zappon

Translation by Dale DeLucia Cover art by Yasumo



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SHIN NO NAKAMA JYANAI TO YUUSHA NO PARTY WO OIDASARETANODE, HENKYOU DE SLOW—LIFE SURUKOTO NI SHIMASHITA Vol. 12

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Illustration: Yasumo

Design Work: Shindousha

CHARACTERS



Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

Kicked out of the Hero's party, he headed to the frontier to live a slow life. Although not as powerful as Ruti, he's one of humanity's greatest swordsmen, with many feats to his name.



Rit
(Rizlet of Loggervia)

The princess of the Duchy of Loggervia and a former adventurer hailed as a hero. Now she is a truly happy young woman who has grown out of her combative phase and lives with the man she loves.



Ruti Ragnason

A girl who possesses two Divine Blessings. The Hero blessing was bequeathed to her by God, while New Truth was born within her heart. She's growing up, having regained her humanity.



Tisse Garland

A young girl with the Divine Blessing of the Assassin. An elite from the Assassins Guild, she is taking a break from her usual job and working with Ruti to get their medicinal herb farm running.



Yarandrala

A high elf Singer of the Trees capable of controlling plants. Brimming with endless curiosity, she has been through countless adventures during her long life.



Mister Crawly Wawly

Tisse's pet spider, who spends his days by her side. Lately, he's been playing a lot with his new friend, the big dog Charlie.

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Chapter 1

The Multi-Talented High Elf Running Amok

“I want to build a ship.”

What was this high elf talking about?

Yarandrala had said it entirely out of the blue, after bursting in while we were getting the shop ready to open. It wasn't even seven in the morning.

If you looked at the calendar, it would tell you that autumn was closing in, but in Zoltan it was still as hot as the middle of summer. Even now, I was having to wash the night sweat off when I got up in the mornings.

“Ummm, how big of a ship?”

“A high-performance adventuring ship, big enough to sail all the way around the continent.”

“I think it might be a tall ask to get that built here.”

I was just an amateur when it came to ships, but I was pretty sure no one had ever sailed around the continent before.

“...Are you leaving Zoltan?” Rit asked.

It was a natural assumption. If Yarandrala was building a ship, then most likely she would be sailing it.

But...that was probably not what Yarandrala had in mind.

“No, nothing like that. I just wanted to build one.”

See.

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Rit and Yarandrala looked at each other with cocked heads.

“I want to build a ship because I feel like it. The doing is the goal, and whatever comes of it is secondary.”

“Ah, yeah, that sounds like something you’d do.” Rit smiled, accepting the other woman’s explanation. “Is this because we went to that island the other day?”

“Exactly! Sailing on a ship, seeing that fishing ship getting made, I started wanting my own ship again!”

“Right, you were a captain a long time ago, and you know a lot about ships.”

“That really takes me back... It’s not like I was actually involved with the construction, but I studied the blueprints of a lot of different ships.” Yarandralla nodded confidently.

Hmmm...

“That was around a hundred years ago, right?” I asked.

“Ahaha, it’s not thaaat long ago. And I was involved in the building of a ship as recently as fifty years ago.”

“Fifty years, huh?”

Around forty years ago, the continent of Avalon had undergone a major revolution in the construction of sailing ships, resulting in significant improvements in their capabilities. But back when Yarandralla had been a sailor, single-masted cogs were mainstream, and countries and pirates had relied on rowed galleys for naval power. The Veronian Admiral Lilinralla had been using a galley model that was eighty years old, but their modern navy was built on larger ships with multiple sails, and the technology of sailing ships had developed to the point where even massive crafts could maneuver freely on the water.

“I know what you’re thinking, Red.” Yarandralla smirked. “The ships I’m familiar with had a single mast in the center with a big square sail, and they wouldn’t go anywhere in a headwind.”

“Yeah, headwind or tailwind, ships nowadays can still sail as long as there’s any wind at all.”

With the newest developments in sails, it was possible to keep going forward regardless of the direction of the wind.

There were ships that relied on magic, but those required a mage at a high enough level to receive a special blessing, who also had to use magic all day long. It was exhausting work, so even taking shifts, it was not something that could be relied on for months at a time out at sea.

The development of high-speed sailing ships that didn't use magic had made the world a much smaller place.

"That's exactly why I want to try building a ship," Yarandrala said emphatically. "I don't know any of that, so it'll be a challenge. It's something I can't do now, but I want to learn how to do it. That's what a hobby is, right?"

"So noble..."

Her aspirations were too high for me. I just wanted to take it easy with the apothecary running smoothly and no big messes to deal with.

"You're doing your best to live a fun life too, Red. Have a little confidence in yourself!"

"Thanks, Rit..."

Her consolation was enough to get me back on my feet.

"So lay it out for us. What's your plan?"

"I've got my treasure to fund it, so that won't be a problem. The first step is finding out what I need to know."

"Yeah, the stuff you have in your item box is worth more than Zoltan's entire budget."

The knowledge would be a little trickier.

"Zoltan shipwrights only make smaller crafts."

Although it was right near the sea, all of Zoltan's seagoing trade ships were built in other countries. There were no shipwrights in Zoltan who made ships capable of remaining at sea for long periods of time.

"But there are craftspeople who have moved here from other countries, so

one or two of them might have made a top-of-the-line ship in the past. Maybe you could try the Merchants Guild this weekend?”

“Sorry, that’s when I’m challenging the champion of Zoltan’s colosseum.”

“Eh?”

“I’m working on a martial art that anyone can use, even without weapons, magic, skills, or a specialized martial artist-style blessing.”

Weren’t we just talking about ships?

“You sure have a lot of hobbies...”



“She said that?” Ruti asked from her seat beside me.

It was evening, and there were omelets and chicken soup on the table, along with a fluffy walnut bread and a plate of neatly arranged, bite-sized pieces of watermelon, pineapple, and banana for dessert.

“Your food is as delicious as ever, Red!” Rit smiled as she took a bite of the omelet.

I was glad tonight’s dinner was another hit.

“Still, though, I was surprised when she suddenly started talking about building a ship,” Rit said.

I nodded with a wry smile.

“Yarandralla’s the type of person who starts to act as soon as she thinks of something. And she’s got the ability to actually make it happen, too.”

“And then, just when it sounded like we might be taking a trip to the shipyard, she tells us she’s fighting in a title match. I almost fell over in shock,” Rit said with a grin.

That frenetic personality was part of Yarandralla’s charm. I’d had this image of high elves as a gentle, refined race when I was young, partly because they tended not to leave the Kingdom of Kiramin. The gap between that mental image and reality only grew wider the longer I knew Yarandralla, which was a surprise. I certainly didn’t mind.

“If Yarandralla’s facing the champion...I have a feeling she’d overwhelm him even barehanded. Still, seeing as it’s a title match, you want to go cheer her on?”

“That sounds great!”

I could make a picnic lunch.

Watching arena matches while snacking on hotdogs sounded like a fun day off.

That said, as a knight, I had lived a life rife with the stench of blood, so I’d never really felt like watching people fight in my free time.

““Right, speaking of the arena...””

Rit and Ruti spoke at the same time. They both looked at each other in surprise.

“Ummm, you go first, Rit.” I nudged them along when the conversation stalled out.

“Okay. Joe from the colosseum mentioned being worried about their stock of potions. With the autumn festival and stuff, there will be more people using the arena, but he can’t get enough potions. He said if you can get your hands on any of the stuff he needs, he’ll buy it all at asking price.”

“I see. I’ll go talk to him tomorrow when I’m out delivering medicine to the clinics in the central district.”

“Great!”

That was my Rit, handling the orders that had come in while I’d been out shopping in the afternoon.

“What were you going to say, Ruti?”

“I’m going to be fighting in the arena on the day of Yarandralla’s match, too.”

““Eh?””

This time, it was Rit and me speaking in unison.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.”

I started shaking my head like a broken toy.

I mean, obviously, right? It didn't matter what the rules were, whether it was with weapons, magic, or bare fists—Ruti fighting in Zoltan's colosseum was bound to lead to some kind of mishap.

"It's probably not the sort of match you're both imagining."

"R-really?"

"It's an exhibition match with the junior competitors."

"Ahh, a request for Zoltan's B-rank adventurer to do something special for the kids."

Zoltan's colosseum had a junior division for children who had not connected with their blessing yet. There was no striking allowed; the winner was the one who could throw their opponent to the ground and pin them. It was a light-hearted competition that was almost an extension of one of their games, but the rules were set up so that it still resembled man-to-man combat, where a person could finish off their opponent with a weapon in that position if it were a real fight.

"There weren't any requests like that when I was active...," Rit grumbled.

"Well, you did things more at your own pace and chose to do things for different reasons from regular adventurers, so they probably weren't sure if it would be okay to give you a light-hearted request like this."

"Really?!" Rit's eyes widened in shock. "I thought I was everyone's favorite approachable hero."

"Being the people's hero isn't quite the same as being approachable."

"...Maybe I should bust into the middle of the match."

"Don't do that."

That would end up causing an even bigger mess than Yarandrala.

"Mrghhh." Rit growled unhappily.

"Also, Ruti plays with the kids a lot, so everyone knows she likes children."

Well, it was more that she was having fun playing all the games she never got

the chance to enjoy when she was younger with the children of Zoltan.

Between the jobs she had done as an adventurer since coming to Zoltan, her performance in the war against Veronia, and the input she had provided to the assembly afterward, Ruti had become famous as Zoltan's hero. But to the kids here, she was just a friend who was really good at games.

That was probably the real reason for this request.

"Well, in that case, we have to go and cheer you on!"

"You're going to come cheer for me?"

"Of course! If you're going to be in an event, then there's no way I'd miss it. I'll make us a picnic lunch, and we'll come watch."

"Yay!"

Ruti broke into a smile. Her expression was so much easier to read than before. Apparently, our island vacation had had a good effect on her heart. Back when she was still the Hero, she never would have considered taking part in the arena for an exhibition match with some children.

"All right, let's make this meal extra special."

It was my little sister's big moment, and as her brother, I had to do what I could to make it one worth remembering. I was really looking forward to the weekend now.

...And with that, I pushed the thoughts of Yarandrala's ship out of my mind for the moment.



The next day, after finishing up a delivery to Christopher Clinic in the central district, I headed to the arena. Zoltan's colosseum was located on the eastern side of central.

Where we lived on the south side of Zoltan was officially called the southern district, but everyone just called it "downtown" because it was downstream of the river from central. Our apothecary got a fair share of customers from downtown, as well as laborers from the harbor district in the west and adventurers from the northern district, but not many from the eastern side of

central where I was headed to now.

“Phew, Zoltan’s summers sure are long.”

I was walking along a path through the woods. Green grass, full of life from the summer weather, had forced its way through the gravel path.

This was a forested area set aside for Zoltan’s charcoal needs. It was a man-made forest populated by fast-growing trees that had been imported for that specific purpose.

Leaving the woods, I continued down the path and saw a clearing surrounded by a wooden fence and wooden benches.

This was Zoltan’s colosseum. It was totally different from the massive arena in Avalonia’s capital, but this was more the norm. There was a building nearby to hold monsters.

The original purpose of a colosseum was to create an environment where people could raise their blessing level as safely as possible. If you were not fighting someone or something with a blessing level equivalent to or higher than your own, the rate of growth was just terrible, but also if you fought an opponent that was equal or stronger, your odds of survival got worse.

It seems like Demis intended for people to grow through fair, life-or-death struggles, but humans are creatures of innovation. And a colosseum was just that sort of creation—a way for people to battle against monsters of an appropriate strength while safely surrounded by skilled warriors and mages who could save them at any time.

Because they had originally been developed for that purpose, the very first institutions had been called training yards instead of colosseums. But as time went on, people ended up using the training facilities to practice together. In order to earn money to keep running, the arenas would hold bouts that could be wagered on, and eventually entertainment became another main goal of the colosseums.

There was no avoiding combat if you wanted to live in this world. Everyone had experience in battle, so there was always some degree of interest in a match that would let people observe high-level techniques. Because the

demand was so high in this world, every town of a certain size had their own colosseum.

“Oh, there’s an exhibition between the martial arts schools?”

It wasn’t as fierce as when dojos tried to crush one another, but it was still an exhibition match with the schools’ honor on the line. They were using Merciful potions to avoid wounding one another, so they could go all-out.

The two schools currently facing off were both incredibly rare: a sickle-and-chain school from Jade Kingdom and a three-section staff school from Tian Long Kingdom. As the names implied, the former school used a sickle connected to a counterweight by a chain, and the latter, a weapon consisting of three short staves connected together. I had never used either myself, but I had fought a sickle-and-chain user once before.

Two different eastern styles... I wonder if they get along well, or do they see each other as rivals?

There wasn’t a lot of exchange with countries on the other side of the Wall at the End of the World, but that did not mean there weren’t any travelers. The warriors who made it through the dangerous trade routes in the Wall were all exceptional masters, and their eastern fighting styles entranced a lot of people. Warriors trained by such people had been successful and started to gather disciples of their own, which was how eastern martial arts schools had made it to even a remote region like Zoltan.

Of course, the actual strength of a warrior came down to their own individual skill, and it was not as if the fighting styles of the Jade Kingdom or Tian Long Kingdom were inherently superior to those developed on this side of the Wall. But foreign styles were interesting to watch and made for a good show.

The warrior from Tian Long Kingdom held the two end sections of their staff and kept it close to their body.

Their opponent from the Jade Kingdom kept both sickle and counterweight in their hands to try to camouflage its actual reach.

They were both weapons that could attack from a distance, but neither warrior wanted to show their hand to the opponent. They were both hoping to

charge in and pile on the pressure, but they were also both ready to hit back with attacks that made use of their reach.

“Hey, pay up if you want to watch.”

“Ah, sorry. I’m here for business.”

“Haha, just pulling your leg. Thanks for coming by, Red.”

The voice belonged to the eye-catching white-haired man who ran the arena—Joe, the guy Rit had mentioned.

“Grab a seat. We can talk shop while we watch.”

Joe took a seat on the bench and held out a cup of water for me. I thanked him, sat down by his side, and took a sip. The cool well water spread throughout my sweaty body.

Back in the arena, the sickle-and-chain user tried to close the distance but was immediately hit in the head by a sweeping swing of the staff.

“Huh, I didn’t realize it could reach so far.”

“It’s an interesting weapon, ain’t it?”

As someone who worked here at the colosseum, Joe had seen all sorts of matches.

“The sickle-and-chain’s pretty interesting, too.”

This time, the sickle-and-chain user landed a heavy blow on the opponent’s shin with the counterweight.

In an actual fight, that might have been enough to incapacitate their leg, but right now, they would only feel an intense pain. With the effects of a Merciful potion, people could still be hurt, but it wouldn’t drastically inhibit their physical abilities. They could still keep pitting their techniques against each other. Even if the rules were the same as real combat, a match was a match, not a battle over life and death.

That was why we could enjoy watching it like this.



“That’s about as much as we can get for you.”

“Your shop’s always good on their word, so that’ll be a big help,” Joe responded, pleased.

I wasn’t able to use magic, so I couldn’t make magic potions. I had made these potions with a student from the Mages Guild to fill an emergency request from the arena, but generally we only stocked medicines that could be made using common skills. Sadly, that meant that I couldn’t provide the Merciful potions the arena needed most of all, but I could still offer lots of medicines that were needed for fighting.

The order this time was for salves, hemostatics, painkillers, stimulants, various sedatives to keep monsters pacified, and two bottles of herbicide to keep the arena itself in order.

The colosseum didn’t order from us frequently, but they were still a major customer for the two-man operation that was Red & Rit’s Apothecary.

“All right, I’ll come by the day after tomorrow with the delivery,” I said, standing up.

From the looks of it, the staff user had won the exhibition match. They helped their opponent up, and the two warriors complimented each other on the fight. In response to the applause, they both bowed to the audience bench and then left.

It definitely had been an interesting match.

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“Take care.”

“Yeah, you too.”

This farewell routine had become normal for us. It wasn’t embarrassing at all anymore.

“Mmm.” Rit spread her arms.

What...? Oh, right.

“...I’ll be careful.” I gave Rit a hug.

“If it was going to be like this, maybe I shouldn’t have told you about Joe.”

“We’re both glad our store is doing well, right?”

“Yeah! That’s right!”

It’s almost been a year since we started living together...but some things are still embarrassing.

I let go of Rit and left the house.

It was after dark, but I was heading out to the mountains to get the ingredients I needed to make the medicines for the colosseum. I would reach the mountain tonight, sleep there, gather everything, and be back by tomorrow evening.

Then, I’d prepare the medicines and deliver the day after tomorrow.

The colosseum was a major customer, so in order to have everything ready for the big event this weekend, I decided to put in a bit of extra effort for once.

“I still can’t believe it’s been a full year since we started living together...”

Our one-year anniversary would be the week after next. Thinking back, a lot had happened in that time.

I should do something special for her...and that means earning some money from this job with the colosseum.

That was enough to get me ready and eager to go.

“Is that you, Red? You’re going out at this time of night?” the guard at the gate called out.

“Yeah, I’m off to the mountains to gather some herbs. I’ll be back tomorrow evening.”

“Huh, you sound really fired up. The missus lay down the law?”

“Haha, it’s almost a year since she moved in. She doesn’t have to lay down the law; I want to work hard for her.”

“Aw, you two sure are close. I wish I could find a cute wife, too.”

Chuckling at the guard’s gripes, I left Zoltan.



A beautiful moon filled the night sky.

The mountains were lively tonight. Summer insects buzzed and chirped in the shadows of the plants, and I found it both amusing and mystifying that such small creatures could make such loud noises. Insects did not live their lives subtly, if they were using sounds like that to try and attract a mate.

But larger insect-type monsters didn't make that sort of noise.

"I just had to think it..."

Sure enough, the sound of insects stopped, and the rough sound of trees being pushed aside filled the silence.

A yellow light cut through the night sky, drawing near.

"That's strange."

An insect appeared with a long, narrow, black body...as big as a fully grown grizzly.

A beast-eating flash beetle. Its large, well-developed lower jaw announced its carnivorous nature. Despite its appearance, it was actually a type of firefly—yet another example of why large insect-type monsters were so fearsome.

"They're supposed to live deeper in the woods, but I guess these sorts of things happen on summer nights."

I put my hand on the hilt of my sword.

The next moment, a flash of light filled my vision. It was an aggressive sort of light, unlike the soft glow of a normal firefly. The flash beetle's strategy was to dazzle its opponents, then attack them while they couldn't move. Even if you knew the attack was coming, it was still difficult to avoid, and if you closed your eyes out of caution, you were effectively blinded anyway.

Which made running away the best course of action.

"...?"

The flash beetle tilted its head and wriggled its antennae.

The moment I'd seen the light, I had immediately escaped the range it could sense me in. The flash also limited its own vision, so it relied on scent and the

changes in the air its feelers could detect, but this was only effective for about twenty meters.

If you turned away from it and started running the moment the flash happened, it was more than enough time to get out of range.

Left alone, the flash beetle moved its head all around, searching for me, before finally giving up and disappearing back into the forest.

“It’s not like anyone got hurt, and one dead monster is barely a drop in the bucket.”

It was rare for flash beetles to come out this far, but there were lots of monsters like that deeper in the mountains. If I’d killed it here, it wouldn’t have made a difference to anyone, be they human or monster.

Today, I was just here to gather herbs, so I let it go.

Fireflies used their lights to search for mates, just like summer insects did with their chirping and buzzing.

“It might have a mate waiting for it to come home, too.”

In which case, there was no need to be cruel. I was just a simple apothecary, not a member of the Hero’s party; I didn’t have a duty to kill monsters.

Thinking back on it, I’d let the owlbear go last year, too. The situation was similar, but I realized my state of mind had been pretty different.

With the owlbear, I had taken a break from my role of saving people, so I’d felt like it wasn’t my job to fight. I didn’t think I’d been wrong to think that. Even now, I was under no delusion that I was the one who had to solve everything, but letting that owlbear go had led to a huge uproar. The owlbear would have been slain whether I did anything or not...but because of a fire mage’s overenthusiastic support during the hunt, there had been a big forest fire across the mountain.

The person I was now...probably would have killed it.

Meeting Rit again and living together with her had changed the way I thought. My mental state as Gideon and how I had been when I first became Red had reached a sort of balance. After all, Red had only ever lived as a guide, so when

he suddenly lost his purpose, he'd forced himself to try to live a quiet life in the countryside even though he didn't know how. He'd been hurt and all beat up.

The man I currently was only existed because Rit had supported me... This past year with her was something irreplaceable.

Sitting in the shade of a tree, listening to insects that had resumed their chirping, I thought about how glad I was that I had come to Zoltan.



The following day, I was out gathering herbs. My goal was to pick the amount I needed by noon. I hadn't been attacked by monsters since my run-in the night before, and my basket was filling up at a good pace.

Demon beast-type monsters had stopped attacking me a long time ago. They were fairly intelligent, so they probably realized I was a dangerous opponent and that I wouldn't attack them unless they came at me first.

There were good medicinal herbs growing around the entrance to the ancient human ruins—the Hero Management Bureau. It was also chimera territory, but after beating a lesson into them a year ago, they had stopped attacking me and even napped while I was around.

Chimeras were monsters that had the heads of a lion, goat, and dragon, and a snake's head for a tail. They were your stereotypical composite-type monster. If I told them they were in the way, they would move without much of a problem, but they could also be very cheeky.

It was something you'd never realize just by fighting them.

"If you're going to watch, you could always help out a bit," I called out to a young chimera staring at me as I gathered plants. It was probably a teenager by human standards.

The words should have meant nothing to it, but I guess some of the nuance came through, because it pulled out a nearby plant with its mouth...then the goat head started munching on it.

"Hey."

"Baaa..."

It spat it out. Guess it didn't taste great.

"Don't give me that look," I said with a laugh, as the goat head gave me a resentful glare.

With that, the chimera stood up. It glanced at me, as if telling me to follow, then guided me to a rocky area where a bunch of the medicinal plants were all growing together in the shade.

Aren't you a nice little guy...

I guess once it realized the plants weren't worth anything as food, it had been willing to share. Chimeras weren't all the same—they seemed to have some individuality.

Thanking the chimera who gave me the tip, I crouched down to start gathering the plants. The chimera lay down and continued to watch me work. I wondered what it found so interesting... Maybe, if it weren't for blessings, humans and demon beasts might have been able to get along better.

With the difference in our blessing level, neither of us had a reason to fight, so we shared this tranquil moment instead.



It was evening back in Zoltan, and I was grinding herbs in the workroom.

"I just closed up shop. Is there anything I can help with?"

Rit came through the door holding a cup of tea.

"Thanks, but all the work for this part needs my skills, so I'll do it myself," I told her as she passed me the cup.

"Ugh, too bad. Maybe I should take the Elementary Preparation skill, too."

"Ahaha. I appreciate the thought, but neither of us is going to get much of a chance to raise our blessing level again. So even if you go for a common skill, it would probably be better to get one that would be more useful day to day."

I took a sip of tea. It was nicely chilled, so I started gulping it down. It was the perfect temperature for my parched throat after all the work I had been doing.

"...If you're not busy right now, would you mind sitting next to me?" I asked.

“Something on your mind?”

“Yeah, there’s a lot I want to talk to you about, since I spent the night away.”

“Hehe, I was just thinking the same thing.”

It had only been one night.

Just a single night apart.

But there was still a lot we wanted to talk about. What I had seen out in the mountains, what she had seen in Zoltan, things we had experienced and wanted to share with each other.

Rit brought over a stool and sat beside me.

I continued my grinding, and we shared what we’d been through.



The weekend arrived, and with it came the day of the title fight at Zoltan’s colosseum.

“C’mon, Kilo! Don’t lose to that shrimp!”

“You better not lose, Booter! That string bean’s got nothin’!”

The junior division was currently in progress.

The fighters’ parents cheered loudly, while the children themselves were obviously tense. They must have been feeling the pressure.

“Both of you do your best,” Ruti called out in a calm yet clear voice.

Strangely, that had more of an effect than the parents’ shouts.

The two fighters glanced in Ruti’s direction, then flashed a smile at each other before getting serious and starting the match. It was a good bout, and they both showed off their skills without holding back.

“So yours is the last fight of the junior division?”

“Mhm.”

“We can watch together until then.”

“Yeah, that’ll be fun.”

Ruti, Rit, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly, and I were sitting together on a bench and watching the fights. Mister Crawly Wawly had a headband on and was waving little flags with his two front arms, since one of his friends was fighting.

“Oh, he’s not? It’s not your friend that’s competing, but his owner?”

It turned out that the person fighting was the owner of the dog sitting next to Mister Crawly Wawly. The dog’s tail was wagging furiously in support; both he and Mister Crawly Wawly must have been enjoying the big event, too.

“I’ve prepared for this day,” Tisse said.

Her expression was different from usual, though it was just the slightest difference. As to what she had prepared for...

“Today is the chikuwa bread’s market debut.”

She was proudly eating the mysterious bread that she had made: chikuwa bread. I didn’t know what was going on with that, but it seemed like it had caught the eye of a Zoltan bakery that had set up a stall in front of the colosseum for the big event to sell it.

Just what is this assassin doing?

But looking around the stands, there were quite a few people eating her bread. It seemed like it was a success so far, which made sense as it *was* delicious.

Anyway, the important thing was that Tisse was also enjoying her life in Zoltan.

As all of that was going on, Ruti’s turn finally came.

“All right, I’m going now.”

“Okay. Do your best.”

“Mhm.”

Ruti clenched her fists at my words of encouragement and headed to the waiting room.

The current bout was the juniors’ championship match between a large girl and a short boy. Neither of them had connected with their blessing yet, so it

was purely a competition of their own individual skill.

The boy was the dog's owner that Mister Crawly Wawly had been cheering for, so the two of them enthusiastically showed their support.

The girl was using her size advantage to maintain the upper hand, but the boy was skillfully keeping himself in a good position.

The girl's arms flexed to forcibly push the boy down.

"Ah." I actually gasped.

The moment the boy had planted his right foot to brace against his opponent's strength, it had been swept out from under him, and he had gone flying into the air.

It was a perfectly timed leg sweep.

This young girl seemed to have incredible technique. I couldn't wait to see what the future held for her.

Once he was on the ground, the boy's size disadvantage was just too much, and he lost. Mister Crawly Wawly and the dog slumped in disappointment.

The girl held out a hand to the dazed boy.

"Pretty impressive, making me use a technique like that. What's your name?"

"Booter."

So she's that sort of person, is she?

It felt like the beginning of a rival story.

Mister Crawly Wawly and the dog started applauding, seemingly moved by the display of comradery. Meanwhile, Tisse took a bite out of her chikuwa bread.

"Ah, next up is Ruti!" said Rit.

"Yeah, apparently it's a match against everyone in the top eight all at once."

"That sounds like fun."

After a short break, the children entered the arena again.

"And now, we have an exhibition match pitting the top fighters from the

junior division against Zoltan's hero: the B-rank adventurer, Ruti Ruhr!"

Ruti made her way into the arena.

"Woooooo!!!"

The crowd roared.

This was Ruti's first time in the colosseum. Even if it was an exhibition match, it was only natural that everyone would be excited for the chance to watch Zoltan's hero fight in person.

Instead of her usual outfit, Ruti was wearing normal outdoor clothes for the arena, the sort of thing adventurers wore beneath their armor. They were fairly sturdy, being made of a thicker type of cloth, but it also meant that her opponents would have something easy to grab onto in a grappling contest.

"How do you think Ruti will approach a fight like this?" Rit asked.

"Hmmm..."

Would she let the children win, since this was essentially an extension of the games she played with them? Would she go along with them for a little while, before eventually outmatching the kids and winning? Or would she use her overwhelming strength to show them what adults were capable of?

There were a lot of ways for a grown person to handle this sort of situation. However...

"The way she is now, I doubt Ruti does any of those."

"Really?!"

The children surrounded Ruti. They seemed to be thinking about the best way to attack her, but then one boy suddenly leapt forward. I figured he wasn't a big fan of waiting around, but it was a cute attack—childish and rash.

Ruti could send him flying with a single hand...but instead she took the attack head on, catching the boy and throwing him down with proper, serious form.

"At a time like this, you should be working together to attack. Even if you don't have a chance of winning head-on, there's still hope if you can get into a grappling match from an advantageous position. All of you were just fighting

one another, so I imagine you haven't ever worked together, but you should focus on taking advantage of your numbers and coordinating your attack as much as possible. We'll pretend this throw just now didn't happen, so come at me for real."

Ruti's approach with the children was to deal with them seriously.

All of them had fought their hardest in their matches. Even if the adults watching the competition found it amusing, the kids had done their best to win. So Ruti faced them on their own level, defeating the children one by one with precise throws, rather than making a half-hearted display.

The girl who had been crowned champion was the last one standing. She tried to throw Ruti from behind, but Ruti hooked her leg and broke her stance.

And that was everyone.

The girl gritted her teeth, and tears welled in her eyes. She and her allies had fought all-out, in all seriousness, on equal ground. That was why it was so frustrating.

"What an impressive match."

The crowd had fallen quiet. They'd been expecting something closer to a game than a proper fight, so I stood up and clapped to break the silence.

"Yeah, Ruti and the children all gave it their best. It was a great match."

Rit and Tisse both stood up and applauded with me, and the rest of the crowd soon followed.

"That was incredible!"

"The future sure is bright!"

The children left the arena filled with a mixture of frustration and joy. They hadn't connected with their blessings yet; this applause was something they had earned with their own power, just as it was for Ruti, who had drawn out their true strength.

In a real battle, there was never any need to draw out 100 percent of an opponent's strength—rather, it made sense to try to win without going against their full power.

This hadn't been a contest of blessings that grew stronger from killing, but between people. In my opinion, that was why it was such a wonderful fight.



With the junior division over, there was a break for lunch before the adult division began.

"Good job, Ruti," I told her when she came back.

She had changed back into her usual clothes, and she sat down next to me, looking completely relaxed.

"That was the goal."

"Yeah, you did great."

"Mm."

Ruti looked happy as I praised her.

"It was a great match. Even I got up and clapped!" Rit said.

"Yes, it is something I am sure those children will never forget," Tisse added.

And Mister Crawly Wawly waved his flags.

"Thank you," Ruti answered with a smile. She averted her gaze slightly out of embarrassment.

Ruti still wasn't totally used to praise like this; it was so different from the praise the Hero had received...or maybe she just wasn't used to feeling overcome with emotion when she was praised.

Ruti was regaining some of what the Hero had stolen from her, and it made me happy.

"Ruti!!!" someone shouted.

"Yarandralla."

"That was such a great match, Ruti! I'm all fired up now!"

Yarandralla wrapped her up in a big hug. That only made Ruti look even more embarrassed... No, maybe a little annoyed would be more accurate.

"All right, Yarandralla, that's enough."

I gently pried her off Ruti. High elves got extremely touchy-feely with friends when they got emotional, so there was no helping it really. Still, I think Rit and Tisse could also tell that Ruti was feeling a bit uncomfortable.

“““Ahaha.”””

They both let out a laugh, almost as if they were enjoying it.



After the lunch break, there were four matches in the adult division.

Yarandrala’s was the fourth and final bout—the title fight to determine the champion of Zoltan’s colosseum.

Combatants could use weapons of any sort, including ranged weapons, and there were no limits on magical buffs, nor any weight classes. These free-for-all rules were the closest to real combat, and the most popular type of match in any town.

“The winner is...Paul!”

The third bout had ended.

The winner had been clear from the outset. Even though the spear-user Paul’s fans cheered like mad, the match had been one-sided and somewhat lacking in excitement.

“And now, our final bout for the day! The ultimate challenger has emerged!”

Yarandrala stepped into the arena.

“The high elf with whirlwinds for fists! Yar-an-dralaaa!!!”

Huh, so she’s earned a nickname fighting? I wonder why they call her that.

Yarandrala’s hands were wrapped in bandages, and she raised them high, firing the crowd up.

Rit and I started to cheer, when all of a sudden...

“Yarandrala!!! Yarandrala!!! Yarandrala!!!”

Cheers erupted all around us.

“Lala~♪”

Yarandrala started singing.

“Go! Go! Yarandrala!!!”

The crowd drummed their feet against the ground, then all together they shouted her name and struck a pose.

“What even is that?”

Yarandrala was almost too comfortable in the arena. I knew she’d had to fight a bunch of times to get this title match, but this was something else...

“Was Yarandrala always like this?”

“It’s such a surprise.”

“She’s really living it up out there.”

Me, Ruti, and Rit were so surprised we couldn’t even manage to cheer. Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly must have already known all about it, because they cheered along perfectly with the rest of the crowd.

“Any real fan of Zoltan’s colosseum knows the Yarandrala Shake.”

“What even is that?”

And now I was repeating myself. How long had this been going on?

And facing Yarandrala and her choreography was the champion of Zoltan’s colosseum.

“I’ve been waiting, champ! Volga the Hammer!!!”

Volga was holding a heavy, two-handed war hammer. He was a big, burly warrior with a barrel chest and short, stout legs, and he had reigned for years as Zoltan’s champion after defeating Tiger Heart Janko.

Strangely enough, his adventurer’s rank was just C. Using weapons and magic, Yarandrala would win for sure, but...

“Yarandrala’s fighting barehanded? No weapons or magic, right?”

“That’s not all. She also handicaps herself by not using grappling techniques that would stop her opponents from using their weapons.”

Yarandrala’s blessing was Singer of the Trees. It allowed her to communicate

with plants and borrow their strength, which fell under the broader spirit mage class of blessings. While it allowed her to fight on the front lines in a limited capacity, its true value was in spirit magic.

What's more, Yarandrala had taken skills to use a quarterstaff for close combat. Fighting without her magic or weapons, she had almost no benefit from her blessing—something that was practically a necessity going up against an armed opponent barehanded. After all, the simple truth was that weapons were stronger than fists.

“Volga isn’t that strong of an adventurer, but in the arena, you can’t let your guard down.”

Actual combat differed from colosseum matches, and Volga was a warrior who had chosen his blessing skills with an eye toward success in the arena, rather than success as an adventurer. The weakness of his Heavy Weapon User blessing was its lack of options for longer range combat and its lack of defensive options for saturation attacks, but neither of those were important under the arena’s rules.



The reason Volga had chosen to make a living for himself in the colosseum was probably because he understood the unique characteristics of his blessing.

Yarandralla, who couldn't make any use of her blessing, was fighting Volga, who used his to the fullest. There was no telling which way the match would go... Or was there?

"This is still Yarandralla we're talking about here."

"Yeah."

Rit and Ruti were munching on some popcorn, looking completely relaxed.

"This is good."

"You can really taste the butter."

They both seemed content.

With the entrances over, Volga and Yarandralla began the match.

"Go Yarandralla!"

I waved at Yarandralla, cheering her on, and she pointed to me in response.

The crowd roared again, thinking it was just a shout-out to a regular fan, and an old man sitting nearby even came over and gave me a pat on the back.

"She's really popular."

"Yeah, I can't believe how worked up everyone is."

Rit and I were both stunned.

"Ah, here she comes," said Tisse. She and Mister Crawly Wawly leaned forward in anticipation.

However, Volga was the first to attack. The difference in reach between a war hammer and fists was just too much. He swung the hammer down at Yarandralla, who slipped past it and stepped inside on his left, but he quickly brought it back up aimed straight at her head.

"Oh, not bad, Volga."

He had shifted his right hand up the shaft closer to the hammer's head—a technique for handling close-range fights. Yarandralla would take a significant

amount of damage if she tried to use her arm to block that attack without any skills from her blessing.

It wasn't easy facing an armed opponent barehanded.

"Still..."

Yarandrala swayed backward with her upper body to avoid the hammer, simultaneously landing a left hook straight into Volga's side. Unleashing a powerful punch from a stance like that was a testament to her extraordinary fighting instincts.

"Even with her blessing, Yarandrala's sense for battle is more suited to close combat."

"Her feel for the range is top tier." Tisse nodded in agreement. "Having seriously fought her once, I can say that much with absolute confidence."

"If even you couldn't take her down, then that's saying something."

As Volga recoiled, Yarandrala pummeled him with a furious combo of attacks. The force of her fists without any blessing wasn't enough to give Volga a concussion, especially with the Merciful potion, so Yarandrala kept punching, and punching, and punching.

Volga still had opportunities to counterattack, but Yarandrala dodged all of his blows, dancing on a knife's edge.

Yeah, this is definitely the sort of fight that would drive a crowd wild.

I could understand why Yarandrala was so popular.

Mister Crawly Wawly wriggled his front legs, copying her movements.

Yarandrala looked like she was enjoying herself, surrounded by the roar of the crowd.

And it ended in a spectacular victory for Yarandrala.

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"Congrats on winning the title, Yarandrala!"

""Congratulations!""

Me, Rit, Ruti, and Tisse all gave Yarandrala a round of applause.

The table was covered in a wide variety of foods: roast chicken, fish pie, sweet potato potage, green salad with a dressing made from fresh vegetables, a simple and fluffy white bread made with the highest quality butter (and no nuts or fruits), and custard pudding for dessert. As for drinks, there was freshly squeezed mixed fruit juice and a nice, inexpensive wine I had bought at the market.

“Thank you for such a wonderful meal and for all of your congratulations!!!” Yarandrala smiled, looking really happy.

We had decided to throw a little party for her after the tournament ended.

“You really are incredible, Yarandrala.”

I meant it. It’s not as if I wasn’t interested in fighting barehanded; I had enjoyed hearing about the theory of martial arts from Danan when we were making camp and had even practiced martial arts as a form of exercise. But I had never even considered trying to train myself to the point where I could become a champion using it.

Of course, if I was willing to take a few hits, I could grab hold of an opponent and crush them through sheer difference in blessing level, but there was nothing fun about doing that. What we had just witnessed was a battle far removed from any real combat, with the goal of challenging Yarandrala’s own curiosity.

It reminded me of something Danan had once said: that Yarandrala was the type of person who could exist in peace and conflict at the same time. The way she fought was different from Danan, who sought strength through combat. Yarandrala found pleasure in challenging herself the way I enjoyed my slow life.

“Why don’t you step into the ring too, Red? Let’s fight with the belt on the line!” Yarandrala’s eyes were sparkling with excitement, but I couldn’t really hope to meet that sort of a challenge. “If you do, I’ll fight with a sword, too.”

“Are you planning to master the sword now? ...You do know I’m trying to take it easy here, hiding my identity as an apothecary, right?”

She really did put all her energy into her hobbies.

“That’s a shame. There are no challengers on the horizon, so I guess I’ll focus

on building my ship for now.”

“Building a ship... Ah, you did mention something about that, didn’t you.”

“Moving on to a new hobby the same day you became champion of the colosseum... It really is just one thing after the other with you,” said Rit, sounding similarly exasperated.

Everyone sitting around the table had a pretty diverse range of interests, but Yarandralla was way ahead of all of us.

“Well, the Merchants Guild is closed tomorrow, so I guess you’ll have to start next week.”

“Actually, I had a good idea for that.”

“You did?”

“When I thought about it, I realized there’s actually a top-of-the-line ship already here in Zoltan!”

““There is?””

Rit, Tisse, and I all cocked our heads at the same time. Ruti was the only one who seemed to have realized what Yarandralla was getting at.

“What ship are you talking about?”

Zoltan was a border nation all the way on the edge of the continent. There were hardly any trade ships, and without a thriving shipping industry, there wasn’t going to be any development in shipbuilding either. There might have been a few people who already knew the craft before they ended up drifting out here, but Zoltan didn’t have a shipyard capable of making top-of-the-line ships, nor was it a place any such ships would come to.

“Leonor came here leading a fleet, didn’t she?”

“Ahh, that was a huge problem. And it led to another big mess when Van came to Zoltan to get the *Vendidad* that was beached here.”

They might be able to look back on it fondly now, but they had been lucky to make it through unscathed. The whole affair was like walking several dangerous tightropes.

“Ah, right,” Rit chimed in.

Yeah, I’d figured it out, too.

“Ruti sank a Veronian galleon during the fight.”

“Exactly!” Yarandralla nodded. “It’s still lying there on the seabed. If I analyze its construction, I should be able to use that as reference for my own ship.”

“I see.”

“So tomorrow, we’re going diving!”

“Huh?”

Yarandralla had always been like this, but even so, keeping up with her enthusiasm could be tough.

“Our swimsuits are seeing a lot of use this summer.”

“Zoltan’s summers are long, so we might as well make the most of it.”

It would be tough, but tomorrow still should be pretty fun.

“It’s never boring with you around, Yarandralla.”

Rit smiled too, looking forward to what tomorrow might bring.

Interlude

Set Course to the West

Half a month earlier, a Jade Kingdom warship was being chased by four demon lord battleships on the eastern seas.

The Jade Kingdom samurai drew their distinctive longbows and unleashed their arrows on the enemy ships. They stood bravely against the powerful battleships, having fought the demon lord's armies for years. However, one fleet had a clear technological advantage; the Jade Kingdom's warship was an oared ship with a single main mast, while the demon lord's battleships had three masts and paddlewheels powered by steam engines.

The demon lord ships were conventional craft with engines added internally, unlike the steel battleship *Vendidad*, but they were still far more capable than any ship mankind had managed to create.

And commanding those ships was Madhu, the new heavenly king of the water who had replaced Altra after his defeat at Escarlata's hands. Madhu was an Asura commander with a wealth of experience leading battles on both land and sea.

"Princess, we will be caught!" a samurai shouted.

Hearing the man's cry, a woman in a Jade Kingdom kimono stood up. She crossed her hands to form a seal. "Tempest Cataclysm!!!"

Tornados rose from the sea, tearing apart three of the battleships, and the one remaining ship fell back to avoid a similar fate.

"Raaah!!!"

There were cheers from the samurai and wails from the demon lord's forces.

"*Haah, haah...*" Having used up all of her strength with that spell, the woman wobbled.

A girl clad entirely in black, who looked to be around twelve years old, supported her. “Please, you must not overexert yourself...”

“Do not be absurd... We must reach the Hero, even should naught but my spirit remain!”

Through a sea that should have been impassable, the ship forged ahead for the frontier country of Zoltan.

This miracle was inevitable. For to seek salvation from the Hero was a rule decreed by Demis.

Chapter 2

Visitors from Across the Sea

The following day, we rented a ship at the harbor and headed out to sea.

It was a single-masted boat with a big square sail. Two ropes were attached to the sail, which could be pulled to steer. All in all, it was a bit of an older model that could reach a decent speed with a tailwind but couldn't handle a headwind.

"Forget 'a bit,' this was ancient even when I was a sailor," Yarandralla said, adjusting the sail with the ropes.

"Everything else was already rented out. It beats rowing, doesn't it?"

"Well, of course it does! Older generation ships crawled so that current ships could run. There's value in understanding older ships before getting to know the top-of-the-line ones."

The sail swelled as it caught the wind.

Although the plan had come together at the last moment, today was perfect weather for sailing. It was the back half of summer, and our small, worn-out ship sailed beneath the white clouds drifting through the sky. Even Zoltan's oppressive summer heat felt comfortable out on the sea. Or could it be because of the pleasant atmosphere aboard?

"Red, ten degrees starboard!"

"Aye-aye."

I used an oar to adjust the ship's bearing. After all, it didn't have a rudder. Whatever adjustments couldn't be done by manipulating the sail were done by rowing.

"The sea..."

"Indeed it is."

Ruti and Tisse were standing together under a parasol, looking out at the water. Mister Crawly Wawly sat on Tisse's head and had what looked like small sunglasses resting atop his forehead.

"We're completely surrounded by water."

That only made sense, considering we were out at sea. If I looked back, I'd still be able to see Zoltan's shore, but even that was pretty far in the distance now.

"We've been on a lot of adventures, but I think this might be the first time our destination was somewhere out at sea," I said.

"Yeah. Whenever we've been on a boat, it was always to reach land somewhere," Rit responded.

Who knows? If I had stayed in the Hero's party longer, maybe I would have found myself journeying to a temple on the bottom of the ocean.

"We went on a quest up in the sky, so it wouldn't have been the weirdest thing for us to go on one beneath the sea, too."

"You were flying when you fought Gandor of the Wind, weren't you, Ruti?"

"Mhm. Gandor's castle was in the sky, so we had to fly to fight him."

"We had the help of some lightning dragons," chimed in Tisse.

"Fighting on dragon-back, huh... The dream of every adventurer."

Unlike drakes, dragons could speak and were wiser even than humans. Dragons taught people at the Ancient Mineral Dragon University, while at the Lightning Dragon Institute, lightning dragons served as lawyers to mediate international incidents.

Wise as they were, they did not allow humans to ride on their backs.

That said, lightning dragons might make an exception for children. It wasn't so different from humans; a person might not mind giving a child a ride for fun, but they'd get annoyed if another adult wanted them to carry them around like a horse.



I guess that was one reason why lightning dragons had a reputation for being unnaturally interested in young boys and girls.

For the sake of their honor, I'll clarify that lightning dragons love people who work hard to improve themselves and grow, which is why many of them are so supportive of youngsters embarking on adventures.

"Riding lightning dragons while assaulting a fortress protected by wyvern knights... It sounds like something an artist might draw in a more peaceful time."

"But you weren't there, Big Brother," Ruti said with disappointment.

I had left the party after we defeated the heavenly king of the earth, the first one the Hero's party had faced, so I hadn't been there for the fight against the heavenly king of the wind.

"Any paintings, plays, or poems would be even better with you in them," she went on. "There's nothing wrong with embellishing the facts a little."

"Woah there. You know, Ruti, every once in a while you say something really concerning."

""Every once in a while?""

Tisse and Rit both cocked their heads.

"While you were all chatting, we've almost reached the spot!" Yarandrala called out.

There was no distinguishing feature to the sea spread out before us; the sunken ship wasn't visible from the surface.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Positive."

As expected of the former captain of an armed merchant fleet who rivaled the legendary Elven Corsairs.

I had a vague feeling that the ship we were looking for was somewhere in this vicinity, but I couldn't pick out a precise spot in the sea without any landmarks.

"Can you tell where it is, Rit?"

“Nope. I’m from a land-locked country, so I don’t know much at all about the sea,” she said, peering down at the surface.

“I haven’t taken any jobs to assassinate someone at sea, either.”

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly also looked down at the water from beside Rit. They were both still wearing their sunglasses, which made it a lot harder to see than it needed to be.

“All right, let’s get ready to dive!”

Yarandralla was the leader of our tour to investigate the sunken ship today, so I followed her instructions and began making the necessary preparations.

“Water Breathing and Gift of Dolphin Power.”

Yarandralla cast two spells on all of us.

“And I cast Extend on the magic too, so the effects will last for three hours and twelve minutes.”

“That’s a crazy amount of time, Yarandralla.”

For an ordinary mage, it would’ve lasted maybe half an hour, meaning that for a normal underwater adventure, they would have to reapply the magic multiple times.

“But there’s no telling what might happen down there, so make sure you have the magic potion and airgrass I gave you ready to take out at a moment’s notice.”

“Roger.”

“The airgrass will only last for about five minutes of continued use, so control your breathing to make it back to the surface. I’m sure it goes without saying, but if you end up in a situation where you find yourself using the airgrass, priority number one is getting back to the surface.”

The potion was a potion of Water Breathing that I had made with Yarandralla last night, and the airgrass was a means of breathing underwater that didn’t rely on magic. There were more than a few monsters capable of negating magic, so we couldn’t go in thinking that we had plenty of time, only to have someone drown because the magic was dispelled. It was hard to imagine

anything could negate Yarandralla's magic, but if any of us died from that one in a million chance, there was no undoing it.

Those sorts of situations were why we had the potions and the airgrass.

"It doesn't matter how strong we are, we'll still die if we can't breathe underwater... Well, except for Ruti with the Hero's skill, since she doesn't need to breathe if she uses it."

"If worse comes to worst, I'll carry everyone to the surface."

Ruti patted her chest, letting us know we could trust in her. If she used all of the Hero's immunities and resistances, she didn't even need to breathe, but she had mentioned it felt weird not to breathe.

"Even if the blessing makes breathing unnecessary, people's bodies are built to breathe while they move. It's different from not needing food or water."

"True. I focus on breathing while using my sword, too."

With swordsmanship, it was important to match your timing to your breath. Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out. Every single breath held meaning.

Because of that, even though Ruti could just stop breathing, she had still been given the same Water Breathing enchantment as everyone else.

"I'm using the same sword as you today," she told me.

"Yeah, your usual sword is a bit too long for underwater combat."

Hanging from Ruti's hip was a bronze sword she'd bought from Mogrim's shop.

When fighting underwater, compact thrusts were more effective than wide swings. In Ruti's case, I was sure she'd be able to swing a sword just fine even against the water resistance, but it was probably a matter of feel.

"That said, putting a belt and sword on over a swimsuit feels kind of strange."

"I think it feels pretty good, personally. What do you think, Red?"

Rit did a little spin in front of me. She was wearing a red-and-white striped swimsuit and a belt with a single shotel around her waist. The shotel's shape wasn't really suited for fighting underwater, but even with that inconvenience,

there was something to be said for picking a weapon you were comfortable with. Still, it seemed like she'd avoided dual wielding for that very reason.

"Mm, that's not really what I meant," Rit said, putting her hand on her hip. "It's the first time I've worn an outfit like this, but don't you think the contrast between swimsuit and sword looks kinda nice?"

"Ah."

She wasn't wrong; the blend of the everyday and the unexpected probably felt fresh and new from a fashion perspective. The belt hung slightly above the waist of her swimsuit, and the sword hanging down from it with its glittering handle also worked well to accentuate the outfit. All in all, it suited her—and was really cute.

"What about me?" Ruti leaned forward, then spun around and did a little pose just like Rit had.

What an adorable little sister.

"Maybe I should have gone with a setup like yours," I told her.

Ruti had two belts around her thigh and her sword stuck inside them. The sheath was made from a supple leather so she could easily draw her sword underwater, and there was a snap fastener to keep it from slipping out.

I was just wearing my usual wide belt over my swimsuit. The only change I'd made was to use a slip sheath, so my sword would be easier to draw underwater.

"I think your belt looks good with the swimsuit," said Rit.

"Yeah, you look cool," Ruti agreed.

"If you say so."

Looking at Rit and Ruti, I felt like I should probably think about my clothes a bit more. The shop was running smoothly, so maybe it was about time I got some new clothes made.

"You look cool too, Mister Crawly Wawly."

While Rit, Ruti, and I had all been talking, Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly had

likewise been complimenting one another. The spider had little swimming fins attached to his legs. Where did he get those made?

He'd had an abundance of accessories during our trip to the island, too. Lately, Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly's connections were getting more and more mysterious.

"Hehe, pretty clothes really do help to get you in the mood for adventure. Everything was always so practical traveling with the Hero's party, and it always felt a bit like something was missing," Yarandralla chimed in happily as she watched us.

"You were always careful about how you looked even while adventuring."

"Yes, taking care of your appearance helps to keep you calm and composed, and that composure can prevent misjudgments. Style and fashion are important in any situation."

"I see."

Yarandralla was wearing a different swimsuit from last time. The previous one had been more fashionable, with a ribbon tied in a bow across the chest, but her current swimsuit was far more practical. Despite this, it still felt fashionable on her, perhaps because Yarandralla just had the right body type.

"Oh, are you not going to bring a weapon, Yarandralla?"

"You can't really utilize the strength of a quarterstaff underwater, so I'll use my spirit magic and plants instead."

"It must be nice having so many options."

With that, everyone was ready.

"Take it away, Yarandralla."

"All right, everyone, let's have a fun and enjoyable underseas trip."



Zoltan's summer heat didn't reach below the surface, and the water washed away the sweat on my skin, leaving me to enjoy the pleasant coolness and buoyancy of my body.

A school of colorful southern sea fish swam by.

“Y’know...it’s a little scary seeing it like this.”

I was looking down toward the bottom of the ocean. There was nothing in that direction—just a darkness that seemed to go on forever. Down here, there were no light sources, and not having any solid earth around us filled me with unease. All of these factors just reminded me that humans were creatures of the land.

“It was worth bringing you along just to be able to hear you say that.”

Yarandrala sounded like she was in high spirits.

“How come?”

“You never complain, so it’s nice to hear you say you’re scared when you are.”

“Really?”

Rit sidled up and held on to me. “Yarandrala’s right. You’re always acting like you’re totally fine.”

“I try to make a point of not hiding anything from you, though.”

“I think it’s just a habit at this point. Your fighting style is about not showing any weakness and acting like you’re in a superior position to your opponent, right?”

“Ah, yeah, a bit.”

It was a style I had turned to in order to fight powerful enemies despite my blessing not really having any benefits—making them believe I still had a trump card up my sleeve by not using any inherent skills. By always looking calm and acting like I’d expected whatever happened, it lured opponents into thinking that they hadn’t seen my full strength.

While that might work for opponents who were clearly weaker than me, it was a different story with superior enemies like the contract demon, Shisandan, Gajasura, and Hero Van, who always pushed me right to the edge.

That went for my last battle with Eremite, too. I never would have imagined she had a demon beast transformation jewel in her back pocket. It would have

been dangerous if I was fighting her one on one.

...As for Demis himself, that was different. That had been so dangerous I hadn't had any time at all to worry about tricks.

"It's a wife's job to support her husband, right?"

"Ngh..."

Surprised by Rit's words, the only response that escaped my lips was a strange grunt.

But she was right. We were engaged now, so it wouldn't be that long before she was actually my wife. At that thought, I could almost feel courage flowing into me through her hand on my back.

"...Also, it's scary for me too, so make sure you support me," she said.

"You got it. Let's go down together."

"Mhm."

I could tell Rit meant it about being scared; I could feel the tension in her hand.

We had been on all sorts of adventures and seen any number of terrifying sights... I couldn't believe a new adventure was so close.

"Fascinating."

The words had left my lips before I realized it, as we descended slowly toward the seabed.

With Yarandrala's magic, we could move freely underwater and also, apparently, withstand the water pressure. If I was being completely honest, though, I didn't really know much about the effects of water pressure. I was just relying on Yarandrala for this trip, which was a new experience in its own right.

"Adventuring is all about facing the unknown."

Rit also seemed to be enjoying the thrill of something unfamiliar.

"Hmph." Ruti huffed. "I'm not scared... It's not fair."

"I guess that makes sense coming from you."

Ruti was using New Truth to nullify the Hero's immunity to fear, but for someone like her, who had never experienced fear since the moment she was born, Ruti really couldn't comprehend what I was feeling right now. She was probably the only person in the world who got upset about not being able to feel fear.

We kept diving, following Yarandrala's instructions as we talked. Eventually, we got to a point where the light from the surface no longer reached, and a deep, dark blue surrounded us on all sides.

It was an incredible sight.

"Light."

Yarandrala cast a spell, illuminating the area around us.

"Ah, there it is."

She pointed beneath us, and we looked down to see a big shadow on the seabed.

"The Veronian galleon!"

We were right on the mark, as expected of Yarandrala.

The shape became more distinct the closer we got, until it resolved itself into a large ship lying sideways on the sandy seabed. It was broken in two a third of the way down from its bow, and the fore and aft sections were lying a little ways apart from each other.

"Ruti just chopped it in half and sent it to the bottom of the ocean, but up close, it's stunning."

When the fleet had arrived, the *Vendidad* was so massive and unlike anything I'd ever seen before that I hadn't been able to take my eyes off it. But looking at it now, this ship was pretty huge, too.

I took a lightstick out of my belt—a thirty-centimeter-long magic item that looked like a brass rod. It gave off light and burned with a magic fire that didn't give off heat and couldn't be put out by water. The materials were cheap, and any magic user could make one, making them an inexpensive tool that even beginner adventurers could afford. I smacked the tip against the hilt of my

sword to light it up.

Unlike Yarandrala's magic, the lightstick wasn't especially bright underwater. However, there were still traces of the sun's light at this depth, so it was enough to explore a sunken ship.

"It's neat. You don't get too many chances to see the bottom of a ship."

"Mm. I've seen blueprints and ships mid-construction, but this is what it looks like when it's finished."

"And the damage is pretty intriguing, too."

Me and Rit headed to the stern of the ship. Tisse and Ruti were taking a look at the bow, and Yarandrala investigated the masts.

"It's a complex system that uses square-rigged and lateen fore-and-aft rigged sails of different sizes. With this setup, it can move a huge ship like this no matter what direction the wind is blowing."

"Ms. Ruti, there are sea anemones clinging to the ship."

"Cute! They're so red and jiggly."

Being able to hear each other from so far away was an effect of the Water Breathing spell. Sound was essentially vibrations in the air, so it should have been dampened by the water. But thanks to the magic, we were breathing water as if it was air, so apparently that meant our vocal cords could also transmit sound directly through the water.

"Everyone, come here a moment!" Yarandrala called us over.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Do you want to check out the inside?" said Yarandrala.

The inside, huh?

"The cabin layout should be different from older models, so it could be useful as a reference."

"Not to mention there might be some treasure left!" Rit said, sounding excited.

This ship had been carrying the mercenaries hired by Queen Consort Leonor.

Unlike the kingdom's official army, mercenaries provided their own weapons and gear. Leonor had also put a lot of money into gathering skilled mercenaries, so the gear they had brought along would probably include stuff forged by renowned blacksmiths and magic items found in dungeons.

"There might even be some artifact-tier gear!"

"If we find any, we'll have a feast to celebrate."

Dreaming of the unknown treasures you might find on a quest was part of the fun of being an adventurer. It wasn't that simple to find such incredible magic items, but as long as there was a treasure chest to be opened, there was a chance of uncovering something amazing.

"An adventurer is someone who takes joy in the unknown," Rit said, and a look of understanding crossed Ruti's face.

I wasn't up for any real adventures anymore, but this sort of adventure could still be a bit of fun.

"Big Brother," Ruti said, drawing her sword. "There are monsters."

"Ah."

Rit and I nodded, following suit and readying our weapons.

"Yarandrala, we should let Ruti take the lead here."

"Got it."

Yarandrala was planning to fight mainly with her spirit magic, so we dropped her to the back lines and put Ruti out in front. Rit and I moved in behind her, and Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly protected Yarandrala, ready to move up front if needed.

"I'm opening it."

Ruti opened the door to the cabin, and from my position behind her, I could also see into the room.

"...!"

Four mercenaries were floating in the water—at least, their bones were. Their flesh had been completely eaten away by underwater creatures. It was

gruesome in a different way from the desiccated corpses you might find on land.

I could see huge swarms of tiny crabs in their hollow eye sockets. They weren't a threat, just normal crabs...but seeing so many of them writhing around inside what used to be a person was still repulsive.

Ruti slowly moved into the room.

"Ruti!" I shouted. "The corpses!"

Suddenly, the skeletons came after her. They didn't swim like people but wriggled like fish toward Ruti at high speed.

Rit and I were right behind Ruti, but the door stood between us and her, limiting where we could swim. If we rushed in, we'd just be in Ruti's way.

In this situation, our choices were:

1. Fall back and meet them where we had more space.
2. Stand and fight where we were.
3. Push into the room and attack.

Which option would Ruti want?

"Let's go, Rit!"

I pushed forward without hesitating, and at the same time, Ruti moved deeper into the room.

If we were on the surface, falling back might have been a solid option, but right now we were underwater. Ruti had been swimming into the room, meaning that she'd lose momentum if she tried to change directions now. So instead she sped up, moving forward to let me and Rit into the room behind her.

She quickly thrust her bronze sword toward the approaching body.

But underwater combat was a tricky thing. On land, three people was about the limit to the number of enemies that could attack from the front at the same time. Here under the water, however, they were free to move up and down as well. Four enemies from both the front and above could attack all at the same

time.

The water also limited our ability to swing a sword, so we had to fight primarily using thrusts. Stabbing techniques were powerful, but they left you open to an attack the moment you finished a thrust.

Slashes were what you needed to repel multiple enemies attacking all at once...or, at least, that was the theory.

There was a loud *whump* as a shockwave passed through the water. It looked instantaneous to my eyes.

Ruti's thrusts shattered the skulls of the moving corpses, and the crabs hiding inside were propelled through the water. But the enemies were corpses; shattering their skulls was not enough to stop them.

Now, it was time for me and Rit to join the fight.

"I'll take the right!"

"Got it!"

I approached the corpse on the left, thrusting my sword with my right hand on the haft and left hand holding the blade. I aimed for the skeleton's hands and spine.

Despite how it seemed, there were certain rules to magic. Even if a corpse's biological functions were no longer working, it still lost its sense of awareness if its head was crushed, and it wouldn't be able to move its lower body if its spine was broken. The magic that animated corpses used the memories imbued in the body from when it was still a person.

"This'll finish it."

Ruti destroyed the corpses attacking from in front and above her, ending the fight.

"But these aren't the main body."

"Yeah, there's still a monster that was controlling them."

There were monsters that possessed corpses, but I hadn't felt a blessing from any of the skeletons we'd just fought. The monster had to have a real body

somewhere, and it seemed the type to manipulate others from a distance using magic.

“These sorts of monsters normally have a Necromancer-type blessing, but...”

Unlike people, the vast majority of monsters had only lower-tier blessings, which meant the more likely answer was...

“This is probably a demon,” said Yarandralla.

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Demons, by their very definition, were a species that only ever had one type of inherent blessing. The highly intelligent ones following the demon lord’s army were the most well-known of their species; however, there also existed other demons with lower intelligence that lived among monsters.

We kept going further into the ship, investigating the cabin as we went. Our original goal had been to analyze the construction of Veronia’s cutting-edge new ship, but taking care of any threats came first.

“More of them!”

There were several bodies floating in the cabin, and this time, we attacked first. It wasn’t a threat once you knew the trick, but it didn’t exactly leave you with a good taste in your mouth, either.

“...”

“Are you all right, Ruti?”

“Mhm.”

“Maybe I should take the lead,” I offered.

“I’m fine... That isn’t our best formation.”

Ruti was right; underwater, where we couldn’t move like normal, me taking the lead wasn’t optimal. Still, it looked like she was having trouble. The corpses didn’t even have blessings, so it wasn’t that they were scaring her.

No, what was bothering her was seeing all the people who’d died when she sank this ship.

This world was filled with fighting.

The number of people who'd killed other humans wasn't insignificant, and a majority of people had had to make the choice to kill or be killed. Just like Ruti, I had lost count of the lives I'd taken. But they had also been trying to kill me, so that was the risk they'd taken.

The mercenaries on this ship had been going to kill the people of Zoltan. Even if Leonor had ordered them to, that had been more than enough of a reason for us to draw our swords. And Ruti had been the Hero.

The Hero, who saved the weak and slayed evil.

She couldn't hesitate. That was how Demis had made the Hero blessing, and so Ruti had never known fear or guilt.

Even if she had escaped the impulses of her blessing, and as much as she might hate being that person, Ruti had only ever fought as the Hero, so she was used to killing people like that. She wouldn't hesitate when she had to fight just because she didn't want to kill, and she wasn't going to regret her battles afterward. But that didn't mean she never thought about it.

You can't afford to hesitate to fight to protect your own life or those of your friends. That was just the world we lived in. But in my opinion, it's also important not to reach a point where those deaths never cross your mind.

Faced with the corpses attacking us, Ruti was experiencing a whirlwind of emotions. It must have been distressing. But it was proof of her humanity and a display of how much she had changed.

I would always support her, but she'd learned to move forward on her own two feet. If she was insistent about taking the lead, then I should just hang back.

"It's hard, though."

Not being able to do anything, even though my sister was hurting...

Yeah, it really is tough.

Once we took out whatever was controlling these bodies, I'd be sure to shower her with praise.

"Big Brother." Her voice pulled me back to the situation at hand. "There's something ahead. Other than the bodies."

“This is the lowest level of the ship’s hold. Do you think it’s the seabed on the other side?” I asked.

“Probably,” replied Yarandrala, touching the wall.

“We’ll have to put a pin in our fact-finding mission. Let’s go.”

“Right.” The high elf nodded.

Ruti glanced at me. She put her hand against the door to the hold, then stopped just as she was about to push.

“It teleported.”

“Agh?! Behind you, Yarandrala!”

A corpse holding a sword appeared behind Yarandrala. Teleporting into the blind spot for a sneak attack was a common tactic in fights against powerful monsters.

“It’s true I don’t have my staff, but this ship is my domain,” Yarandrala said, forming a seal. “Verdant friend, share your dream once more!”

The ship’s side swayed, and a sharp branch skewered the corpse, stopping it in its tracks.

“You grew a tree underwater?!” Rit exclaimed.

Ordinarily, plant manipulation could only work in an environment where the plant could actually grow. Issues of water and fertilizer could be solved by using magic, so Yarandrala could grow a tree with just a single seed and a clump of soil. But this was the sea. Not somewhere trees could normally grow.

“That wasn’t growth, but restoration—an application of a skill to return wood back to the state when it was a tree.”

“You can do that?” Rit asked with surprise.

“I don’t know anyone who can actually do it other than Yarandrala,” I told her.

The surprise attack had failed.

This was probably how Yarandrala had been able to fight as a ship’s captain out at sea, even though that wasn’t exactly an ideal battlefield for a plant user.

“But the real culprit isn’t here.”

All she had skewered was the dead body.

The next instant, the door in front of Ruti burst open, and a rust-colored cloud spilled out from behind it.

“Poison!” Tisse yelled in warning.

If anyone could identify poison on sight, it was her.

Ruti would be fine if she used the immunities given to her by the Hero blessing, and Rit and Yarandrala had blessings with poison resistance. Tisse was an expert at dealing with poisons and probably had a way to counter it... meaning the only one who might have trouble here was me.

This was where the Guide having no inherent skills was really a drawback.

“Leave it to me,” Ruti said.

She whirled her arms around, then thrust her palms forward. A swirling current drew in the spreading poison water and pushed it all deep into the hold.

Precise current manipulation using just her body. It wasn’t even a skill, just her own technique... Man, that was crazy.

“Rit.”

“On it! If it’s all in one spot, then it’s no problem! Spirit of water, purify the corruption!”

Rit’s magic removed the poison from the water, while the monster deeper in the ship’s hold was pinned down from the current Ruti had stirred up.

After confirming that the poison was gone, we charged into the hold.

“An undead mass demon...!”

“Ugh, the nastiest kind.” Rit grimaced when she saw it.

There was a mass of corpses in the bottom of the hold. And beyond them, black eyes restlessly looked around. It was an undead mass demon, low in rank and intelligence.

They lived in the seas and were known to use their corpse manipulation

inherent skill to attack ships. As for why they attacked ships...it was to make a husk for themselves out of corpses, similar to hermit crabs. They were physically weak and fought from a distance using corpses under their control. The reason it wasn't able to fight back against Ruti's water current was because it couldn't do anything with its own strength.

"...I don't know if there's any point in fighting it," Ruti said, raising her sword. "But I want those people to be able to rest in peace."

"Yeah."

The mass of corpses turned to look at Ruti, who stared straight back at those empty eye sockets and charged in.

"We'll back you up!"

"Yeah!"

"Roger!"

Me, Rit, and Tisse followed after her.

The undead mass demon undid the mess of intertwined limbs that made up its shell, trying to overwhelm us with sheer numbers. There was a limit to how many zombies could be manipulated at the same time with magic, but the reason it could control this many was due to its demonic blessing's inherent skill.

It was difficult to deal with sheer numbers when fighting underwater...but the people here were members of the former Hero's Party. And Ruti was invincible when she found a reason to defeat her enemy.

We calmly took down the corpses as they approached us from amid the swarm of zombies, creating a path for Ruti.

A screeching sound suddenly reverberated through the water. It came from the demon's crustacean-like mouth.

"Lightning Bolt?!"

It was so hard to predict what magic a non-human creature would use! And we weren't used to fighting against magic underwater.

Many spells had different effects when cast in the water. Fire magic turned into a steam that boiled the enemy, ice magic left chunks that got in the way, and electric magic turned into an attack that spread out in all directions and was impossible to escape from.

“Gah!”

“Aaah!”

Me and Rit stiffened as the electricity ran through us. The charge wasn’t as strong as if we’d been on dry land, but it was still an annoying obstruction.

However...

“Magic doesn’t work on me.”

“?!”

Ruti was unaffected.

It wasn’t like before, when she’d just been able to resist it; the magic itself was unable to reach her.

It was Ruti’s new skill. Ruler’s Garb unilaterally nullified all magic.

“Sacred Shield!”

With the Hero’s inherent magic, Ruti created a powerful defensive shield. But she manifested it behind her, instead of using it to protect herself.

“Haaaah!”

Kicking off the sacred shield, she accelerated through the water. Her outstretched sword stabbed straight toward the undead mass demon.

It was a thrust so sharp it was hard to believe it was underwater. The corpses that moved to try to protect the demon were knocked aside as Ruti ran the undead mass demon straight through.

The dead bodies stopped moving, like puppets whose strings had been cut.

They had been freed.



“Phaa!”

Rit let out a big breath when she broke the surface of the water. We had been able to breathe underwater using magic, but even so, it had felt sort of suffocating. Air just felt so much better to breathe.

“Hooo, it’s pretty exhausting swimming around on the bottom of the sea.” Rit grabbed the edge of the ship. I had already climbed back aboard, so I helped her up by the arm. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Our inspection of the Veronian galleon was pretty much done. We had memorized the general layout of the ship, so next would be a meeting with Yarandrala when we got back to Zoltan to talk about what we’d learned.

“There was a pretty good haul of loot, too.”

Yarandrala was wearing a circlet made of gold. It was a magic item that reflected spells and skills that affected a person mentally. These sorts of items tended not to block any powerful magic, but they could still defend against most wide-ranging spells. It was a common tactic on battlefields with a mage squad to cast Fear to lower morale, and this was a way to protect yourself from such tactics.

There had been several other magic items, including magic swords, as well as gold, silver, and jewels that were easy to carry around.

As expected of elite Veronian mercenaries.

“I already figured as much, but we made way more today than a year of sales at the shop.”

“That’s what comes from really taking a risk when you go adventuring. The enemy this time might have wiped out a party of C-rank adventurers.”

“True. I knew there were strong monsters in the southern seas, but to think there was a demon like that lurking beneath the waters so close to us. The sea is terrifying.”

Fishermen really put their lives on the line each and every day.

“Good work, Ruti.”

I used a towel to dry Ruti’s hair after giving it a rinse with fresh water; it was

bad for your hair not to rinse out the salt water first. If she used the skills from the Hero's blessing, then not even a strand of her hair would be hurt, but Ruti had been trying to rely as little as possible on those resistances and immunities so she could live more like a normal person.

"Thank you, Big Brother." Ruti smiled happily.

"Mister Crawly Wawly, Tisse, you both did well out there, too."

Tisse had been last to come to the surface, and I helped her onto the boat as well. For some reason, she had a big flounder on her back.

"I'm going to have this made into chikuwa when we get back."

"R-really?"

Mister Crawly Wawly was hopping up and down proudly. He must have been the one to catch it. I'd thought he wouldn't be able to use his threads underwater, but apparently not...

"It is true he can't freely control them underwater, but he can still do enough to make a fishing line."

"That's amazing..."

Maybe I should ask for a detailed explanation of everything Mister Crawly Wawly can do. Or maybe that would take the fun out of these little moments.

The situation now was different from my days adventuring, when I had to know exactly what my comrades were capable of so that I could always be thinking about what our best course of action was.

Being surprised by this little spider's abilities was just one of the joys of our mini adventures.

"All right, everyone's back. Ready to go?"

"I'd love to have lunch here and do a little fishing..."

"We've done a lot of fishing lately."

I loved to fish, but I was more than satisfied with our tour of the sunken ship. And I hadn't even brought any rods.

"We can come again whenever you want. I'm sure I'll be back to investigate

the sunken ship a bunch more.”

“Yeah, why don’t we leave that for next time?”

Tisse gave up and tied up the flounder she’d brought back from the dive. Was the reason she always tried to catch the biggest fish because she could use it to make the most chikuwa?

Just as that idle thought crossed my mind, Yarandrala finished getting the ship ready to sail.

“Shall we?”

But just before we started moving...

“Wait,” Ruti said, pointing out toward the sea. “There’s a ship.”

“Hm? Ah, out in the distance.”

Straining my eyes, I could see a shadow that looked almost like a ship. It would have been clearer if it wasn’t summer, but I couldn’t tell what sort of vessel it was.

“What a strange design.” Apparently, Ruti could make it out clearly. “And it’s in bad shape.”

“It is?!”

“It’s probably drifting aimlessly.”

“What?!” Yarandrala immediately changed the direction of the sail. “It’s okay to go check it out, right?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

It was going to take time to get there, but we couldn’t just ignore the other ship. Had it been attacked by monsters or caught up in a storm...? Either way, I hoped the crew was all right.



About an hour later, we finally reached the floating ship.

“It’s bigger than I thought,” Rit said. “But you’re right, Ruti. I’ve never seen a ship like this.”

It was a...box-shaped galley? The deck was covered in planks, and there was what looked like a big box on top of it. It had a single mast, which was broken, and was of medium size for a ship, but it didn't have a keel and seemed to have a shallow draft.

While it didn't look like a ship meant for sailing the open seas, it also appeared to have been made in a country that used different shipbuilding technologies. Maybe it had been built to weather storms, and I just didn't understand how it worked.

"Either way, if it's this damaged, it can't do much of anything."

It wasn't just the mast; the oars were broken too, and a number of holes studded the hull. It was a miracle it hadn't sunk yet.

"Are those arrows?"

There were quite a few of them sticking out of the wood; they weren't the sort of thing sea monsters tended to use. Had it been attacked by pirates?

"Mister Crawly Wawly."

He nodded at Tisse's request and used his thread to connect our ship to the one drifting across the water.

"Shall we? Rit, can you stay on our ship as backup, just in case?"

"Sure. I imagine it'll be fine, but be careful."

"I will."

The rest of us crossed over to the drifting ship.

The boards covering the ship had probably been meant as a sort of shield. There wasn't a roof on top, so climbing up the boards we could see the state of the deck. There was one small cabin and two holes leading down into the ship's hold.

"There's...no monsters."

"Still, this is...," Tisse trailed off sadly.

Death was strewn all across the deck. A dozen or so armored warriors lay where they had fallen, none of them showing any signs of life.

“Resist Disease.”

Yarandrala’s magic enveloped us—a ward to protect against the spread of sickness.

“It looks like there was a battle, but seeing as this ship probably came from quite a long way away, it doesn’t hurt to be careful.”

“Thanks.”

We climbed down to the deck.

“It has a shallow draft, so there’s probably only food and water in the hold below.”

“Right, and I think those are sleeping bags on the deck.”

The deck and cabin were the first priorities in our investigation.

“How awful,” Tisse said as she examined a corpse sitting slumped against the mast. “This is Jade Kingdom armor, isn’t it?”

The fallen warriors’ gear was all very distinctive: katanas and naginatas, asymmetrical longbows, and armor made from iron scales layered atop cloth.

They were the weapons and armor of the Jade Kingdom.

“Yeah... Did this ship drift all the way here from the Far East?”

“That’s hard to believe. I can’t imagine this ship being capable of something like that.”

The Jade Kingdom was a country in the East, beyond the Wall at the End of the World. To reach it, you had to either go by sea around the north of the continent, or by land using the pass discovered through the Wall that just barely kept a trickle of trade flowing.

Theoretically, you could reach it if you sailed due east from Zoltan, but there weren’t any merchant ships that took the southern route—it had no ports to resupply during a long voyage, ferocious southern sea monsters, and fickle storms. If you gathered a fleet of a dozen large ships and even one managed to make it through, the voyage would be considered a success. That was the level of risk we were talking about.

If a southern route to the East was established, Zoltan would prosper as a resupply point. However, even with the most generous outlook, that was not likely to happen in our lifetimes.

Right now, people had their hands full with the demon lord's armies.

"Were they carrying some sort of powerful artifact or something?"

The moment Tisse looked away from the corpse in front of her...

"?!"

...it grabbed her arm?!

"What?!"

"Th-the princess...!"

As pale and bloodless as the man's face was, his eyes were bright red.

He shouldn't have been breathing...!

"The princess?" Tisse asked despite her surprise.

The man pointed toward the cabin.

"Our hope...to save...the world...!"

"What do you mean?"

But the man's final words disappeared in a bloody burble, and his arm fell limp.

"Healing Hands." Ruti immediately tried to heal him, but...

"He's dead. Your Healing Hands can't reach him."

Ruti looked bewildered. "Is this some sort of skill that lets a person move even after they've died? Or just tenacity?"

I hadn't been able to tell what his blessing was just from that, but I had a feeling it wasn't the strength of a blessing. It felt more like the strength that came from that powerful, human determination that surpassed blessings.

"There's something he wanted to protect, even at the cost of his own life, in that cabin."

“But...look at this place,” Yarandralla murmured softly.

There was no one alive on the deck; everyone had died in combat. Considering that fact, it was hard to imagine that the cabin would somehow be safe.

“Let’s at least check.”

I opened the door to the cabin.

“Mrgh?!”

Something leapt out at me from behind the door, and I quickly drew my sword and cut it down. It was a small cross-shaped blade... A shuriken?

“Big Brother!”

Ah, so the shuriken had just been a distraction to hide the assailant’s true goal—a direct attack with a sword.

“It’s not much of a surprise attack when you’re swaying around like that.”

I grabbed the outthrust arm and twisted it.

“Ah, ungh...”

My attacker was a young girl.

She was holding a short sword, smaller than the ones the fallen warriors on the deck had, and wore light armor that only protected her vital areas; she must have been a light warrior similar to Tisse.

Is she a ninja from the Jade Kingdom?

“So there was a survivor... Yarandralla, can you heal her?”

“Sure.”

Ruti’s Healing Hands was a skill only the Hero could use. Given we didn’t know anything about the people on this ship, hiding Ruti’s identity was paramount.

“I shall not let you approach the princess...!”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t try a shoddy sneak attack right now.”

“Huh...?”

Even as she continued trying to resist, I started talking to her.

“The situation on this ship is hopeless. It doesn’t matter who’s come on board, you have to use them in order to get out alive. Yet instead, you attacked us, provoking hostility without even bothering to gather any information. I wouldn’t have done that if I were you.”

“...”

“The way you chose to do it was clumsy, too. Even if you’d managed to succeed, all you would have done was kill me, leaving yourself completely exposed and defenseless to my remaining comrades. That’s not wise either.”

“...Unh.”

She stopped struggling.

Understanding that I was not her enemy, the fire in her heart died down, and I left her in Yarandralla’s care.

“She’s weakened, but it’s not too serious yet.”

“That’s good.”

From the condition of the warriors outside, it looked like the ship had been low on water and food, but this girl was only malnourished—not yet fully starving. She had just barely managed to take in enough food.

But a ninja... I had seen someone with a Ninja blessing before, but this was my first time seeing one from the Jade Kingdom itself.

“Big Brother,” Ruti called out from further inside the cabin.

It sounded serious.

Was she behind the screen in the middle of the room? Tisse and I headed deeper.

“This is awful...!”

I wasn’t sure.

There was a woman lying on a blanket, her body unnaturally wasted away. Her skin was pulled tight around her bones, and her breathing shallow... How was she still alive?

“Yarandrala! She’s in terrible shape!” I quickly called the high elf over.

“...Ah.”

There was a sound.

A second person was moving when she shouldn’t have been able to.

“Stay still. My friend is on her way. She can use healing magic.”

“Wh-who are you...?”

Her voice was clear. I couldn’t believe her strength of will to still be alive in such a terrible state.

“I’m an apothecary from a country called Zoltan.”

“Zoltan...!” Her sunken eyes gleamed for a moment. “I...made it...”

“Oh no!”

Whatever was keeping her alive was fading away.

“Great current, spirit of life drawn from the wellspring, preserve this fading life...!” Yarandrala cast her magic the instant she laid eyes on the woman.

But there was no change.

“This is too much for spirit magic!”

“It’s not working...?!”

“Don’t worry, I’m also an expert at healing in a different way from Esta.”

Yarandrala formed another seal.

“Corpse Rose!”

The woman’s body became shrouded in poisonous-looking red roses.

It was a plant I’d never seen before.

“This is a type of rose that lives symbiotically with humans. Normally, it survives by borrowing a little of the life force of its host, but when that host is on the verge of death, it has the ability to expend its vitality to resuscitate them. A body bound by roses can’t move, and the thorns damage the skin, but it can heal deeper wounds even than healing magic.”

“That’s incredible.”

Spells that came from cleric-related blessings was commonly considered to be the best when it came to healing magic; however, Yarandrala’s Singer of the Trees allowed her to use her knowledge of plants to recreate things that could only be done with other blessings. It was a strength that couldn’t be gained simply by raising one’s blessing level, and it was a perfect fit for Yarandrala.

“There’s a limit to the roses’ vitality, but I can provide it with mana to make sure it doesn’t run out. It’s even more effective than Regenerate. Only Healing Hands is more efficient in turning magic power into healing.”

That’s Yarandrala for you.

With this, we should be able to save her...

“Huh?”

But it was not to be.

Yarandrala’s roses withered before our eyes.

“What’s going on?!” Flustered, Yarandrala quickly changed the roses back into seeds. “Is a skill activating to prevent the corpse roses from taking root?”

“The plants are parasitizing a host, so maybe they’re getting caught by some sort of resistance?!”

This wasn’t good.

It would take a while for us to get back to Zoltan on our boat, but the woman lying feebly before us didn’t look like she could last the trip.

There was only one form of healing better than Yarandrala’s...

“I’ll do it.”

“Ruti...”

The only person whose healing power surpassed Yarandrala’s was Ruti.

Only the Hero’s power had a chance.

“I can’t just leave her like this.”

Ruti’s body shone.

She was releasing the full power of the Hero from the constraints of New Truth.

“Healing Hands!”

The light shrouding Ruti poured into the woman.

The ashen skin clinging to her bones took on a ruddy hue, and the flesh that had withered to keep her alive regenerated.

I put my fingers to her wrist, checking her pulse. “She’s out of any immediate danger.”

She was still terribly malnourished, and her body looked emaciated, but she wasn’t on death’s door anymore.

“We can just take her to a clinic in Zoltan, and she should recover with some rest and recuperation.”

“Big Brother... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. If you thought it was right to use your power, then that’s enough. After all, it is yours to use.”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

I put my hand on Ruti’s head, and she smiled happily back at me.

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“Nhh...”

“Ah, awake now?”

I handed the ninja girl a cup of warm water.

“Where...am I...?”

“On our ship.”

“Ship...?”

It looked like she wasn’t fully conscious yet.

I helped her drink the water as her eyes struggled to focus. She seemed to have trouble swallowing, but she didn’t spit any of it out. She was weak, but the damage to her digestive tract was not too severe. She’d eaten just enough to

avoid the effects of starvation.



I prepared another cup for her.

We didn't have any soup or other food that would be easy to eat in her malnourished state, but Yarandralla had squeezed some berries to make a warm, sweet juice that would help the girl's weakened body recover energy. When she took a sip from the cup, this time filled with the warm juice, a spark returned to the girl's eyes.

The sweetness must have worked to stimulate her brain.

"Lady Torahime?!" she cried.

"Who's Lady Torahime?"

She looked around frantically, saw the older woman lying on the ship, and went to rush over toward her...then staggered and started to fall.

"Whoops." I quickly caught her—and the cup of juice, too. "She is terribly emaciated. I don't think she'll be able to wake up right now, and it would be better not to call out to her."

"What did you do to the princess?!"

"We healed her, since she was on the verge of death," Yarandralla answered with a reassuring smile. "I'm Yarandralla, a florist living in Zoltan...though I'm not really doing that right now, so, hmm..." Yarandralla cocked her head, unsure of how to introduce herself.

"Right now, I guess you're a shipwright?" I suggested.

"Aren't you the champion of the colosseum?" Rit offered.

"A hobbyist," said Ruti.

"A helpful sister-figure," said Tisse.

We all answered in our own way.

The girl looked confused.

And what was with Tisse? Every once in a while, she'd say something where it was impossible to tell if she was joking or serious.

Mister Crawly Wawly just swayed his body with resigned acceptance.

“Ah, also, she’s a super-skilled healer, so she helped the princess lying over there. She’s still unconscious, but her life isn’t in any danger.”

“Th-thank goodness...”

The strength seemed to leave the girl’s body, and she stopped struggling.

I gave her back the cup of juice and guided her to a seat.

“I’m Red, this is my little sister, Ruti, and that’s my fiancée, Rit.”

“Ruti?! Are you Ruti the Hero?!” the girl shouted.

“No, I’m just Ruti,” she answered without batting an eyelash.

“But Ruti is...”

“Ruti isn’t that uncommon a name... Ah, maybe you didn’t know, since you’re from the East.”

“Oh... Is that so?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not the Hero.”

“No, it is this one’s fault for leaping to conclusions... Humblest apologies.”

The disappointment was clear on her face.

I guess the feats of Ruti the Hero had even made it all the way across the world to the Jade Kingdom.

“I’m Tisse, and this my friend, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

Mister Crawly raised his right front leg in greeting.

“Eeep! A spider?!” the girl yelped.

“Ah, do you not like spiders? Sorry about that.” With some chagrin, Tisse put Mister Crawly Wawly in her bag.

“Ah, not at all. Forgive me...,” the girl apologized again, lowering her head. “This one is uncomfortable around bugs.”

She seemed a frank and honest sort of girl.

“Apologies for not introducing oneself sooner. This one is called Habotan. Thank you for saving her life.”

“Habotan, huh. That’s an odd name.”

“Apparently, it comes from the name of a flower.”

“I see.”

The girl looked a little embarrassed. Why now, when she was just talking about her name? Did it have something to do with Jade Kingdom culture?

“The woman lying over there is known as Lady Torahime, this one’s master and princess of an exalted family in the Jade Kingdom.”

“So that really was a Jade Kingdom ship.”

I couldn’t believe a ship like that had managed to cross the most dangerous sea in the world... There was still so much about seafaring I didn’t understand.

Well, technically, it had been adrift, so it didn’t exactly cross safely, but still.

“The ship was accompanied by an incredible group of samurai!” the girl said, her voice filled with pride. But as soon as the words left her lips, her expression went rigid, as if she’d just realized something.

“...What of the rest...?” she asked.

“By the time we got there, there was nothing we could do for them.”

“Ah... I see...”

Tears welled in the girl’s eyes, and she quickly turned to look up at the sky.

“It is an honor for a Jade Kingdom samurai to die for their master! You were all splendid!” she said, her voice quivering.

It was obvious she was fighting to keep it together.

The Jade Kingdom, huh...

I waited for her to collect herself before continuing.

“Our ship is headed for the city of Zoltan in the Republic of Zoltan. It’s a place that doesn’t generally probe too deeply into peoples’ pasts, but they’ll probably have a few questions for someone who washed up from the East.”

“Oh! Ah... That’s...”

“You should probably take the time now to figure out what you can and can’t

say.”

“...Are you not going to question us, Sir Red?”

“If you feel like answering questions, then I don’t mind asking them, but we’re just normal citizens of Zoltan. That’s a job for the city guard.”

They probably had some sort of important reason for being here.

The Jade Kingdom was a country on the other side of the world that was separated from the dark continent by a strait and had been fighting the demon lord’s armies for many, many long years. Things in the west were going better with Hero Van and Prince Salius’s efforts, but the situation might have been worse in the East. If they had come seeking help...that would be difficult.

It was possible for a heroic party of a handful of people to cross the Wall at the End of the World, but moving an army over it was impossible with humanity’s current level of technology.

It might have been different if the dragons were willing to help carry soldiers across the Wall...but that wasn’t really something I could do anything about.

“This one is...” Habotan started, before stopping herself short and looking down. “Deepest apologies.”

What a conscientious girl.

“Your master is still sleeping, so you can’t say anything careless, right? Don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

“Oh, there is one thing I do want to ask!” Rit popped her head out from behind me. “Are you a ninja, Habotan?!”

“Yes! You are correct!” she answered in a loud voice.

...Were ninjas usually like this?



It was dark by the time we’d made it safely back to Zoltan and taken the two of them to a clinic. We could have just left the rest to the doctors and guards, but...

“Ah, no... Thank you for everything...”

Hearing Habotan say that to us with the look of an abandoned puppy, we couldn't help but explain things to the guards for them and get them admitted to a hospital run by the Church.

Well, after all, Habotan was in an unknown country, all of her comrades were dead, and her liege Torahime was still unconscious. It was only natural she might feel disheartened.

After helping out and promising to come see her tomorrow once we were done with work, we made it back to the shop after the sun had well and truly set.

It had been a pretty exhilarating day off.

“So they're from the other side of the Wall at the End of the World...”

“I wonder what it's like!”

“I doubt we'll ever get to see it, but it's not every day we get a visitor from the East, so it'd be nice to ask Habotan a bit about it.”

“Yeah!”

Rit and I had dinner smiling and talking about our day as per usual.

It had been a busy day, and we hadn't had time to go to the market or make a fancy meal, so dinner was just a simple pasta soup using olive oil and tomatoes.

It might have been simple, but it was still tasty—the perfect meal for a time like this.

“That certainly was a unique day off.”

“Yeah, it was.”

I loved the ordinary days I spent with Rit, but having a bit of excitement in our lives every now and then was fun, too. And after our adventure, I got to spend the evening together with Rit just like always.

Yeah. It was a good day.

Chapter 3

Zoltan Habotan

The following morning, I left Rit to manage the store and went to the workroom to make medicines. I was mixing cold medicine and a styptic to stop bleeding—two cheap, common-use drugs.

“Not to mention...”

I was also making the nutritional supplement that was an ingredient in our top-selling medicinal cookies. It provided nutrients, helped to improve blood flow, and had a minor pain-relieving effect, but it was by no means a cure-all; it couldn't reduce a fever, so we recommended patients use it with another cold medicine if they were feverish. And, of course, it shouldn't be used if they were too weak to eat. Still, there were no side effects and no problems with taking it daily, so it was a good defense against the common cold.

“It's been a year since I first made these with Rit.”

That brought back memories.

Back then, I'd managed to open a store, but was struggling with how to get customers to stop by. Now, our number of regulars was increasing, and we had all sorts of people coming to the store, from nobles to craftsmen, merchants, farmers, and adventurers. The medicinal cookies had been an important step in getting to this point.

“We gave out a bunch of free samples, didn't we?”

When the cookies had sold out, I'd been so happy I lifted Rit up in a hug.

Mm, looking back, I have to wonder what I was thinking then, but I really was so happy in the moment.

“I want to try making something else together again.”

It was one year since Red's Apothecary had become Red & Rit's Apothecary. I

was still going to give her a present, but it might be nice to come up with a new product for the store, too.

I'll talk it over with her later.

"It's peaceful, but there's still so much to do."

The list included getting a present for Rit, making a new product for the store with her, Ruti's growth, Yarandrala's shipbuilding, checking in on Habotan...

"And right now, mixing medicines to give to customers!"

Every day was so full and rewarding.



That evening, Rit and I walked to the hospital in central Zoltan. We had closed up shop a little bit early to go visit Habotan and Torahime.

"A new product to celebrate our one-year anniversary?" Rit asked, crossing her arms in thought. I had brought up my idea from this morning while we were walking.

"Some sort of medicine that would be useful to anyone might be good," I said.

"Yeah, definitely."

A big part of why the medicinal cookies sold so well was because any and every customer could benefit from them.

"Is there any sort of medicine you can use when you're healthy?"

"Hmmm."

Medicine was usually for when your body wasn't working properly. Still, maybe there was something people could use even when they were healthy.

"That might be good. When we get back, I can go through my notes on medicinal plants and try to think of something."

"Okay!" Rit cheered, happy to have her idea heard. "I always want to stay healthy, after all, since I'm going to be living with you even when I'm an old granny."

"Yeah. I have to stay healthy too, then."

“Ehehe.”

Thinking about one year together was great and all, but I also needed to think about what to do for a wedding.

...If someone had told me back when I was a knight that this sort of happy future was waiting for me, would I have believed them?

“Haha, no way.”

“Huh?”

I’d accidentally said that part out loud.

Rit was looking at me in confusion, so I told her what I’d been thinking.

Her cheeks flushed happily, and she hid her smile behind the bandana around her neck.



The difference between a clinic and a hospital came down to whether or not they had larger facilities for admitting patients. Around Avalon, clinics were generally doctors’ homes as well, so they had space to admit two, maybe three people on a short-term basis.

It would have been possible for Habotan and Torahime to be admitted to a clinic near the harbor, but given the gravity of Torahime’s condition, it wasn’t likely she’d recover fully with just a few days of treatment. So instead, we’d taken them to the hospital where Danan was admitted before.

Considering how blunt and quick to speak his mind Danan was, if he had been willing to accept treatment there, then it must be a hospital with trustworthy doctors and nurses.

I’d love a chance to set up a contract with them someday.

As we walked along the stone paved central streets, a large building came into view.

Hospitals of this size were normally run by the church rather than an individual doctor, and Zoltan hospitals were no exception. Clerics dispatched by Zoltan’s church worked alongside the nurses; apparently, caring for the afflicted was considered one aspect of a cleric’s study.

“You’re here to visit Ms. Habotan? Hmm, it’ll probably be a little bit of a wait,” the receptionist at the hospital told us.

“Is she being seen by a doctor now?”

“No, she’s in a meeting with people from Zoltan’s assembly.”

“Ahh, I see.”

Two visitors from the Jade Kingdom had appeared from across the sea, so it was natural the Zoltan authorities would take an interest. If this was Avalonia, they would have been used to score political points, but thankfully...

“It’s probably just a matter of curiosity.”

“Yeah.”

Rit and I shared a smile. People from Zoltan were always so laid-back.

“What should we do? Come back tomorrow?”

“Mmm, we promised to come today, and it’s not like we have any special plans, so I don’t mind waiting.”

“Sure, let’s just relax and wait then.”

I think I remember there being a café near here...

Places in central Zoltan tended to be a bit more expensive than normal, aimed at the richer classes, but we had just gotten our hands on all sorts of treasure during the diving expedition yesterday.

I mean, we hadn’t exchanged anything yet, so it wasn’t like my purse was actually any heavier, though. It was a cliché among adventurers that loot was just a fancy decoration until you exchanged it, but given the size of Zoltan’s economy, there probably weren’t any places we could exchange everything we’d found all at once.

“There was a magic sword in there, too. Maybe I should keep that, at least.”

If you held the sword and poured magic power into it, you could create a barrier of wind to deflect arrows and other smaller projectiles. A weapon like that would be invaluable on a battlefield.

“I bet there will be some funny looks when the guy known for only using a

bronze sword comes in trying to sell a magic sword.”

“...Maybe I should ask you to sell the treasure.”

She had a point; it might be a bit weird for me to take in the loot to sell.

As Rit and I chatted, we opened the door to the café, and a bell chimed to announce the arrival of customers.

“Ah! Ruti, Tisse, and Yarandralla are here!”

“Huh.”

Fancy tables lined the inside of the café, upon which sat cups of black tea and plates served with distinctly small portions of food.

“The food looks good.”

“It’s made by a cook who used to work for the royal family of the archipelago kingdom.”

“Oh wow!”

That sort of technique was way beyond what I’d learned cooking for a band of knights.

“Big Brother,” Ruti called out, waving to us.

We sat down at their table.

“Are you three here to visit the hospital, too?”

“Mhm, since we said we would.”

Ruti pointed at the pancakes she was eating. There was a dollop of white cream on top of the fluffy, golden cakes.

“This is good. You should get it.”

“Oh yeah? I think I will.”

“Me too!”

Our orders arrived, and I took a bite of my pancakes. The outside was a little crisp and the inside light and springy. The cream was rich, giving you the full flavor of the milk. They looked nice, and they tasted just as good; the visual highlighted the flavor, and the flavor made the visual more memorable.

They were just that exquisite.

“The tea is nice, too. I wonder what sort of leaves they use.”

“Yeah, it really is. I’d like to have this at home.”

It had a soothing flavor that paired well with the sweet pancakes.

“Red.” Yarandrala’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “I went out to sea to investigate Habotan’s ship again today.”

“That Jade Kingdom ship?”

“Yeah. I wanted a bit more information about them.” Unlike me, Yarandrala was still a real hero. “It’s just another hobby of mine.”

I couldn’t help laughing out loud at that.

“Being a hero for fun. You really do have a lot of hobbies. So what did you find out?”

“The ship had sunk.”

“It sank? You’re sure it didn’t just float away?”

“I’m sure. I tied a rope to it and weighted it down yesterday to keep it from drifting away.”

“You really don’t leave anything to chance, do you?”

“So is that what sank it...?”

Yarandrala let out a moan. “I mean the thing was already halfway there. It was practically inevitable.”

If anything, it was hard to believe it hadn’t already gone under by the time we arrived. From everything I knew of ships, it should have already sunk.

“True, I was amazed it was still floating.”

“The tenacity of that warrior must have possessed the ship,” Tisse said.

She was talking about the warrior who, even in death, had held on long enough to entrust Torahime to Tisse. Had that man’s persistence lived on in the vessel itself?

“That’s a romantic sort of thought, that his soul might have moved into the

ship.”

“Strength of spirit is sometimes all a sailor has to keep going.”

“You always do think everything comes back to spiritualism, don’t you?”

That was Yarandrala—coming up with theory after theory, doing whatever she could to improve her odds, then making up for the rest with spirit. I agreed with her about the importance of theory, but that sort of resolve was beyond me.

“So let’s go diving again next week.”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna pass. I am curious about Habotan, but right now I don’t really have the urge to delve deeper and get involved.”

And two straight weekends diving would be a bit rough.

“That’s a shame. Oh, you want to come with me, Mister Crawly Wawly?”

Mister Crawly Wawly had hopped onto Yarandrala’s hand and started gesturing to get her attention. She stroked his abdomen happily.

There was always a one-in-a-million chance something might happen if she went down to the bottom of the ocean alone, but it should be fine if Mister Crawly Wawly was there, too.

“It probably won’t come as a shock to either of them, but I wonder if we should tell Habotan and Torahime that their ship sank...”

“We don’t know what sort of kid Habotan is, so maybe we should wait and see for today.”

“Good idea.”

From the little we’d talked to her yesterday, she seemed serious, curious, and full of love and respect for the one she served.

“She’s a normal girl,” Ruti said.

Hmm, so that was how she looked to Ruti?

“But I didn’t expect her to be scared of Mister Crawly Wawly.”

“Yeah.”

Of course some people had trouble with bugs, but anyone who'd trained outdoors should have gotten used to them, even if they still didn't like them. It was one thing if she had some sort of psychological trauma, but it hadn't looked like that was the case for Habotan. It felt more like she just wasn't used to creepy-crawlies.

"Why did they come west?"

"I don't know," Ruti said, shaking her head.

We didn't know anything about the situation in the East, so the answer wouldn't be found in any of our heads.

"Ah, it seems the meeting is over," said Tisse.

"You can tell?"

"Yes. Mister Crawly Wawly set a thread at the entrance, and he told me that the people from Zoltan's assembly just passed through it."

"Amazing as always."

Mister Crawly Wawly seemed to swell a bit.

He could differentiate people through the vibrations in his spider web. It wasn't for nothing that Tisse, one of humanity's greatest assassins, had him for a partner.

"So, shall we go?"

I finished the last bite of my pancakes and stood up.



We were back at the hospital. Thinking about it, I suddenly realized that it didn't have a name. I figured something straightforward like the Zoltan Holy Church Hospital would be about right, but most people here just called it the hospital, the central hospital, or the church hospital. There wasn't a name plate at the entrance, and even the people who worked here just called it the hospital.

It didn't cause any issues, so I guessed it was fine.

"The west is very different," commented Habotan.

I'd just finished explaining to her about the namelessness of the hospital, and she looked to be suffering a bit of culture shock.

We'd brought pancakes from the café we were at earlier and some fruit as presents. It seemed to be the young girl's first time eating pancakes; after a very timid first bite, her eyes lit up as she devoured the rest.

"A name is terribly important to our people. It is bound to a person's soul, only to be shared with one's parents and master."

"Huh, Jade Kingdom customs are pretty different."

"This one had heard that people here are not as particular regarding names, yet it was a surprise to discover that to be true."

"Some people even just pass down their own name, like a man called Thomas naming his son Thomas Jr."

"Ooooh..."

Unlike western countries—whose cultures by and large resembled each other, even if they had their differences—a completely different sort of culture had developed on the other side of the Wall at the End of the World.

Interesting.

"So Habotan isn't your real name?" Ruti asked.

"Uh." The young girl hurriedly tried to explain herself, but it just turned into a mumbled noise.

"Well, Habotan's enough for us anyway, so don't worry about it."

"Right... Apologies... That is our custom."

It looked like she felt bad lying about her name. She really was earnest.

Red was an alias for me too anyway, so she wasn't alone.

"Then, is Habotan a name you were given when you were older?"

"It was bestowed upon this one by Lady Torahime. My master spoke of it as the name of a blessed flower that blooms even in the depths of winter."

"Oh, what a nice meaning."

“I concur!” Habotan replied happily. It wasn’t her real name, but she seemed fond of it. So her relationship with Torahime was a good one.

“How is Lady Torahime’s condition?” Rit asked, looking at the sleeping woman. She looked a lot healthier than yesterday.

“She wakes from time to time, and she even managed to ingest a small quantity of porridge, but her consciousness is still hazy. She did not seem aware of her current location.”

“I see.”

“The doctor explained that Lady Torahime might awaken at any time, but there is no guarantee that time will be soon...”

Habotan glanced anxiously at Torahime’s face.

I would have liked to say something...but I wasn’t a doctor, so I couldn’t say anything irresponsible.

“It’s okay,” Ruti said in a soft yet powerful voice. “She’ll wake up soon.”

“Oh? Th-thank you for trying to cheer this one up, Sir Ruti.”

Habotan looked surprised, probably because of how conclusive Ruti’s statement sounded. To be honest, I was a little surprised too.

But we soon realized why she’d spoken with so much confidence.

“...Where am I?”

“Lady Torahime?!”

The sleeping princess had opened her eyes. Her face was emaciated, but her eyes shone with intelligence.

“I’ve worried you, Habotan.”

“No! Not at all!!!”

Habotan hugged Torahime and cried. I knew she must’ve been feeling lost and alone, but even so...

“I’ve always heard of Jade Kingdom ninjas as being this highly-trained special forces squad.”

Seeing Habotan crying there like that, she just looked like a normal girl for her age.

“Well, that means they must have trainees, right?”

“You’ve got a point...”

Rit was right; no matter the group, it wasn’t like hardened warriors just sprang out of the ground fully formed. Maybe there had been a ninja master on the ship who’d already died, and the trainee, Habotan, had been the only one to survive.

I always was curious about things like this.

We decided to wait a little bit until Habotan calmed down.



“Apologies for the embarrassing display.”

Habotan had cried for about ten minutes and was now staring at the floor, her face red with embarrassment.

“You were all alone in a foreign country. It’s understandable.”

“Sir.”

Habotan looked at least a little bit better after my words of encouragement.

“Allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude to you for saving our lives.”

Torahime thanked us in a manner befitting nobility. Her face was haggard, but there was still an elegance and beauty to it. It was hard to tell her age, but she was definitely a grown woman, probably at least in her thirties.

She was certainly beautiful, but her beauty was so flawless that she felt almost doll-like.

...Ah, that’s it. She reminds me of Leonor.

“It is an honor to have been able to save you.”

We were dealing with a princess from another country, not to mention we didn’t know her personality, so I fell back on the manners I’d learned from my time with the knights and bowed.

I didn't know if an eastern princess would understand western etiquette, but at least she seemed to recognize I was attempting to extend her every courtesy.

"Yes, you conducted yourselves valiantly. I should offer you a fitting reward; however, having just drifted ashore in a foreign land, I have only this to give."

Torahime held out her hair ornament. It was wooden and seemed to have been made from some sort of aromatic tree.

I didn't know its value, but it seemed the sort of thing an eastern noble would use.

"Thank you for your kind generosity." I politely accepted the gift and slipped it into my shirt pocket.

"Am I correct to assume that we are in the Republic of Zoltan?" Torahime asked with a serious look.

"Yes, milady. You have made it to a country on the other side of the Wall at the End of the World."

"I see...!"

Her calm facade crumbled, replaced by unbridled joy, and she clenched her fists.

The two of them really must have come west on some crucial mission. The warrior on the ship had mentioned some sort of hope to save the world.

I wondered what sort of secret Torahime was holding on to.

"Knowing that, I cannot remain in this state!"

"P-please wait!"

Torahime started to sit up in bed. I hurried to stop her, but before I could move, her own strength gave out.

"Lady Torahime!"

"C-curses, for something like this to keep me..."

Habotan, sitting beside Torahime, had caught her falling body and gently laid her back down in bed.

“Lady Torahime! Please do not push yourself so hard!” she insisted.

“We have no time. We are already so far behind, having drifted for so long.”

But Torahime couldn’t even move her body. Of course she couldn’t—she’d only just come out of a coma.

“Your strength should recover enough to move around in a few days; however it will likely be difficult for you to continue your journey,” I told her, and Torahime bit her lip in frustration.

“Please, Lady Torahime, do not trouble yourself!” Habotan puffed out her chest. “This one will find Ruti the Hero!”

What?

Now that I thought about it, hadn’t she reacted to Ruti’s name when we first met? So was their goal to meet the Hero ?

“...Is that something you should be saying out loud in front of us?”

“Ah?!”

She was earnest, but maybe a little *too* earnest...

Torahime looked a little troubled, too.

*

*

*

Five minutes later, Habotan was no longer dismayed, and Torahime had somehow recovered her former composure.

“...We can pretend we didn’t hear that, if you would like?”

“No, it is too late to be asking you to forget that now... Though I would have preferred not to draw attention to our search for the Hero.”

“I see...”

It looked like Torahime was trying to decide what to do.

This had turned into a bit of an awkward situation.

“Ruti the Hero’s whereabouts are currently unknown,” said Ruti.

“They are?!”

“However, there is a new hero, Van. He is currently fighting on the front lines

against the demon lord's forces, so if you have need of the Hero's strength, then you should try speaking with him. If you ask the powerful people Habotan spoke to today, they should be willing to provide a ship for transportation and some soldiers for protection."

Habotan was surprised when Ruti, who had mostly been quiet up to that point, gave them such well-thought-out and logical advice.

However, Torahime shook her head.

"No. The one we have need of is the true hero, Ruti."

"The true hero?"

I cocked my head and feigned confusion to hide the shock of her question.

Did she know that Van's Hero blessing was a replica of the one created by Demis? We didn't have any information about the East. Just how much did the Jade Kingdom know about the Hero and Demon Lord blessings?

It's okay. Just keep your cool.

"If the Jade Kingdom is facing difficulties in its war, then it might be best to speak with the commanders of the allied forces, as well as the Hero. We currently have the advantage with the war here. While it would be difficult to send out reinforcements across the Wall at the End of the World, I am sure they would lend you whatever support they could spare to resolve your problem."

"No, that is not the issue."

"...In that case, I am afraid we cannot be of much help. Your best chance might be to set out for the Kingdom of Avalonia, since that is where Ruti the Hero is said to have begun her journey."

Torahime's reaction to my suggestion was underwhelming.

...Did she have some information on Ruti the Hero's location?

"Please forgive us for making such presumptuous suggestions."

"No, I am grateful for your advice."

What was I supposed to do...?

I hadn't intended to pry too deeply, but if they were searching for Ruti, what

else could I have done? What stance should I take to gather more information?

“Good sir,” Torahime said, looking at me.

I met her gaze with an expression befitting a frontier apothecary.

“Might I impose upon you to allow Habotan to remain at your home for a time?”

“You want me...to take care of Habotan?”

“Lady Torahime?!”

I was confused, and Habotan was shocked.

“It is our duty to search for Ruti the Hero; however, I cannot yet rise. It is vexing, but I must focus on regaining my strength until the next full moon.”

The next full moon... As in six days from now?

“All the more reason why this one cannot leave your side while you remain powerless!”

“Control yourself! Think of what is most important right now!”

“But if anything were to happen to you, milady...”

“The grasp of the demon lord’s forces has not yet extended to this land of Zoltan. You must do what must be done, Habotan.”

“...”

The conversation was unraveling before my eyes, leaving me behind in my confusion. They were talking about me looking after Habotan, right?

“What should we do, Red?” Rit whispered in my ear.

“Hmmm, good question... What do you think?”

“It should be fine for us to take her in.”

“Hrm.”

“There’s too much we don’t know right now. If we let her stay with us, it’s possible we might be able to learn from each other.”

“That’s true. There’s a risk, but right now the more serious threat is our lack

of information.”

Plus, having me and Rit handle her would be less risky than Ruti dealing with her directly.

“Habotan.”

“Sir Red...”

“If Lady Torahime’s safety is a concern, then we can ask the Zoltan guards for help or pay to hire adventurers. But whatever your duty is, you’re the only one who can do it, right?”

“Be that as it may, this one could not entrust the safety of Lady Torahime to strangers.”

I quickly stepped in and touched Habotan’s forehead with my finger before she could react.

“I’m just an apothecary, but even I managed to touch you. It may sound harsh, but in terms of simple strength as a bodyguard, I don’t think you being here would be the best choice.”

“Uh, ungh...”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

Ugh, the guilt...

She was still just a child.

“A lack of strength isn’t something you can make up for; it’s the same for me. And there’s no shortcut to getting stronger, either.”

“Then what should this one do?”

“You should think about what you can do with the strength you have right now, and make up for your weakness with knowledge and judgment. There’s always something you can do, no matter the situation.”

“Sir Red...!”

Argh, I couldn’t believe I was tricking a child like this.

I was starting to hate myself for it.

The advice I was giving her was real, but I was also saying it to get more information about why they were searching for Ruti.

I thought I was done with these sorts of tricks after the incident with Van, but who could have imagined trouble arriving from the East?

However...the situation was still peaceful.

Hopefully, it wouldn't turn into something that ended with us drawing swords.



Around noon the following day, I headed back to the hospital.

Torahime had only just woken up, so last night we had decided to let Habotan spend the night in the hospital, then have her stay at our shop for five days, starting today.

I was going there now to pick her up.

Homes lined both sides of the road leading toward central Zoltan. They were occupied by all sorts of craftspeople who used the first floors as workshops.

There was the rhythmic clanging sound of a craftsman banging on a pot. A merchant from central Zoltan peered into the shop, presumably looking for something he could sell later. A cat dozed atop the fence separating that shop from the one next door. A young trainee craftsman watched the cat with fascination, while his master watched the apprentice, blowing smoke from his pipe and resting his chin on his palm.

It was a peaceful Zoltan afternoon.

"Maybe I should buy a new pot," I mumbled idly as I made my way along the street.

Finally, the hospital came into view. After talking to the receptionist, I climbed the stairs to the room where Habotan and Torahime were staying. The hospital had been built quite a while ago, and the stairs had an aged feel to them, creaking as I went up. That sound was probably from the lumber warping a bit, creating a little gap between stairs, but I didn't think they would break anytime soon; it felt like you'd still be able to use them for another hundred years.

Reaching the room, I opened the wooden door.

What I found was Habotan, kneeling on the floor, her forehead lowered all the way to the ground.

“Sir Red! This one is inexperienced, but grateful that you are allowing her to accompany you!”

Habotan’s loud voice echoed throughout the hospital.

What was I going to do about her?



“First things first...”

I had Habotan sit up normally.

“This agreement is just to give you a base in Zoltan and share information, so you don’t need to treat it like an oath between lord and retainer.”

“Deepest apologies, sir!”

“And about that. I’d rather you apologize without quite that much intensity.”

I glanced at Torahime anxiously, but she remained silent. Her expression was that of a superior watching her subordinate do her best—she wanted her subordinate to grow, so she wouldn’t step in even when Habotan was flailing.

“...All right, we’d best be off. I will make sure to look after Habotan these next five days.”

“Very well. Habotan?”

“Yes, milady!”

“I am counting on you.”

“Please leave it to this one!”

And with that, their intense goodbye was over.

I led Habotan out of the room, unable to do anything to improve her attitude.



Before going back to the apothecary, I took Habotan shopping with me.

“This is the Zoltan market. Here, you can find all sorts of items gathered together in one spot, but it’s also a gathering place for people. Villagers from Zoltan’s outlying lands also come here to sell vegetables and fish and the like, which makes it a good place to gather information.”

“...”

“Are you listening?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

I doubted that was true, so I explained it one more time.

Her mind was restless.

“Is this your first time outside of the Jade Kingdom?”

“Uh... No, sir, it is not. However, it is this one’s first time in the west, and it is surprising.”

“I guess it would be a bit of a shock. Are the markets there not like this?”

“They are not so different, but they are louder and more raucous.”

“Taking things easy is sort of a Zoltan thing; other countries here have livelier marketplaces.”

“Is that so? It would be interesting to see them.”

It was natural to act like that in response to seeing a market in a country you’d never been to before...but Habotan’s reaction really was just what you’d expect from a girl her age.

“I’d love to show you around Zoltan a bit more, but first I want to make sure you know the route between my shop and the hospital. I’ve got work left to do, so you’ll have to settle for just the market today.”

“Thank you very much, sir!”

“If you don’t mind, I can show you around some of the major places tomorrow morning.”

“I would appreciate that, sir!”

“You got it.”

Maybe I should invite Tisse along tomorrow too. She could observe Habotan from a different perspective to me.

“I’m going to do some shopping for dinner tonight, but—”

“Sir, this one will accompany you!”

“A-all right then.”

That was fast.

The Jade Kingdom pair had talked about not having any time, so I’d figured Habotan would use this chance to gather some information, but I guess not. It was a new town with a completely different sort of culture, so maybe she’d decided it would be better to observe how I dealt with people first?

“Please allow this one to carry things! Despite appearances, this one has confidence in her strength!”

If that earnestness of hers was all calculated, I’d have to admit ninjas were really incredible. But somehow...

“Mph!”

...I strongly suspected she was just a child who was happy to be useful.

...Oh yeah, what sort of blessing did she have, anyway? It wasn’t Warrior or Mage or something normal like that. I saw her fight for a moment on the ship, but I didn’t notice any skills beyond physical enhancement. There might be blessings that only appeared in the East too, so I was a bit lacking in information.

“Should I make omelets today?”

“Omelets, sir?”

“A dish made from eggs.”

“Eggs of what, sir?”

“Ah, chicken eggs. Is there a different kind of egg that’s more common in the Jade Kingdom?”

“Umm, the eggs of chickens were not eaten much where this one was.”

“Oh, is it not really done out of custom or something? If so, I can make something else—”

“Not at all! This one is very interested in western cooking!”

She responded before I even finished my sentence.

“All right, then I’ll make the best omelet I can.”

The two of us made our way around the market.

“Hey, Red! We got some real nice eggs in today!”

“Looking for onions and carrots? You better buy here to get the best!”

“Well, if it ain’t Red. What’re you making today? You’re gonna buy some of our meat, right?”

A bunch of people called out as we made our way around the market. There were merchants who were always there and farmers who’d come in from outer villages to sell their harvests. The old man I usually bought meat from ran a ranch on the north side of Zoltan.

Seeing his tanned face break into a big smile reminded me of old man Kent, the rancher in my old hometown who’d been so nice to me when I was little.

“Wow...”

Habotan’s eyes gleamed as she studied the contents of our bag. It was filled with normal sorts of ingredients, but they might have been rare or strange in the Jade Kingdom.

When I was a knight, I’d read a document written by someone who traveled through the East that said most of the foods available in Avalonia were also available in the East. Granted, it was a very old text, and there might have been other different types of ingredients there as well.

It always made me a little worried only having book knowledge to fall back on.

“Cooking requires quite a number of ingredients, doesn’t it, sir?”

“Yeah, though this will do for the main ingredients at least. Next are the spices.”

“Salt, sir?”

“Salt is more of a seasoning. I am going to use it, but we have some at home, so I’m not buying any today. Right now, I’m looking for garlic and black pepper.”

“Ohh?”

It sounded like she hadn’t heard of either of them.

If she didn’t usually cook, then it made sense she wouldn’t know much about seasonings and spices that weren’t really visible in food.

The shop was set away from the center of the market, just like always, and was run by an old woman in a black robe. It was essentially just a roofed wagon lined with all sorts of items, including black pepper, mustard, mint, and horseradish, with garlic hanging from the roof. It was a good shop that had pretty much every spice you could get in Zoltan all in one place.

“You’re a new face,” said the shopkeeper as we approached.

She was a hook-nosed old lady who looked for all the world like a witch. Her blessing was Swarm Keeper, and apparently she’d been an adventurer in another land when she was young, but now lived a secluded life in Zoltan and used her ability to control insects to make a living farming.

She’d never told me her name. I wasn’t going to try to pressure her to share it either, but I had the feeling she’d lived a dangerous sort of life before.

“Heeheehee, another little sister, Red?”

“S-sister?!” Habotan was both concerned and a little flustered.

“What’re you on about? Have you ever seen siblings that looked this little alike?”

“Heeheehee, true enough.”

Of course, she’d known that already.

Habotan, from the Jade Kingdom, had a completely different sort of appearance to me, who’d been born in Avalonia. There was no way the shopkeeper had actually believed we were related.

“But you’re an unusual girl. What country could you be from?”

She leaned in close to Habotan's face, and the young girl tensed up.

"Careful, granny, you're scaring her."

"Heehee... Sorry, my eyes aren't what they used to be."

"You look scary, that's why you're always making kids cry."

"Don't say that. I like children... Ah, yes." She pulled a cookie from a bag on the counter. "Here, have a treat."

"Th-thank you." Habotan took the cookie.

Ah, she ate it.

"?!"

She took one bite of the cookie, and her eyes went wide with shock.

"How is it?" the old lady asked, opening her mouth up wide.

Oh, that's supposed to be a reassuring smile. It looks like it's having the opposite effect, though...

Those cookies were packed full of the old lady's special spices that exploded with flavor in your mouth. They weren't particularly sweet.

"I-it's tasty."

"Really! I'm so glad! In that case, maybe I should give you a few more!"

"?!"

Habotan's face froze in panic.

She was a good kid, the kind of person who wouldn't think to throw them away quietly later.

I gave her a little smile and patted her on the shoulder.

"I like those cookies too, so share a couple with me later."

"Yes, sir!"

Polarizing foods like these weren't usually a big hit with kids, but they were often popular with adults. And in this case, I happened to like those cookies quite a bit.

I thanked the old lady, bought the black pepper and garlic, and left the market with Habotan in tow.



It was around three in the afternoon when we arrived at the shop.

“Welcome back!”

“Thanks.”

Rit and I had a little hug when I came back, like we always did.

Habotan was there too, but it really was just a small hug, so I was sure it'd be fine.

“Uh, ah...”

Turning around, I saw Habotan red-faced and embarrassed.

“How shameless.”

Now it was my turn to be flustered.

I thought something like this was normal.

“You’ve really ramped up your business in the past year.”

“Oh, I didn’t see you there, Gonz.”

The half-elf carpenter Gonz was sitting at the counter looking exasperated.

“I came to get some medicinal cookies and was chatting a bit with Rit.”

“You sure you can take the time off work?”

“Talking with a friend’s more important, don’t you think?”

He said it outright, as if it was obvious. He really was a great carpenter, but he had his failings as a person.

“Gonz was telling me how Tanta’s doing,” Rit said.

Ah. Tanta.

Tanta had connected with his Cardinal blessing, so he had started seriously working at learning carpentry with his uncle and raising his blessing level, which was why I hadn’t been seeing him out playing as much when I went walking. It

was nice to see a child grow up, but also a little sad.

“How’s he doing? Working alongside adults every day and fighting monsters to raise his level are all new experiences for him. He isn’t having any trouble, is he?”

“Have a little faith in my eye for talent. In terms of passion for the job, he’s already top of the pack among my crew. He isn’t that interested in hunting monsters, but because of that, he doesn’t do anything unnecessary and fights seriously while following directions. He isn’t aiming to be an adventurer, so that’s good enough.”

“Yeah, it’s better to let people with more experience come up with battle plans.”

“And I’m the one in charge of giving him jobs, so I’m not gonna work him so hard he starts to hate it!”

“I’m not sure that’s something to be proud of.” I chuckled.

Either way, it sounded like Tanta was enjoying himself.

“So who’s this little lady?” Gonz asked, glancing at Habotan.

She took a deep breath for another long-winded introduction, but I gently stopped her.

“This is Habotan. She’s staying with us for five days.”

“You don’t say. And here I was thinking you had another little sister pop up.”

“Get some new material; the granny from the spice shop said the same thing.”

“Geh.”

Rit and I laughed as Gonz grimaced.

“This is Gonz, my friend and a master carpenter.”

“Nice to meet you, Sir Gonz!”

“That’s me, Zoltan’s top carpenter! If you ever wanna build a house, then just leave it to me!”

“Y-yes, sir! When such a time comes, I shall do so!”

“Hang on, I was just kidding... Surely you’re too young for that.”

I guess jokes like that weren’t common for Habotan when she was growing up.

“Anyway, I should get back to work before Tanta gets mad. Can I get two dozen cookies and some hangover medicine, Rit?”

“Sure thing.”

Rit quickly wrapped up some cookies and the medicine. The way she moved her hands was enchanting; she had been plenty skillful a year ago, but her movements were even more practiced now. That was just another way we’d grown together this past year.

“Medicinal cookies...”

Habotan’s face tensed.

She was probably remembering the old lady’s spiced cookies.

“Would you like to try one?”

“Uh, umm, this one’s stomach is...”

“Haha, don’t worry. They’re sweet cookies made with apple jam.”

“In that case...”

I took one of the cookies out of the basket on the counter and gave it to Habotan. She stared at it, then sniffed it, making sure it wasn’t dangerous.

“Why’s she being so cautious?”

“She ate one of the old spice shop lady’s cookies.”

“Ahhhhhh,” Gonz said with a grin.

“Pardon me...!” Working up her nerve, Habotan took a bite of the cookie.
“Wah!”

Her face lit up.

“I’m guessing you liked it.”

“Yes, sir! It’s delicious!”

She quickly ate a second bite and finished it with the third.

“There’s medicine baked into the cookie, so it’s good for colds and fatigue.”

“Ooooh.”

“It also helps prevent catching a cold and has nutritional supplements for growing children, so you can eat them every day—as long as you don’t have too many.”

“You’re an incredible baker, sir!”

“Apothecary.”



Rit giggled. “I thought she’d be nervous, but it looks like she’s settled in a bit thanks to you,” she said.

Habotan was a lot more relaxed now than when she’d first left the hospital.

It was good progress.

“So, let’s do proper introductions. I’m Rit. Nice to meet you.”

“And this one is called Habotan! Sir Rit, humblest thanks for allowing one such as myself to stay with you!” Habotan snapped to attention as she introduced herself.

Rit smiled gently and gave her another cookie.

“I’m sure you must have a lot on your mind, but at least while you’re here in our house, you can rest your heart and relax your body.”

“Thank you for your kindness!”

Habotan’s eyes gleamed as she took the cookie and started eating it. The way she held it so carefully with both hands reminded me of a squirrel.

After that, I showed her around the house. Judging from her lack of a reaction to the bath, I imagined she probably didn’t make a habit of bathing regularly.

Maybe the information in that book I’d read about the Jade Kingdom wasn’t all that reliable.

“If you have any bags, just put them in this room. It’s yours to use as you see fit, but it can get loud. So if you go out at night and have to sleep during the day, you’re welcome to use our bedroom instead.”

“Yes, sir!”

“If you’re going to eat with us, I’ll be sure to make enough for you, too. Just let me know if you’re going to be late, though.”

“You are even providing meals?!”

“I mean, if you’re staying here, we’ll at least take care of food, clothing, and shelter for you... Are you all right for clothes?”

“Yes, sir. This outfit will be enough!”

“...You don’t have an item box or something like that?”

In which case, the only possessions Habotan had were what I could see—nothing more than what could fit in her pockets. That didn’t bode well for her mission to stay and gather information in a foreign land where she didn’t know anyone.

But she didn’t seem to even notice my concern.

“No, sir. These are all of this one’s belongings.”

She unwrapped a cloth bundle and spread it out on the floor to reveal the barest essentials of travel gear and shuriken.

Hmmm...

“Why don’t we go buy you some clothes tomorrow?”



The next day, after the morning rush of customers had passed, Ruti, Tisse, Habotan, and I were walking around Zoltan. Mister Crawly Wawly had apparently gone to sea with Yarandralla, most likely to investigate the sunken Jade Kingdom ship.

We had our own job to do, too.

“This is Zoltan’s Adventurers Guild.”

“Adventurers Guild, sir?”

“...Hm? You don’t have Adventurers Guilds in the Jade Kingdom?”

The Adventurers Guild had been formed during the reconstruction effort, after the previous Hero defeated the former Demon Lord. It was a way to gather together warriors who’d lost their jobs with the end of the war, in order to maintain public order.

At that time, the Kingdom of Gaiapolis had been the only country in this part of the world, but as it broke up into the countries, branches of the Adventurers Guild began appearing across the land.

But that had all been on this side of the Wall at the End of the World; it had nothing to do with Tian Long or the Jade Kingdom in the East.

“The Adventurers Guild is a place where you can put in job requests to adventurers with combat skills or other specialized abilities. A lot of people go to them with jobs like clearing out monsters, investigating dangerous locations, or providing protection.”

“So it is similar to a job agency?”

“Is there some sort of business like that in the Jade Kingdom?”

“No, sir, a job agency merely recommends jobs, but those who take requests do not belong to the agency themselves.”

“I see. So it’s a little bit different.”

That meant the agencies served more as a go-between, connecting freelance warriors with job offers. It was similar, but different from the guild, which contracted out adventurers registered with them. The Adventurers Guild was also responsible for making sure that the adventurers could be trusted by the clients and that the requests themselves were reliable.

“If you need someone for a job, then you can come here, and they should be able to help. Adventurers take all sorts of requests, meaning they can also gather information. Still, most people won’t tell you anything if they don’t trust you, which might make things a bit hard for you since you just arrived in Zoltan.”

“I see...”

Well, it wasn’t that difficult if you were a skilled negotiator, but it didn’t look like Habotan had that particular skill set.

“Just so you know, we are also members of the Adventurers Guild,” Tisse said. “Ms. Ruti and I are B-rank adventurers with the Zoltan Adventurers Guild.”

“Is B-rank high?”

“The highest is S-rank, then A-rank, and then B-rank is the third from the top.”

“Ohhh.”

That told Habotan that Ruti and Tisse were skilled adventurers, but being the third-highest rank should also make her think they weren’t particularly heroic warriors either. It was the perfect impression to give considering Ruti wanted to

hide her blessing.

“Want to go inside and introduce yourself?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“If you’re going to use the Adventurers Guild later, it would be easier if you introduced yourself as my acquaintance, right?”

“Ah, indeed!”

We opened the door to the guild.

“Oh, Ms. Ruti and Ms. Tisse. And Mr. Red!”

“Hello, Megria.”

Megria was sitting at the counter sharpening a sword.

...Why was she sharpening a sword?

“Even the receptionist is armed! So this is an Adventurers Guild...!”

“Exactly!”

“While Ms. Ruti is technically correct, please do not take her words as an accurate representation of the Adventurers Guild.”

“...I see.”

Ruti looked a little deflated by Tisse’s comment.

“What’s with the sword?”

“I was planning to hang it on the wall for decoration.”

“It looks like a real sword, though.”

“The guild chief said we should use proper, sharp swords as decorations on the wall, since this is an Adventurers Guild.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

Decorative swords were more about looking beautiful and being rust-proof than actually being decent swords. Especially with a place like this, where people were constantly coming in and out, it was important to use ones that were easier to maintain. The sword Megria was sharpening had been designed

for practical use, so it would start to rust without proper care.

“Harold does get some funny ideas at times.”

“He has a habit of suggesting odd things when Mr. Galatine isn’t around.”

“Galatine isn’t around?”

“There’s a gathering of all the Adventurers Guilds in the area. It’s a big, week-long meeting held every five years where they talk about all sorts of things, so he couldn’t really get out of it.”

“Shouldn’t Harold be the one attending? He’s the guild chief, after all.”

“Ahaha.” Megria just laughed with a strained smile.

“So there’s a tradition of decorating with swords here, too?” Habotan remarked, sounding intrigued.

“Oh, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Ah, apologies. This one is Habotan, ninja of the Jade Kingdom! Due to unforeseen circumstances, this one is currently staying with Sir Red!”

“The Jade Kingdom?!” Megria’s eyes widened.

Ah, right. If Galatine were here, he would have known about Torahime being hospitalized yesterday and let the rest of the guild employees know, but with him gone, it was no surprise they were unaware.

I explained how Habotan had ended up staying with us as briefly as I could.

“Adrift at such a young age, and all your comrades... It must have been so difficult.”

Tears of sympathy welled up in Megria’s eyes, and she stifled a sniffle. Yet Habotan just stared curiously at the sword in Megria’s hands.

“Do you like swords?” Ruti asked.

“Yes. An excellent blade can cut a path through even the most difficult of fates.”

“You think?”

It sounded like Ruti didn’t agree with Habotan on the matter.

“This is mine,” Ruti said, unsheathing the sword on her back to show Habotan. It was a goblin blade pockmarked with holes.

“It does not seem to be a very good one,” Habotan said, giving her frank assessment of the weapon.

It was a two-handed greatsword Ruti had received from a goblin settlement when she first came to Zoltan. Because of the holes, it was fragile despite its size, but she used it without leaving any nicks or cracks in the blade.

“It’s not. This sword isn’t special at all. But I forge my own path with it. What matters isn’t the blade you use, but the will you pour into it.”

“The will...?”

“Yes, *will*. The most important thing for a person.”

Ruti passed the sword to Habotan, who studied it carefully.

“This one does not understand,” she murmured.



Leaving the Adventurers Guild, we went around to most of the important places in Zoltan.

“There are a bunch of inns here in the northern district. They’re used by everyone, from adventurers to farmers, who come in from outside the city to sell their produce. Keep going north and you’ll reach the city’s gate.”

“What a delicious smell!”

“This is the Zoltan council building in central, and Zoltan’s church is over there. With you coming from the Jade Kingdom, I’m sure you’ll get special treatment, so if you ever need the help of someone in a position of authority, you can come here to discuss it with them.”

“That is quite a large building!”

“If you go west until you see the river, you’ll reach the harbor district. There are sailors there who have been outside of Zoltan, so if you’re looking for information about other lands, then that’s the place to go. But...well, don’t get your hopes up.”

“So these are western ships! They are completely different from what this one knows!”

“If you go a bit north from here, you’ll head into Southmarsh. There you can find a lot of people who came from outside Zoltan and the Thieves Guild that runs the underworld. It’s a good place to get information, but not the safest. I don’t have any connections with the Thieves Guild though, so if you use them, I won’t be able to help you.”

“That person seems to be glaring at us. How scary!”

“If you go back south, you’ll reach the southern district, also called downtown. A lot of craftspeople live here, and it’s where a lot of Zoltan’s craftwork is done. It doesn’t really have much to do with your mission, but it’s a nice place.”

“Another delicious smell... This one is quite hungry.”



“Mrgh, mrgh.”

It was noon, and we’d found a place downtown to eat.

Habotan was hungrily eating whitefish with sweet potato fries.

“This one has never had fried sweet potato before now.”

“They taste even better than they used to, thanks to the new oil Red developed last winter.”

“Mreahhy?!”

“Swallow your food before you talk.”

“Apwowogies.” Habotan quickly swallowed and cleared her mouth. “Haah... But...to develop oil... Were you not an apothecary, sir?”

“There was a war not too long ago. With sea lanes blockaded, the oil Zoltan usually imported couldn’t get in, so I developed an oil using the palm trees that grow here in Zoltan.”

“Incredible... You are not Ruti the Hero by any chance, are you, Sir Red?”

“Huh?”

I was at a loss for a moment at that, then cracked up.

“Ahaha...!”

“I-it was just a joke.”

“I know, but the thought of me being Ruti the Hero was just too funny.”

It was the first time anyone had ever said something like that.

My Guide blessing was practically the polar opposite of the Hero blessing.

“I’m not the Hero.”

“This one is aware. However, you are gifted with the sword, and so many people look up to you. When people are troubled, you make medicine or oil to help them. Is that not like the Hero?”

“No, not at all.”

“Yeah, not at all.”

Me and Ruti both shook our heads.

“The Hero is the strongest being in the world,” said Ruti. “Stronger than anyone, capable of facing any desperate situation, able to heal the wounded and fight at the head of an army. But swordsmanship and the knowledge to develop oil or medicine for your friends and people in need aren’t the sorts of things blessings can provide. That’s why Big Brother isn’t the Hero.”

“I-is that so...?”

Habotan slumped in her chair and looked toward the ground.

“Have you heard what sort of person the Hero is?” Ruti asked, and Habotan immediately raised her head.

“An ally of justice!” she answered without hesitation.

Her hope was palpable; she was clinging on to the Hero for support when all seemed lost, just as Ruti had seen in all the people she’d met on her journey.

“...”

Ruti looked like she wanted to say something, but then...

“Does anyone want some dessert? There is a fruit stand over that way,” Tisse

interrupted.

She was trying to avoid any further careless discussion.

“There’s no knowing the sort of person Ruti the Hero is without meeting her,” I said, before changing the topic. “All right, what do you feel like for dessert? Something sweet or something tart?”

“...Ruti the Hero would be able to save us,” Habotan murmured.

Ruti only listened in silence.



With a quick tour of the city under our belt, it was time to take care of our other goal for today.

“This is it.”

We stopped at a clothes store in downtown Zoltan. A sign hung over the door that read MADAM OFFLER’S WONDERFUL CLOTHES.

“The names of western shops are very strange. It is quite a cultural difference,” Habotan said, looking at the sign.

The store’s name was written in cute, rounded letters, and there was a picture of a woman grinning broadly next to the sign.

It was one of Rit’s favorite shops. I’d also come here before with her.

“You might be even more surprised when you go inside.”

I opened the door and led Habotan inside. The moment the bell rang, a woman appeared from the interior of the store, walking on light footsteps.

“Welcome! Oh my, if it isn’t Red, Ruti, Tisse, and who is this little cutie?”

“Wah?!”

She was tall and covered in solid muscle.

“Hello, Madam Offler.”

“Hi, darling. It’s rare to see you without Rit.”

“I was hoping to get some clothes for her,” I said, motioning to Habotan. “She’s staying with us for a little bit, but only has the one set of clothes.”

“Oh dear, how horrid! I can hardly imagine being forced to wear the same thing every single day!”

Madam Offler bent her big body over to meet Habotan eye-to-eye.

She always did that whenever she was dealing with a customer looking to buy clothes. Apparently, she couldn't see what sort of clothes would suit a person if she didn't. She often said it was important never to forget that fashion was not just how a person was seen by others, but how they saw the world, too.

I didn't know anything about the world of fashion, but I was sure it was just as deep as swordplay.

“Oh my, those clothes are from the Jade Kingdom.”

“Yes, they are! You can tell?”

“Of course, honey. I know every style of clothing on the continent,” Madam Offler answered with a smile.

There was no hesitation at all in her words; the sort of thing that put you at ease and made you think it was safe to trust her when it came to fashion.

The clothes here were on the more expensive end of the scale—though not rich enough for Zoltan's aristocracy—but even so, it was clear this place was beloved by the people of the neighborhood.

“Now, come this way and take a look at this.”

“Eh, a kimono?!”

Madam Offler had pulled a Jade Kingdom-style dress out of one of the store's closets.

She had once lived in the trading city of Lark, a key location on the southern Avalon shipping routes, and had a chance to learn about all sorts of clothes there.

Judging from Habotan's reaction, this kimono was worthy of the Jade Kingdom itself.

“It's a shame I don't have any in your size. I would love to make one especially for you, but seeing as you need clothes right away, I'll find you something

ready-made.”

“Waaah,” Habotan said, sounding overwhelmed.

Madam Offler put a hand on the girl’s shoulder and led her over to a changing room.

“Make sure to tell her what sort of clothes you want!” I called out to Habotan.

Well, it would probably be fine just leaving it to Madam Offler.

Turning around, I saw Ruti and Tisse looking through the racks of clothes.

“Since we’re here, do either of you want to buy something?”

“Mhm, I think I’ll pick out a new outfit,” Ruti said.

As for Tisse...

“I’m just looking. I need to be able to hide things in my outfits, so they have to be made to order.”

“I see.”

With how assassins fought, it made sense that Tisse would need to be able to hide throwing knives, chains, and all sorts of other tools inside her clothes.

What about ninjas? Would buying something off-the-rack cause issues for Habotan?

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I suspect it will be fine,” Tisse told me. “As far as I can tell, instead of hiding tools inside her outfit, she seems to tie the cloth bundle she carries in a certain way to make it easier to retrieve whatever she needs.”

“Ohh, I guess styles really do change depending on where you are.”

Back when she’d attacked me on the ship, I’d been really impressed by the way Habotan had thrown a shuriken and attacked me with her sword at the same time. If she hadn’t been so weakened, I might have been a little bit more surprised.

“But, well, Habotan is still inexperienced,” Tisse said. “She’s barely qualified to be a standard assassin, much less a heroic one.”

“She’s still young, though.”

“You’re not wrong. However, she is filled with a sense of duty, and her mission right now is a heavy one.”

“Yeah.”

“Age is no excuse. I don’t know the exact role of a ninja in the Jade Kingdom, but to an assassin, only one thing matters: did you fulfill your mission, or did you fail.”

“I’d guess it’s probably the same for ninjas.”

“That is why the Assassins Guild will never give a person an impossible mission, and why it has a policy of rescuing those who fail a mission and retraining them.”

“The Assassins Guild’s really got it together when it comes to the welfare of its employees. I feel like the knights are way worse with that.”

“Heh... Yet Habotan doesn’t have any sort of backstop like that. It looks to me as though she has been given a burden far too heavy for her to carry.”

“...I think so, too.”

“My plan is to watch over her from a distance, so I’ll leave her mental care to you.”

“We don’t know much about their situation, either. Like how much we should be getting involved in all this.”

“We are also unaware of what Torahime is thinking. My assassin’s instinct is telling me that she may be quite cunning...”

“In which case, they may have a plan to win even despite Habotan’s lack of experience.”

I hadn’t been able to form a mental image of the sort of person Torahime was, particularly because she’d been in such a weakened state. I had no intention of underestimating our Jade Kingdom visitors, but after spending the day with Habotan, I was not as wary of her.

What could she manage to accomplish with just a single young, immature

ninja like Habotan?

“Big Brother, what do you think of this?”

Ruti held up what looked like the garb of a warrior from the Jade Kingdom. The top half was a white kimono, and the bottom, a navy pair of long pants called a *hakama*.

“It’s nice to try wearing clothes from another country every once in a while. I reckon that outfit would suit you well, Ruti.”

“Yay. I’ll go try it on.” Ruti headed to the changing rooms, bubbling with excitement.

“Haha.” I couldn’t help but let out a happy little chuckle.

Ruti was excited about clothes now. Wanting to try on cute clothes was another aspect of her life that Ruti had reclaimed.

“How is it?”

Ruti emerged from the changing room and, to nobody’s surprise, the clothes suited her well and she looked totally adorable.

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We finished our shopping and left Madam Offler’s store.

“Huh, interesting.”

I was looking at Ruti and Habotan walking out in front. Ruti had changed into the Jade Kingdom warrior-style outfit, and Habotan wore a simple black dress.

“Ruti’s wearing Jade Kingdom clothes, and Habotan’s wearing Zoltan clothes.”

“That is interesting.”

Me and Tisse walked side by side behind the two girls, nodding to ourselves.

I’d also bought Habotan a nightgown for sleeping in, as well as a tunic and pants that were easy to move around in and would make her less conspicuous in western towns.

“Hmhm.”

Ruti was in high spirits, apparently enjoying her new clothes.

“...”

And Habotan was...thinking about something from the looks of it.

She had been excited when she put on the outfit, so I was sure it wasn't that she didn't like the clothes...

“Red!” someone called out in a loud voice.

“Is that you, Mogrim?”

The short dwarf waving at me up ahead was Mogrim the blacksmith.

“Oh, hello, Moen.”

And standing beside him was Moen, the captain of the guard.

“Hi, Red. You've been so busy lately we haven't seen you much, but it looks like things have calmed down now.”

“Yeah, I had a lot going on last year.”

And this year, I'd been really busy all the way up till spring, but summer had been relatively peaceful. Well, there had been that whole incident with Saint Eremite, but this world was filled with battles and adventure. I still considered my life normal.

“Still though, you two really do make an odd pair,” I commented.

“They hired me to inspect the guards' gear and handle any repairs,” said Mogrim.

“Oh, that's a big job!”

“Yeah, I'm itching to get to it! The plan is to divvy up the work with a bunch of other blacksmiths, though. I was on my way to take a first look, so I could come up with a plan.”

Now that explanations were out of the way, Mogrim turned to look at Habotan.

“You're a new face.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. This one is called Habotan!”

“Oh, you're a lively one!”

“Ah, the girl from Jade Kingdom!” remarked Moen.

He already knew about her. As expected of the captain of the guard.

“You came all the way from the Jade Kingdom? That must have been a grand adventure,” said Mogrim.

“It was very difficult.”

“I’m Mogrim, a blacksmith, and this here is Moen, the captain of the guard in Zoltan. If you ever need a weapon or have one that requires some looking after, just come talk to me anytime.”

“Ah, this one’s blade is imbued such that it does not need maintenance.”

“Even if your sword’s magic, your throwing weapons aren’t, right?”

“Mogrim here can’t forge magic weapons, but he’s the best in Zoltan when it comes to smithing. I’m sure he could even make copy of your Jade Kingdom weapons, like that shuriken if you need.”

“Oh, uh...”

Mogrim and Moen smiled kindly at Habotan, letting her know that she could come to them whenever she needed, and then went on their way.

“...”

“Mogrim’s a weapons specialist, which is how he could tell you had some hidden in your clothes,” I told her.

“And Moen’s the captain of the guard. Being able to spot when someone’s carrying a concealed weapon is a big part of his job,” Tisse added.

We’d both tried to reassure Habotan, because we could tell what she’d been thinking since meeting Miss Offler.

“...This one is weak, is she not?”

She looked me in the eyes as she asked the question, and I could hear the frailty in her voice.



It was the afternoon by the time we got back to Red & Rit’s Apothecary.

“You must be tired. Here, have some herbal tea.”

Habotan was seated at the table, and I set a cup down in front of her.

“It’s made from flowers picked in the mountains nearby.”

“...Thank you, sir.”

“And some for you two as well.”

“Thanks, Big Brother.”

“Thank you.”

I set cups down in front of Ruti and Tisse, then placed one on the table for myself and sat down. The tea had a nice fragrance, if I did say so myself.

“Sir Red,” Habotan began, eyes glued to her cup. “There is a question this one would like to ask, since you crossed blades with her.”

“Go ahead.”

“Is this one weak?”

“No, you’re not.”

I meant that.

“However, just today, this one met three people stronger than herself. Including the elderly lady from the spice shop yesterday...and all of you from the ship, that is nine people.”

“True.”

“Sir Moen is the captain of the guard, so that is understandable. However, Madam Offler is a tailor, Sir Mogrim a blacksmith, and you and Sir Rit are apothecaries... Yet this one is weaker than all of you.”

“If you could recognize Madam Offler’s true strength, then that’s something.”

“Even though this one has been entrusted with such an important mission, she has not the strength to complete it... It is shameful and distressing.”

Habotan had been doing everything she could to fulfill her duty, despite the fact that her master had collapsed and left her all alone in a foreign land. Her experiences up until now had strengthened that willpower, so she definitely

couldn't be called weak. She'd worked hard to become this strong at such a young age.

When faced with uncertainty, the only thing a person could rely on was their experience that came through hard work. But right now, Habotan was starting to doubt the effort she'd put in.

It was understandable; that's what happens when you step out into the wider world.

"It's not something you should tell other people, but before she came to Zoltan, Madam Offler was an enslaved gladiator."

"A gladiator?!"

"Yeah, she fought in a colosseum in a big city, won her freedom, and kept on winning. She was a champion known as the strongest gladiator, 'Offler the Red Wolf.'"

"She sounds like an incredible person."

"I don't know why she quit, but her life surely hasn't been uneventful. It makes sense she's so strong."

"I...see."

"As for Mogrim and the old lady at the spice shop, they've got their own stories about how they've got to where they are, too."

"So they aren't normal people either?"

"Same goes for everyone."

Everybody had their own story, filled with struggles they'd overcome and strengths they'd developed.

My Guide had the unique feature that let me start out at level 30 from birth, but if I had just relied on that, I would surely have died somewhere along the way.

"What you're lacking is experience, which only makes sense considering you're still a child."

"...I see."

“Even so, you have something you need to accomplish... That is your struggle.”

“Yes...”

“Basically, what I’m trying to say is...”

I took a sip of tea, and Habotan took a sip, too.

“Delicious,” she said, her expression softening.

“Do what you can do now, and rely on others for what you can’t. You can’t win against an opponent who’s too strong for you, just like how you can’t do something that’s impossible for you. It’ll help if you think of it like that.”

“Yes, sir.”

Some things were out of reach no matter how hard a person tried. The way I saw it, the most important thing was to not give up hope and not stop moving forward when that happened.

“In any case, it doesn’t look like we’ll be fighting anytime soon. No need to worry about how strong you are for the time being, right?”

I smiled, and Habotan smiled just a little bit, too.



“So, what is your plan for tomorrow and beyond?” Tisse asked, having finished her tea.

“Tomorrow?” Habotan crossed her arms and pondered the question. “This one was taught that, at a time like this, it is best to go to taverns to gather information.”

“Well, that is pretty standard.”

Going to a bar and asking if Ruti the Hero was in Zoltan? That wasn’t likely to get much in the way of results.

“Have you ever tried going up to a stranger in a tavern and starting a conversation?” Ruti asked with a hint of concern.

Habotan’s eyes darted around anxiously. “This one shall do her best!”

Yeah, that was the sort of thing I used to hear a lot back when I was a captain

in the Bahamut Knights. That was what subordinates said right before they messed something up.

“You should rehearse what you’re going to say,” Ruti suggested.

“Rehearse?”

“Yeah.”

It was unusual for Ruti to suggest something like that, but it seemed like she couldn’t just sit back and watch Habotan flounder.

“I’ll be a patron at a tavern, so try talking to me.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Oh, diving right in, I see.

Tisse and I quickly moved our seats and watched.

Ruti held her cup to her mouth and made an audible “glug, glug” sound with her mouth, pretending to drink beer.

Adorable.

“Umm,” Habotan spoke up.

“Glug, glug.” Ruti continued to pretend to drink, acting like she hadn’t noticed.

“Uhh... Do you know anything about Ruti the Hero?”

Straight to the point!

Tisse was grimacing a bit...though it was just barely noticeable.

“No idea. And who are you, anyway?” Ruti answered coldly. Well, it *would* have been cold if she hadn’t sounded like she was reading from a script.

“I am Habotan. Thank you for your help.” Habotan nodded, then looked at us almost proudly.

What’re we gonna do with her? That was even worse than I was expecting.

“Habotan,” Ruti said, setting her cup down on the table and turning to face her.

“Y-yes? H-how was that?”

“Terrible,” Ruti answered mercilessly.

“Wh-what?! Did this one not properly ask the question?”

Habotan looked stunned. Apparently, that had merited passing marks on her internal evaluation.

“If that’s your approach, no one will take any interest in you.”

“Ugh.”

“One of the fundamentals of trying to get information out of a person is to get them to take an interest in you. If the information you’re after is something that might come up in casual conversation, then that can be enough.”

“Ohh!”

“Just now, you didn’t talk about yourself at all. Most people will be wary of a stranger walking up and asking them a question, so they usually won’t give you a proper answer.”

“Ugh, then what should I do?”

“I’ll give you an example,” Ruti said, then switched places with Habotan.

“Hey, Tisse.”

“I am aware of what you’re thinking, Red... You wonder whether Ruti can truly provide an example of this sort of thing, correct?”

“Yeah, she can definitely make a case logically, or raise morale with her charisma, but I can’t imagine Ruti chatting up a stranger to get information.”

“Nor can I. Ms. Ruti is excellent at gathering information, yet I cannot recall her ever doing anything other than use her imposing force as the Hero to terrify people into talking...”

Tisse and I watched on with a hint of unease.

“Glug, glug.”

Ruti unhurriedly approached as Habotan mimicked her pretending to drink beer.

“Pardon me. Hey, how are ya. It’s hot today, isn’t it. I’m parched like you wouldn’t believe just from walking around outside. Give me a cold beer, and one for my friend here, too. Hooo, that’s good. I’m Ruti, by the way. What’s your name.”

That was almost hilariously flat!

Tisse and I both froze in shock.

“I’m Habotan. Thank you for the beer.”

“No problem. Cheers, pal. I like your style. Want another round?”

“Yes, I would.”

“All right, hey chief, another round on me. By the way, I’ve been trying to find someone. You heard anything about a hero called Ruti?”

“Ahhh! That way it feels natural to answer!”

“Mhm, like that.”

Well, the performance hadn’t exactly been convincing, but the basic idea was pretty good.

“Regardless, it would probably be better if you or I handled these sorts of inquiries,” said Tisse.

“In Ruti’s case, it’d probably just be better for her to listen in on other people’s conversations.”

Ruti’s ears and her ability to process information were top tier. She could eat in a tavern while listening to a dozen or more people talking at the same time, and not only distinguish their voices but remember what they all said. When we were traveling, I would usually do the talking, while Ruti watched to see if anyone reacted to my information gathering.

She had exactly the right skill set for the job.

“Do you think it would be better if we helped train her?” Tisse asked.

“...No, it should be fine to leave it to Ruti for now.”

There was nothing wrong with the core concept of Ruti’s plan.

“May I sit here?” Habotan was practicing.

“Be more familiar.”

“Mind if I sit here?”

“You’re still a kid; take advantage of that. You’ll be less suspicious if you sound more like a child.”

“Hey, mister, can I sit here?”

Ruti and Habotan worked hard to polish their information-gathering skills.

At the very least, Habotan would have enough practice that she wouldn’t have any trouble with the thugs from the Thieves Guild. And there wasn’t any information about Ruti the Hero in Zoltan, so teaching her high-level techniques wouldn’t matter.

It would be better in the long term for her to think things through with Ruti and figure it out, rather than have me and Tisse tell her the answer from the start.

“We should just sit back and watch,” I said to Tisse.

“Right.”

It was good practice for Habotan, but it was also good for Ruti to have this sort of an interaction with someone. She was going out of her way to help a child she’d only just met. Ruti’s world was getting bigger and bigger.

The lonely girl she used to be was nowhere to be found anymore.

And that, more than anything else, made me happy.



Night fell, and Habotan slept soundly.

After all their practice, she and Ruti had apparently gone to a tavern in the neighborhood to run a live drill. While she hadn’t found out anything about Ruti the Hero, people had complimented her, given her advice, and doted on her some, and Habotan looked a bit more self-confident talking about it afterward.

Sitting next to her, Ruti had looked just as proud.

“Good work today,” Rit said, handing me a glass of amber liquid.

“Thanks. This smells nice.”

It was mead—the drink we’d had when Rit and I were first reunited. It brought back fond memories.

“You handled the shop alone almost the whole day. You must be tired.”

“Yeah, today was pretty busy, since the weather was a bit cooler.”

“It feels like fall’s starting to get a bit closer, though I’m sure the heat will stay around for a while longer.”

“It probably won’t really start to feel like fall until next month.”

I took a sip of the mead. “That’s really nice.”

“I’ll have some, too.”

Rit and I faced each other, sipping our mead.

A soothing moment passed in silence.

“How was she?”

“Who, Habotan? ...Hmmm.”

That was a difficult question to answer.

“Honestly, I would never guess she was a ninja who risked her life to cross the ocean.”

Having spent both yesterday and today with Habotan, what I’d sensed from her most of all was her apprehension and curiosity being in an unfamiliar place, and her joy at making new acquaintances in me and Ruti.

They were completely normal reactions, at least if I didn’t think about the circumstances she’d found herself in.

“But when I think about that warrior’s tenacity...”

The warrior who’d grabbed onto Tisse and left behind his message even as he died had had such a powerful determination. In all my adventures, I’d never seen anything like it.

“A hope to save the world, huh?”

Habotan’s determination to do her best for Torahime’s sake was clear, too. It

was commendable even... But she didn't act like someone in danger. If you were on a mission to save the world, then wouldn't that mean the world might be destroyed if you failed? Watching Habotan, I couldn't feel any sort of impending sense of doom like that.

"Well, it's possible Habotan herself doesn't fully know about the mission they're on."

"That would fill in a few of the gaps."

Like Rit said, if Habotan only knew that their mission was to search for the Hero, then that would explain why she lacked that sense of urgency.

"But what do you think they meant by a 'hope to save the world'?"

"It makes the most sense to think they're talking about the threat of the demon lord's armies..."

Until recently, on this side of the Wall, saving the world had meant driving back the demon lord's armies. But right now, humanity's forces had the upper hand. Here, the world had already been saved.

"Maybe in the East, 'the world' means all the countries on their side of the Wall at the End of the World, just like it means all the countries in the west to us."

"But in that case, it would be her own country in danger, so Habotan should at least understand the situation, right?"

"Which doesn't make sense with how carefree she seems."

Hmmm.

"Maybe something big is happening that we don't know about."

"And they need Ruti for that."

"If they know Hero Van won't be able to handle it, then they must also know about the Hero blessing."

"But the point of the Hero blessing is to recreate the soul of the first Hero. And the first Hero fought the demon lord, so if they're talking about saving the world, then they must be talking about fighting the demon lord, right?"

“The Hero might be the strongest blessing in the world, but there shouldn’t be any threat that specifically requires the Hero to counter it.”

Demis’s goal in creating the Hero blessing was to recreate the first Hero’s soul, which was why the Hero was the strongest blessing.

It went without saying that there were lots of situations that could be resolved with that ultimate power, and there were plenty of problems I couldn’t fix that Ruti could handle easily. But even the ultimate power was still just power. Hero Van, Danan, Esta, mighty military forces like Prince Salius’s Veronian navy, and my old squad the Bahamut Knights—those were all other forms of power.

There shouldn’t be anything that specifically required Ruti’s help—it shouldn’t matter so much where the power to resolve it came from.

“Well, maybe that’s something only we understand because we actually got to meet Demis and speak to the first Hero.”

“It could be that they also have some sort of prophecy in the Jade Kingdom, just like how we have the prophecy of the birth of the Hero here in Avalonia.”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t think about it too logically.”

Ruti the Hero was the only one who could defeat the demon lord. It had to be Ruti, because the prophecy foretold it. Maybe that was all it was.

“In that case,” Rit said, “it might be best to make them realize that their best option is to give up on whatever prophecy they have and search for a more logical solution.”

“Maybe it would be best, after all, to send them to where Van is. Heroes from all across the continent are gathered on the front line there, so those two might change their mind after seeing such a show of force.”

“I don’t know. Lady Torahime’s determination might cause that to backfire on us.”

Perhaps Rit was right. Determination could also narrow a person’s vision.

“Do you think Habotan would be able to convince her?”

“It’d be best if they just told us what’s going on over there.”

“True, but they don’t seem to want to, and they don’t fully trust us yet either.”

“Yeah, they haven’t exactly been forthcoming.”

It might sound strange after all the investigating we’d been doing, but using tricks and techniques to get information out of people and getting them to trust and confide in you were two very different things.

I wouldn’t pull Ruti into a battle she didn’t want to fight ever again, but if there was something we could do for Habotan and Torahime here in Zoltan, then I wanted to do whatever I could to help.

“Hm?” I sensed someone outside, and I went to the door to open it.

“Evening.”

“Good evening, Yarandralla.”

Yarandralla was standing in the doorway...

“And good evening to you too, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

...with Mister Crawly Wawly atop her shoulder.

He looked a little tired. Instead of his usually cheerful wave, he just shook his body a bit.

“Were you out at sea this late?”

“There was something that kept bothering me.”

The two of them had gone out to sea to inspect the Jade Kingdom ship and were here now to report back.

“Come in. If you want, I can make you a light snack to eat.”

“Please. I’m famished.”

Mister Crawly Wawly waved his front legs weakly, too.

It looked like I’d be better off whipping them up a proper dinner, not just a light snack.



“Here you go, Capital-style spaghetti *aglio e olio* with lots of bacon.”

It was a dish of spaghetti tossed in olive oil and garlic, with plenty of cheese and thick-cut bacon on top, and a garnish of sauteed spinach.

“Tastes great!”

Yarandrala had a big smile on her face as she ate.

I’d just thrown it together with what I had in the pantry, so I was glad to see she was happy with it.

Mister Crawly Wawly was hungrily sucking on a cloth soaked in sugar water.

“Ahhh, that really hit the spot. Today was so exhausting. I spent the whole day just diving down to the ship, going over everything we found back on the boat, recasting the spells, then diving back down again.”

“Sounds like you had a long day.”

It had been tiring enough just going down once the other day.

“But the ocean floor is full of adventures. When I finish my ship, maybe I’ll travel all around the world exploring the bottom of the ocean.”

“Adding a new hobby already?”

She really was something.

“Anyway, since you came here this late, I guess it’s safe to assume you figured something out?”

“Yes, a few things.”

Yarandrala finished the last bite of her pasta and put her fork down on the table.

“First of all, the ship.”

She spread out a plan of the Jade Kingdom ship. It looked like she’d drawn it herself, and it was easy to read—which was good for someone interested in shipbuilding.

“And this is the part that was damaged,” she said, spreading out another sheet of paper.

This one’s a sketch of the ship?

Looking at the sketch, it almost hurt to see how badly the ship had been damaged. It was a miracle it had stayed afloat as long as it had.

“There’s no way it should’ve stayed on the water.”

“Huh?” Rit cocked her head beside me. “But we literally saw it floating, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did, and there were no imminent signs of it sinking when we boarded...but no ship should be able to float with holes here.”

Yarandrala pointed at two specific points of damage on the ship, then used the blueprint to explain in more detail.

“...You’re right. Holes in those two spots would be fatal. Water would pour into the hold and sink the ship immediately.”

“Which means the ship must have stayed afloat because of a blessing, either in the form of a spell or a skill.”

Rit looked unconvinced.

“The most likely explanation is magic. A powerful spell can make heavy objects float, just like how Leonor raised the *Vendidad*...but if such a powerful spell were being used, there’s no way we all would have missed it, right?”

“Yeah.”

The more powerful a spell, the more difficult it became to hide any trace of the mana used to cast it.

Eremite had slipped past us on the island by intentionally using weak magic to evade detection, but even with her level of skill, Rit and Yarandrala would have noticed right away the moment she used a more powerful spell.

“I agree. I don’t think magic is the explanation either,” Yarandrala said with a nod.

“Which means our only other option is a skill...”

I crossed my arms and sank deep in thought. Was that possible with any of the blessings and skills I knew?

“A Sailor blessing’s inherent skill has something similar...”

There was a skill that allowed someone to control a ship like an extension of their own body, adjusting the tilt of the ship to make it harder for water to get in and avoid sinking that way.

“As far as I know, there isn’t any skill that can keep a ship like this afloat when it’s physically impossible like this.”

Unlike magic, there were limits to skills.

Even if a skill could make a ship move seemingly against the laws of nature, it couldn’t stop water pouring in through a hole beneath the surface and keep it afloat.

“But we saw the ship floating.”

“What about a magic item?” Rit asked.

“Ah, I also investigated along that line of thought, but couldn’t find any trace of something like that.”

“Hrm, in that case, there’s only one other possibility I can think of.”

“I bet we’re probably thinking the same thing.”

Rit and Yarandralla both furrowed their brows. I imagine I had the same look on my face, too.

“There may have been a species other than humans or elves aboard that ship. One with the power to keep a sinking ship adrift out at sea for a long time...”

“If it was a dragon, there would be traces of their magic power, and a fey would have left spirit power.”

“There are a handful of species of giant that can do something like that...but giants are, well, giant. They wouldn’t have been able to sail on that ship, and there’s no way we wouldn’t have noticed one if it had been close enough to the ship to affect it.”

“Which just leaves one race.”

“In other words, the only possibility seems to be that there was a demon on the ship,” I said, and the two of them nodded.



Demons.

That was the broad term for every race with only one inherent blessing. Demon blessings also never appeared in any other races.

For a monster that had a normal blessing and natural abilities, one could study others with the same blessing to learn which abilities came from the blessing and which did not.

But demon blessings were set in stone. The only way to investigate one was by working directly with that particular demon, which meant that there were still major gaps in our knowledge of demon blessings.

“Desmond of the Earth was an earth demon; he could control the ground freely without using magic. I don’t know if that was a natural ability of his or a skill, but it wouldn’t be all that strange for there to be a demon out there that could keep a ship afloat without using magic.”

“Which brings us to our next question: who was the demon?” Rit said gravely.

“Yarandralla, did the number of bodies check out?”

“Yes. There were as many corpses on the seabed as there were when we boarded, and they were all human.”

“...I see.”

“It’s possible the demon was hiding when we boarded the ship, then slipped away after we took Torahime and Habotan, leaving the ship to sink beneath the waves when it got far enough way.”

“Yeah, that’s not impossible, but...”

If that were the case, and it had protected Torahime and Habotan up until that point, it didn’t make sense for the demon to leave the two of them in the hands of a bunch of complete strangers like us.

“The most likely possibility is that Torahime is the demon.”

“...Yeah.”

“When we found her, she was emaciated. She looked like someone who’d survived on tenacity alone for ages without any food or water.”

“I know what you’re getting at, Red. Compared to Torahime, Habotan was relatively healthy.”

“Yeah, Habotan was malnourished from rationing, but she’d had enough food and water for it not to be life-threatening.”

“Even if there had been some reason to prioritize keeping Habotan alive, the difference between the two of them was far too extreme.”

“Torahime must have been so emaciated not because she was starving, but because she’d been constantly using her strength to keep the ship afloat.”

“That makes the most sense.”

We all fell silent for a few moments.

Back when I was a knight, I would have been convinced already. But as the man I was now, Red from Zoltan, it pained me to doubt Habotan’s earnestness.

Still, we had to seriously consider it.

“Let’s not make any rash decisions. At the very least, I don’t have any reason to believe that Habotan or Torahime mean to harm anyone at the moment.”

“Yes, we should be cautious, but I don’t think we need to act on this immediately.”

Our basic plan was unchanged: help them however we could from within Zoltan while keeping Ruti’s secret.

“It may not change our plan...but it sure does raise a lot of complicated questions about what that ship was doing here.”

“Right. It’s not just the Jade Kingdom’s plans we have to consider now, but those of the demon as well.”

Torahime and Habotan had come from the Jade Kingdom in search of Ruti the Hero to save the world. But now, it turned out that Torahime was actually a demon.

“Apparently, in the East, there are Tengu demons that do good as well as bad. Maybe Torahime is another ‘good demon,’” Rit mused.

“I think those are probably just a fairy tale.”

I smiled a little at the mention of Tengu demons.

A while back, I'd helped a rookie adventurer out in the mountains. She'd mistaken me for a Tengu demon, which had started a rumor, and to this day there were still a handful of adventurers out there who believed a Tengu demon roamed the mountains.

"They say that Demis assigned demons the role of being the 'evil race,' but..."

"But it's Demis, right?"

"Yeah."

If you asked me whether Demis was a good god, my answer would be a definite "no." Meaning that just because he'd made demons to be a race for evil, that didn't necessarily mean they all were.

"All right, so to sum things up, the Jade Kingdom ship reached Zoltan with the help of a demon's power," said Yarandralla.

"And it is highly likely that demon is Torahime," I agreed.

"Torahime is searching for Ruti the Hero. And she was clear that Hero Van wouldn't be able to help them, despite also being a Hero."

"If Torahime's a demon, it wouldn't be surprising for her to know something about the Hero blessing that regular humans don't."

"And right now, she is entrusting the search of Ruti the Hero to Habotan while she recovers in the hospital."

"I went to check on her in the hospital before coming here," said Yarandralla.

"That's good to know. How was she?"

"She seems to be resting properly and recovering. Today, she even managed to go for a short walk."

Yarandralla shared her observations of Torahime and what she'd learned from the staff at the hospital. She had been thorough asking around, but nothing had really stuck out to her as unnatural.

"We saw with our own eyes just how weak she was, and whatever her goal is, it'll take some time before she can move around... The biggest question then is

whether she belongs to the demon lord's armies or not."

"Do you think they've figured out Ruti is in Zoltan?"

"Shisandan was a general in the demon lord's armies, and he knew. We killed him, but it's possible he'd already reported Ruti's whereabouts."

"Shisandan..." Rit's face clouded over when she heard that name.

Shisandan was the Asura demon who had killed Rit's master. Her old enemy.

"Do you think he really is dead?"

"...I checked his corpse to be sure. But we killed him in Loggervia too, and he was still alive somehow."

If that hadn't been enough to kill him the first time, then the second time might not be enough either. And if he was alive, then it was safe to assume they knew Ruti was here.

Yet the demon lord's armies hadn't made any sort of move against Ruti after that battle.

"It doesn't make sense for the demon lord's armies to try to do something about Ruti now, after all this time."

"True... So in the end, even if our theory is right and Torahime is a demon, we can't really work out anything more from that," Rit said, raising her hands.

"Yeah, we'll just have to wait and see for now."

That was all we could do for the time being.

"I'll fill in Tisse later, but can you keep an eye on Torahime, Yarandralla?"

"Sure. And you all watch Habotan."

"Yeah... It's not like a fight is inevitable, so hopefully we can just peacefully go our separate ways."

Picturing Habotan's face, I couldn't help but hope things would turn out that way.

Prologue

The Last of the Four Kings

Flamberge Kingdom, on the western coast of the continent, had been the first nation to fall after the demon lord's armies invaded from the sea. Ever since, the former Flamberge Royal Palace had been transformed into a castle of darkness, serving as the command post for the forces of the demon lord.

"Altra."

In the bowels of that dark castle, Altra, the demon lord's heavenly king of water, sat on the floor of what had once been a dungeon cell.

"How long do you intend to hide away here?"

"Dreadonna."

The voice belonged to his fellow heavenly king, Dreadonna of the Flame. Desmond of the Earth and Gandor of the Wind had already been slain by Ruti the Hero.

"The situation has worsened while you were in here. The territory under our control has shrunk to where it was right after we started the war."

"Hmph. It has no bearing on me. I was stripped of my title after falling to that masked knight."

"Your successor is incompetent."

"What of it? The four heavenly kings are chosen from our four tribes. No demon would obey an Asura calling themselves the king of wind or water."

Vidosra, the new heavenly king of wind, and Madhu, who had been named heavenly king of water one month ago, were both Asuras; they did not have any special powers over the elements but had simply been appointed as commanders.

To demons, with their strict belief in the meaning of blessings, that was

unacceptable.

“Haha, too true. The demon lord’s armies will lose this war.”

“...Get to your point.”

“I’ve located the princess.”

“What?!” Altra exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

“As your brother-in-arms, who has sworn loyalty not to this heretic but to the rightful demon lord, I have a request for you.”

Dreadonna bowed deeply to Altra.

“Fight with me against the demon lord, for the sake of the future.”

“Of course. Every one of us—the fallen earth and wind kings, too—have endured our humiliation all for the sake of this day.”

“Thank you, my friend. I will go to rescue the princess.”

“Then I shall challenge the demon lord as a distraction.”

“No, I want you to come and slay me.”

“What do you mean?” Altra gasped.

“I want you to kill me and everyone in the rescue squad. We cannot allow for even the possibility of our memories being extracted through magic.”

“I see...”

“I’ve prepared a stand-in for the princess. We will make it look as if she died in one of my attacks, and that charred corpse should buy enough time for you to escape. You will protect the princess and take her someplace safe.”

“Is any place safe from Demon Lord Taraxon?”

“Only one! With the Hero who can stand against the Demon Lord!”

“You don’t mean—”

“You must head for Zoltan! There, in that frontier land, Ruti the Hero lives in hiding!” Dreadonna said, showing Altra a map. “After the battle with Desmond, the Hero’s brother, a knight, was banished from his party. That was where everything began...and this, too, feels like fate. The Hero went to a land far

removed from the front line and humanity has defeated the demon lord's armies without her. Desmond and Gandor died to give us this information, so make good use of it."

"Dreadonna..."

"This is our will! You must carry on in our deaths!"

"I promise... I will see this through."

"I'm counting on you, my friend."

Altra grabbed the other demon's hand with a look of grim determination, and Dreadonna flashed him a broad, white-fanged grin.

Chapter 4

The Demon Lord's Daughter

The following day, I was walking around Zoltan with Habotan again.

"The one-year anniversary of Sirs Red and Rit reuniting is wonderful."

"Thanks. Sorry for dragging you along with me."

"Not at all! This one was uneasy alone, so it was a pleasure."

I was out with Habotan today to look for an idea for Red & Rit's Apothecary's one-year anniversary and a present for Rit. Of course, that was just an excuse; the real goal was to keep an eye on Habotan...but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't struggling to find something, so hoped accompanying Habotan in her mission would lead me to a flash of inspiration. I particularly wanted to figure out what to get Rit for her present.

"I'm here to get some ideas for presents, so I won't really be able to help out that much. I can still mediate if any sort of issues pop up though, so go ahead and do the best you can on your own."

"Yes, sir!" Habotan chirped back.

The energy in her response reminded me of my subordinates from when I was a knight.

"Where are you going today?"

"Last night, Sir Payen, the metalworker, told me that there was a ship coming in to port today."

"Ohh?"

"Apparently, there is a manor being built in central Zoltan, and a large amount of lumber and marble is being brought in for it."

"I see."

I'd been a bit worried after yesterday, but from the sound of it, she'd managed to get some proper leads.

"Not bad. Look at you."

"Hehe, thank you."

It looked like chatting up the locals with Ruti last night had given her some confidence, because Habotan looked more composed than she had before.

...Though it was times like these when you had to be most careful.



"What's with this pipsqueak?!"

We'd found ourselves in a tavern in the harbor district that was popular with sailors, and a man with a stubbly beard had just growled at Habotan. She looked perplexed, and I thought he might have scared her, but instead she just seemed to brush it off, which made the sailor even more annoyed.

"Talk about bad luck," I muttered.

About thirty minutes after she'd started talking to people, the sailor had suddenly erupted at Habotan when she approached him. Her opening ice-breaker hadn't even been that bad.

"He just doesn't like kids."

Everyone had a different perspective. I happened to like kids, but there were many people who didn't, and some, like this sailor, seemed to hate them wholesale.

The man's companions seemed unimpressed with his attitude, but not enough to defend Habotan, either. So how would she react?

If she glanced in my direction looking for help, then I'd step in, but until she did, I figured it'd be better to let her try to handle it.

"I'm here to drink, not to look at some brat's stupid face."

"Very well," Habotan said, then covered her face with both hands. "Now you shan't see it."

The other sailors burst out laughing at the adorable comeback, but the hostile

man's drunken face turned redder, and he flashed his blackened, cavity-pocked teeth in a menacing scowl.

"You makin' fun of me, you little shit?!"

His blessing level wasn't that high, but he was used to brawling. Even though he was dealing with a kid, he clenched his fists tightly and started to swing down with a heavy punch. He didn't seem to care at all that it might actually kill her.

Habotan stood there unmoving, still covering her face.

"Sorry, thanks!" I grabbed a bottle of wine from a nearby table and threw it at the sailor's feet.

"Woah!"

Stepping on the bottle, he fell to the ground with a loud crash. All the sailors around him burst into loud laughter at the comical sight.

"S-s-son of a bitch!"

Standing up, he glared at the laughing sailors with bloodshot eyes.

"Which of you bastards did that?! I'll murder the lot of ya!"

"Eh? We're sick of watching you treat people like shit!"

Just like that, the sailors got up and started brawling. The other patrons started cheering, while the barkeep scrunched up his face in annoyance and started clearing the counter of things that might get knocked off.

Brawls were just part and parcel for a tavern in the harbor district.

"Sorry about that. Get yourself another drink," I said, putting a silver coin down on the table from which I'd borrowed the wine bottle.

"Don't worry about it, we got a good show for it. Thanks for the laughs."

The guest at the table raised a glass to me.

Some other sailors had moved away from the counter, so Habotan wouldn't get caught up in the brawl. I could see her talking to them, and it looked like she was learning something of interest.

Even with a fight going on right beside her, she looked unperturbed.

That was a ninja for you.



It was afternoon by the time we left the tavern. Walking beside me, Habotan ate a meat skewer the sailors had bought for her back at the bar.

“Ah, did you want some, Sir Red?”

“I’m fine, I ate back at the tavern.”

“Really?”

I’d undersold my hunger as a matter of pride, but I probably should’ve had a proper meal, too. A bit of wine and cheese wasn’t enough for a proper lunch.

She bit into the skewer again with gusto.

“Sorry about earlier.”

“Hm?” She looked up with a mouthful of food. “What about?”

“You could’ve dealt with an opponent of his level without any issue, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I knew that, but still couldn’t help but get involved. I thought you weren’t going to dodge.”

Habotan had been covering her face with both hands at the time, so I’d thought she hadn’t been able to see it.

“It is fine. This one would not die from a punch like that.”

“...So that was what you were thinking?” I said, frowning slightly.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, that’s certainly one way of looking at it.”

If you’re up against someone who can’t cause you any trouble, then just endure it. That way, you won’t cause any unnecessary disturbances or provoke them further. It wasn’t necessarily wrong to think like that when gathering information.

But...

"It's just a me problem," I said.

"Sir Red?"

"I didn't want to see you getting hit."

That was why I'd intervened.

"I-is that so...?"

She looked a little surprised, then fell silent.

This is a bit awkward...

"Ah, Habotan," I said, raising my voice slightly. "It looks like some sailors are running a shop over there."

I pointed to where a group of sailors was sitting in front of tables full of merchandise, calling out to passersby.

"A sailors' shop?"

"Yeah, they buy things in one port and sell them in another. It's a side gig for sailors. Do they not do that sort of thing in the Jade Kingdom?"

"I couldn't say. I don't really know much about ships."

From what I read, ninjas trained in the mountains, so I guess they didn't go to the ports that much.

"Want to go see?"

"Yes, sir."

Getting closer, the sailors immediately started calling out to us.

"Hey, there, why not get something for your daughter? I've got a cute li'l pendant for sale!"

Daughter, huh...?

That was even harder to square than sister.

"Just kidding." The sailor laughed it off. He obviously didn't think much about what he said when he called out to customers.

"That would not suit this one."

“Really? I think it would...but I guess the design might be a bit too childish. What about that one?” I pointed to a silver pendant with red jewel in the center. It looked like a ruby, but it was just a red spinel; cheaper than a ruby, but beautiful enough to be mistaken for one.

“Something so fair would not suit this one, either.”

It didn’t sound like she was just being humble—she really believed it.

“I think it’d look nice on you, though.”

“This one would be better.”

“Hm? Which one?”

She was looking at a pendant at the edge of the display. It had a black jewel set in the center of what looked like thorns.

...Looking closer, I saw a red eye floating in the jewel.

“Hey, this is cursed!” I shouted at the sailor, who recoiled in fear.

He was selling it even though he knew it was cursed?! What was wrong with him?!

“I have to. I bought it at such a high price...”

“What made you think that was a good idea? Just look at it!” I fired back in exasperation.

“How much is it?”

““You wanna buy it?!”” the sailor and I both shouted in surprise.

“You did hear me say it’s cursed, right?” I said. “We’d have to analyze it to know more, but it’s bound to have some sort of malicious effect.”

“You have quite the discerning eye, missy! For you, I’d be willing to take thirty percent off!”

“You just got caught trying to sell cursed goods, and you’re still trying to foist it on her?!”

“A man’s gotta make a living!”

As I argued back and forth with the sailor, Habotan took the pendant and put

it on without any hesitation.

“I am strong against curses,” she said with a smile.

Ah, she probably has a blessing that can use cursed power.

“All right, it’s all yours now, missy!”

The sailor sounded ecstatic as he took Habotan’s money. I guess, if she was fine with it being cursed, then there was nothing else for me to say.

“A pendant, huh?”

Should I get necklace for Rit’s present? No, I gave her one before already.

“What sort of gifts do women in the Jade Kingdom like?”

“Uh, ummm, this one is not especially versed in such things.”

Right, since she was a ninja and still just a child. With all her training, she probably didn’t know much about that sort of stuff.

“Oh, but people tend to enjoy combs and the like.”

“Right, so something useful but fashionable.”

Rit’s beautiful hair came to mind. I didn’t like the expectant look on the sailor’s face, but there was a nice comb made from a sea drake’s horn among his goods.

...Looking at the price, he’d probably mistaken it for one made from whale bone.

“I’ll take this.”

“Hehe, thank you kindly!”

I felt a little bit bad, but that was just business.

“How ’bout this to go with the comb?” he said, showing me a small jar. He opened the lid, and it let out a pleasant smell. “It’s fragrant oil for putting in your hair. I’m sure the wife’ll love it.”

“Hmm, it is a nice scent... But sorry, I can’t give her something to put in her hair without knowing what’s in it.”

“If you say that, then you won’t be able to get her anything.”

“I’m an apothecary. I can make it myself to give her,” I told him, taking the comb I’d bought.



Evening had fallen, and we’d finished visiting all the noteworthy taverns.

“This one failed to discover anything...” Habotan said, her shoulders slumped dejectedly.

It made sense. After all, Ruti came to Zoltan without anyone knowing, so there was no way a sailor who was just passing through would know anything.

“Even so, it looks like you found out a fair bit about Ruti the Hero before coming here. I’m surprised how much information on her made it over the Wall at the End of the World.”

When she’d been talking to people, well-known stories of Ruti’s adventures had often come up, but Habotan had never looked surprised.

“I heard much from Lady Torahime. Ruti the Hero truly is an incredible person.”

Habotan’s eyes shined in awe.

Torahime, huh...

“I was thinking of going to visit Lady Torahime after this. Do you want to come?”

“A visit? It is possible to see her?”

“Ah, right, I didn’t tell you about visitations, did I?”

It was just common sense to me, so I hadn’t thought to mention something that important.

“Sorry.”

“Not at all! This one would like to go and visit Lady Torahime!”

“All right, then let’s go now, before it gets too late.”

Just then...

“So this is where you were!!!”

We heard an angry shout.

Turning around, we saw the child-hating sailor from earlier glaring at us, shoulders heaving.

“You threw that bottle at me, you bastard! I’ll get you for that!”

“You’re still bent out of shape over that?”

Talk about a petty guy.

“After a bar fight, don’t people normally just drown their sorrows in beer?”

“Shut up!!!”

It was a pain in the ass, and we could’ve just run away, but a guy this tenacious would probably look for us all over Zoltan and end up at our shop.

I guess there’s nothing else to do but face him...

“Sir Red, please let this one take care of him,” Habotan said, standing in front of me.

“No, he’s after me this time, so I’ll do it.”

“All the more reason. Please allow this one to repay you for your help earlier in the tavern!”

“Hrmm... Sure.”

She might be a child, but Habotan was still a warrior filled with a sense of duty. It made sense she might not want to be in someone’s debt.

“Hehe, perfect. I was wanting to beat the shit outta that kid, too.”

“He’s a dangerous one.”

Considering what sort of trouble he might cause in the future, it might be better to put him out of commission here and now.

“Habotan, I know he’s a bad guy, but still, don’t kill him.”

“Understood, sir!”

She’d started to reach for a shuriken, but I nipped that in the bud.

She’s pretty dangerous herself.

“Can you fight barehanded?”

“Of course! You needn’t trouble yourself!”

Habotan assumed an unusual fighting stance. Her hand wasn’t clenched into a fist, but it wasn’t exactly open either. Her fingers were bent like claws pointing at the opponent, and her legs were straight, raising her center of gravity.

Was that some sort of Jade-Kingdom-style martial art?

“I’m gonna teach ya to leave us adults the hell alone!”

The sailor raised his fist and charged in, showing no caution toward her stance. Even with the large sailor charging at her, Habotan didn’t move—until the moment he got within range, when she swung her right hand down.

“Woah?!”

Latching onto his body with her fingers, she threw him to the ground.

It was a move even I couldn’t have copied. She must’ve really trained her fingers.

“Hah!”

The sailor’s back hit the ground hard, and as he writhed in agony, Habotan slammed her hand into his face. There was a loud cracking sound, and her fingers sank into his cheek. It was a powerful blow.

Seeing her fight, I still couldn’t figure out what her blessing was. It didn’t seem to be Martial Artist, but it had to be something that let her fight barehanded, right?

“Do you still wish to continue?” Habotan asked.

Was she stronger barehanded than with a sword?

“I-I’ll ’ill ’ou.”

He was still champing at the bit...but was it just me, or was there something strange about the way he was acting?

“Habotan, watch out!” I shouted.

I hadn’t noticed the talisman clenched in his left fist.

“Dieeee!!!”

That was a Fire Arrow! The talisman was a consumable magic item that let anyone use the magic sealed within it.

“Crap! He’s using magic in a street fight?!”

I’d underestimated how vicious he was! Using offensive magic in the middle of town was a serious crime. If the guards caught him, that was a definite prison sentence.

I never thought he’d go so far in a fight like this!

“Habotan!”

The flames enveloped her, and I started to run over in a panic.

“You need not worry,” Habotan called out from within the flames. Her voice was no different from usual. “Hah!” With a shout, she dispersed the flames.

“Uh, wha?!”

There wasn’t a single burn mark on Habotan’s clothes or even Habotan herself. Habotan swung her right hand down again at the sailor.

“Gaaah!!!”

There were five clear imprints of her fingers in his chest.

The sailor’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he fainted.



The sun had set, and the light from house lamps spilled out into the darkness as we made our way to the hospital in central Zoltan. It had gotten late by the time we’d handed over the sailor to the guards.

I wondered whether we’d still be allowed to visit.

“Big Brother.”

“Ruti?!”

A familiar voice stopped me in my tracks as we entered the hospital.

“Why are you here?”

“I thought you’d come, though you are a little later than expected.”

“Ahh, we got mixed up with a rowdy sailor. He even resorted to magic, so we turned him over to the guards.”

“What a disaster.”

Ruti gave me a reassuring pat on the head.

It was a little embarrassing, but stopping her would make her sad, and seeing as it didn't really bother me, I just went along with it.

“I arranged for us to visit Lady Torahime.”

“That's just like you, Ruti, taking care of everything.”

She shifted her gaze to Habotan standing behind me.

“Lady Torahime's condition is improving, and it looks like she'll be discharged the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh! Ohh!” Joy filled Habotan's face. “Thank you very much. Let us go to meet her at once!”

“Sure, let's go.”

If we spent any more time talking here, Habotan was so excited she might just run off on her own.

We quickly headed to Torahime's room.

“Oh, Habotan. And Sir Ruti and Sir Red as well. This is a welcome surprise.”

“Lady Torahime!”

Habotan ran over to Torahime's side and smiled happily when her master touched her. There was no sign of the terrible state she'd been in when we first found her; the luster had returned to her skin, and her emaciated figure had filled back out.

Even for someone who'd been healed by Ruti's Healing Hands, to recover this much in just a few days was impressive.

“You seem well.”

“Indeed. It seems the Zoltan air is agreeable to me,” Torahime said with an amicable smile.

“Habotan, have you discovered the location of Ruti the Hero?”

“A-apologies, milady! There are no leads as of yet...”

“I see. Then continue your search as you are.”

“Y-yes, milady!”

Torahime had spoken gently, not wanting to pressure Habotan.

“Habotan has not caused you any trouble, has she?”

“Not at all. In fact, I was assaulted by a hoodlum earlier, and she defeated him and handed him over to the guards.”

“Ohh?” Torahime said with a look of surprise. “Regardless, she is still inexperienced. I expect she may yet cause you some trouble, but I pray you, kindly continue to look after her.”

She sounded more like Habotan’s parent than her master.

Ahh... Has she already achieved her goal?

“Might we speak in private, milady?”

“With me? Very well,” Torahime replied with a small nod. “Habotan, would you step outside for a moment?”

“Hm? Y-yes, milady... Understood.”

Habotan left the room.

“Now then...”

Torahime fixed her gaze on us.

Where to start...?

“Lady Torahime, forgive my abrupt question, but you are not a princess of the Jade Kingdom, are you? You aren’t even human.”

She let out a short sigh.

“The princess is actually Habotan, isn’t she?”

“Yes. I judged it safer to make the enemy believe that I was their target.”

“And you had us protect Habotan for you.”

“You have my deepest apologies for the deception. There was no time to gain your trust if I revealed my identity first... However, I have not come here to hurt anyone. There was simply no other place that possessed strength enough to protect the princess.”

Torahime the demon looked at Ruti.

“Hero Ruti, I beg you, please protect Habetan.”

“Was it when I saved you that you realized?”

“Yes, when you used Healing Hands to heal me. From the information gathered by the demon lord’s armies, I knew that the Hero was in Zoltan, and in that moment I knew you were the true Hero.” Torahime sat up straight and bowed formally. “My apologies for taking advantage of your good intentions. I am ashamed that I cannot properly repay you for all you have done for us.”

“Don’t worry about it. What’s your real name?”

“My name is Altra. I was formerly the heavenly king of water of the demon lord’s armies.”

One of the heavenly kings?!

“I’m surprised to find such a major figure here.”

“When I was defeated by Escarlata, I was stripped of my rank and am no longer even a member of the demon lord’s armies.”

The masked Esta had risen to fame after grievously wounding Altra in battle and forcing him to retreat.

“The defeat of the four heavenly kings has brought the princess to the Hero. I suppose this, too, is fate.” Altra smiled Torahime’s gentle smile.

“Who is this princess? Why would the highest commanders of the demon lord’s armies give up their lives to protect her?” Ruti asked.

Altra was silent for a moment, then rose from the hospital bed.

“You are aware that the current Demon Lord Taraxon is not the rightful Demon Lord chosen by Lord Demis, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“The rightful Raging Demon Lord, Lord Satan, was overthrown by Taraxon, who stole the power of the demon lord and currently leads his armies.”



“What does this have to do with Habotan?”

“...Habotan is a demon princess, the daughter of the demon lord.”

“The demon lord’s daughter...?!” I gasped.

“The Jade Kingdom and the demon lord’s armies have been at war with intermittent periods of ceasefire for many long years. As such, the Jade Kingdom is the human land with the strongest diplomatic relations with the demon lord’s armies. There is enmity between the two, but also an odd sort of cooperation. To borrow a Jade Kingdom turn of phrase, ‘It has been a battle conducted with honor.’”

“So the Jade Kingdom helped Habotan get away from the pursuers sent after her by the demon lord?”

“If the princess can be made safe, the upper-tier demons will leave the demon lord’s army. And if she grows stronger, the power of the Raging Demon Lord will return to its rightful lineage, weakening the demon lord’s ability to force intermediate-and lower-tier demons to do his bidding. Our hopes of bringing peace to the dark continent lie with the princess.”

This was a story far beyond what I had been expecting. Habotan truly was a hope to save the world.

No matter how well the battle against the demon lord’s armies was going, with Avalon’s shipbuilding technology, we would never manage the defeat of Demon Lord Taraxon. But here was someone who could.

“I understand the absurdity of asking the Hero to protect the future demon lord, but even so, I beg you! Hero Ruti, please protect our only hope of saving the world!”

There was a loud thud as Altra’s forehead pressed against the floor.

“Please! Protect your fate and all of ours!”

It was an incredible scene.

One of the highest commanders of the demon lord’s armies was pleading with Ruti to protect the future demon lord.

I'd never imagined the Hero's fate would catch up to us like this...

"Big Brother..."

Ruti looked at me.

She wanted my opinion on what to do.

But...

"This is something for you to decide, Ruti. Whatever your answer, I'll respect it."

Ruti closed her eyes for a moment, and it looked like she'd made up her mind.

"...I understand. Thank you, Big Brother."

She looked straight at Altra.

"Ruti the Hero doesn't exist anymore. So the Hero can't save Habotan."

"..."

"I want to protect Habotan because we're friends. We've only just started getting to know each other, so I hardly know anything about her, but I want to know more about her. That's why I want to protect her."

Ruti's voice was strong and unwavering.

"My being here isn't fate. I'm here because I chose to be here."

"Thank you...!"

Tears ran down Altra's face.

It really was an unbelievable sight.



Dawn had broken, the sun rising over the horizon, and a woman in a kimono stood alone on the shore of a beach.

Altra, still in her human form, was greeting the new day.

"Traveling as a human was not too bad, surprisingly."

Memories of the trip with Habotan flashed across her mind. It had been an arduous, perilous journey...but even so, it had been a beautiful sight watching

Habotan see the world for the first time and come to learn more about it.

It had touched her heart in a way that Altra, in her long life, had forgotten was possible.

“Forced to obey a false demon lord, made to fight, and worked to death... Having suffered so many humiliations, in protecting you, we shall finally be victorious.”

Shadows appeared over the eastern sea. Wyvern knights—the flying knight squadron once led by Gandor of the Wind. The greatest threat of the demon lord’s armies that made every band of knights across the lands shudder.

“Vidosra and Madhu.”

Leading the wyvern knights at present were the new heavenly kings of wind, Vidosra, and water, Madhu. Both Asura demons.

“So you’ve finally come.”

Altra had sunk all of the ships following them, but the demon lord’s armies had wings to cross any sea. That was why Altra had needed to hurry and gain Ruti the Hero’s trust before the wyverns arrived, so she would protect Habotan.

And it had been a success—Habotan was under the protection of the strongest Hero.

All that remained...was to serve as a stand-in for her.

“Where is the demon lord’s daughter?!”

The two heavenly kings circled above Altra’s head.

“She stands before you. I shall have vengeance for my father.”

Still in the form of Torahime, Altra glared at the flying forces.

She couldn’t use her inherent abilities.

They will find out eventually, but taking my corpse back to the dark continent and examining it should buy a significant amount of time.

From the moment she had begun this journey, Altra had decided that Zoltan would be her final stop. Vidosra and Madhu had never met Habotan before; Demon Lord Taraxon had needed to secure the daughter without having her

killed to get the upper-tier demons to follow him, and to prevent another potential candidate for the title of demon lord from being born elsewhere. Information about her had been kept to as few people as possible. And, as an upper-tier demon herself, the demon lord's daughter could freely change her form.

They had no way to determine on the spot whether the person they'd killed was actually the demon lord's daughter or just another demon. That was why Altra had asked the people of the Jade Kingdom to treat *her* as the princess, and they had traveled so far and fought so hard all for sake of this conclusion.

You can have my head...but I'll kill enough of you that you won't be able to march on Zoltan and massacre every living person there.

The wyvern knights raised their lances and descended.

"Overlord Wrath."

Altra summoned a greatsword more than two meters long into her hands.

"Come!!!"

Altra cut down the charging wyvern knights.

"Gyaaaaa!"

The wyvern knights cried out as they were torn to shreds. Fragments of broken lances and bits of flesh rained down all around Altra.

"It can't be! That's the demon lord's sword!!!"

"They say it's a legendary weapon passed down through the demon lord's lineage!"

The Asura demons cried out in surprise.

"Let's do this, Madhu!"

"Aye, these small fry can't win alone!"

The two heavenly kings joined the fray, and more and more attacks fell upon Altra. Faced with the powerful sweeps of the demon lord's sword, Vidosra adapted by organizing waves of attacks to wear Altra down.

Rotten though they are, they are still heavenly kings, and that is the correct

strategy to use here...which is precisely why I was waiting for them to do that.

In order to keep attacking in waves, the enemy had to maintain a certain distance, and that gap was just what Altra had been aiming for.

I can't use my skills as heavenly king of the water, so this is the strongest attack I can manage right now!

Altra thrust the demon lord's sword into the ground and formed a seal with both hands.

"Blackened blood, words of destruction, paradise-splitting spear of the overlord! The end is nigh! Demon's Flare!!!"

It was a power passed down among the upper-tier demons of the dark continent.

An incredibly powerful, secret spell that unleashed one's full magic power in order to eradicate their enemy.

"Damn it!!!"

All the wyvern knights were within the area of effect of the spell.

Altra had brought out the demon lord's sword as a feint leading to this.

"Roooooar!!!"

Black flames erupted all around them, and swirling darkness enveloped the wyvern knights. It was a single attack using all of the magic power Altra had built up while recovering since her arrival in Zoltan.

"Haah... Haah..."

Altra wanted to sink to her knees but held on. The soldiers of the demon lord's army fell from the sky, but two figures rose among the unmoving masses.

"As expected of the demon lord's daughter... That was impressive."

"But a poor choice. You should have held back enough strength to flee."

Even the dark continent's strongest spell hadn't been enough to defeat Vidosra and Madhu.

I win.

In her heart, Altra smiled with relief.

The enemy had lost a lot of soldiers, and their means of transport was cut off. How long would it take to return her corpse to the dark continent? Having been scarred by defeat so many times, Altra and the heavenly kings had won their final battle exactly as planned.

Farewell, Habotan. May you become a powerful demon lord...strong enough to reclaim the sword they will take here... Ah, and... Aaah...

Altra was embarrassed and perplexed by the final emotion that welled up inside her, but without any time to consider it, she just accepted it.

“I hope you never lose your smile.”

She didn't realize it, but Altra's words were those of a parent to a child.



The two Asura raised their swords and charged at Altra, who stood tall before them. The battle was over...or at least it should have been.

“We can’t have you dying then, can we?!”

As fast as lightning, a bronze sword caught both of the Asuras’ blades.

“How did you manage to stop our swords?!”

“Who are you?!”

But the man just grinned fearlessly.



I—I made it...

I masked my unease with a smile.

Catching my opponent off guard by acting like I had everything under control was my style of fighting.

The truth was, though, that I had a cold sweat running down the back of my neck. A hair later and I wouldn’t have been able to block that attack; I was on the verge of thanking God I made it in time.

“I’m just a simple apothecary.”

“An apothecary! So you’re Gideon, one of the twin hopes of humanity?!” an Asura shouted.

“I’m not sure how I feel about the demon lord’s army knowing my true identity when not even the humans do.”

“So you’re the swordsman who crossed swords with Shisandan? Why do you protect the demon lord’s daughter?”

“Is it that strange? If someone I know is going to be killed, it’s just natural to help them.”

“Pitiful humans.”

The two Asuras raised their swords.

The Asura demons I’d fought up to this point had all been multi-sword users, but these two only wielded one? How had I found myself forced into another

fight with limited information?

I wish I could have fought them after talking more with Altra...

But when we heard she'd left the hospital, I'd immediately realized she was planning to die in Habotan's stead. There had been no time to search for tracks, so I'd just predicted that any pursuers would come from the sea to the east and rushed here as fast as I could.

Thankfully, my guess had been right on the mark, but it was just luck that I'd made it in time—and only just barely.

If we make it out of this safe, Habotan better give Altra a serious talking to.

"Be careful, Sir Red! These two demons are Vidosra and Madhu, the new heavenly kings! Powerful warriors even among the Asura!"

That explained why their swords had been so heavy.

"Hey, can you transform into a lighter form?" I asked.

"If a dwarf child will do."

"All right, do it."

Altra turned into a small dwarven boy.

Now I had to create an opening, even for just a second.

I attacked Vidosra with a slash, and the Asura blocked with his sword.

"Sorry, Mogrim!"

I let go of my sword, as if throwing it away.

"Whoa?!" Vidosra shouted in surprise, and my sword spun around his to cut him. It was a shallow wound, but a spurt of blood erupted from his face.

The Bahamut Knights' sacrificial spin counter.

It was a simple sword technique, not a skill born from a blessing—a feint designed for when you locked blades with a superior opponent. It worked by distracting the opponent by letting go of your sword at close range, where even a moment's hesitation could get a person cut down, and spinning your own sword around theirs. When you weren't expecting it, it was an attack that was

almost impossible to block. However, it was easy to counter if you did know what to expect, so trick strategies like that only worked on opponents who had never seen them before.

The Bahamut Knights had a broad range of feints and tricks in their repertoire for staying alive, but they still taught that the proper path of swordsmanship was fundamentally the strongest.

I knew it wouldn't be enough to defeat a heavenly king.

But all I'd needed was to make him stop for a second!

"Lightning Speed!"

Spinning around with my new burst, I grabbed the dwarven boy that was Altra and quickly sped up.

"Not so fast!"

The other Asura, Madhu, thrust his sword toward my back.

"?!"

The sword stopped.

A slender thread of spider web glittered in the light.

Cautious of a trap, Madhu focused on the thread for just a moment.

Of course, there was nothing there; there hadn't been any time to set a trap. Mister Crawly Wawly in the pouch at my hip had sneakily managed to spin a thread the moment he'd been in the two Asuras' blind spot.

However, something had suddenly appeared where there had been nothing before, and a first-rate warrior like Madhu wouldn't ignore that.

"...Gh!!!"

I didn't have a sword anymore, so I couldn't afford to take even a single attack. But I didn't have to turn around; I just had to run with all my might.

Thirty-seven seconds.

That was how long I'd had to run before I saw Ruti and the others.

"We're up against two Asura demons, the new heavenly kings!" I shouted,

stopping at Ruti's side. My body ached in pain. "I thought I was gonna die there!"

I set Altra down, and a torrent of sweat dripped to the ground.

"Thanks, Mister Crawly Wawly."

Peeking out of the pouch, Mister Crawly Wawly looked just as relieved as I was. He hopped up onto Tisse's shoulder.

"They're crazy strong. I can't do anything against them without some sort of a plan."

"They didn't get appointed heavenly kings for nothing," Yarandralla said grimly.

Yarandralla had fought Desmond of the Earth too, and she knew his strength just as well as I did. The reason I'd chosen to throw away my sword like that was because I had judged it would be too difficult to try to hold them off until Ruti arrived.

"Lady Torahime!!!"

Habotan clung to Altra, who was still in the form of the dwarven boy.

"Why are you here?" Altra asked, looking confused.

I had never imagined I'd see one of the demon lord's terrifying heavenly kings in a state of confusion like that. You really do never know what life will bring.

"No! Don't die!" Habotan shouted, tears pouring from her eyes.

"You think of Habotan like a daughter; it's the same for her."

"In what sense?"

"Habotan thinks of you like a parent."

"I..."

Altra looked unsure how to process these emotions.

"Seeing as Altra can't fight anymore, we'll have to face them ourselves."

I took the sword we'd found in the sunken Veronian galleon from Rit's item box. It was a valuable magic sword forged by a renowned swordsmith, but I

wouldn't really be able to rely on it facing off against a heavenly king.

"I'll take the front," announced Ruti. "Tisse, cover me."

"Understood."

Ruti drew her sword and moved forward.

I would've liked to give her some sort of advice...but I came up with strategies by figuring out an opponent's blessing, which meant Asura demons without blessings were the ultimate counter to me.

"It's okay. Let's just trust Ruti," said Rit.

"Yeah..."

I needed to focus on going along with Ruti's orders.

Our opponents were two heavenly kings. According to the demons, they weren't true heavenly kings, but Desmond of the Earth alone had been enough to give us a hard time in multiple battles. It would be fair to say that, at that time, a heavenly king and Ruti had been about equal in terms of ability.

And now we were up against two enemies of equivalent power...

Ruti's Ruler skill, which nullified people's blessings, wouldn't work on Asura demons. So even Ruti had to stay on the alert against these two.

"Why would you come? Hero Ruti...you must understand that our best option is for me to die here." There was a hint of reproach in Altra's voice.

"Because my friend was crying," Ruti answered without turning back.

The two Asura demons were approaching.

"If Gideon's here, then of course the second twin hope would be too," Vidosra said when he spied Ruti.

"Ruti the Hero!" Madhu roared, raising his sword.

It was a unique sort of stance, with his sword hand held back, similar to Shisandan's style.

"Why does the Hero protect the Demon Lord! What justice moves your sword?!" Madhu shouted.

“Sir Ruti...,” Habotan said, looking nervously toward her.

“I am no ally of justice.” Ruti’s turned her sword on Madhu. “I fight by my will alone.”

“I see. So that is why you are no longer deluded by another person’s sense of justice?”

The expressions on Vidosra and Madhu’s faces warped.

““Fascinating! So this is what it means to be human?!””

The two of them leapt forward at once.

Ruti met them head on, and their swords clashed with dizzying speed. The two heavenly kings really were incredibly powerful.

“Rit! Yarandrala! Let’s keep Madhu busy!”

““Got it!””

Even if we couldn’t beat him, Ruti would gain the upper hand if we could make sure she wasn’t fighting both of them at once.

“It’s fine.”

But Tisse stopped us.

“This will end it.”

Tisse threw her knife, and it suddenly changed path in midair.

Had she used a spiderweb to manipulate it?

“How impudent!”

The Asura demons immediately dodged the complicated trajectory of Tisse’s knife.

Gah, so they even saw through Tisse’s trajectory-shifting attack?

“Mhm, that’s enough.”

Ruti’s sword accelerated. It swung faster than my eyes could follow.

“It’s too fast. It almost looks like she’s attacking them simultaneously.”

“Shisandan was right. This is beyond even the Hero.”

The Asura demons' bodies twisted unnaturally, and a line appeared running from their shoulders diagonally across their torsos. Then, their huge forms collapsed to the ground.

"This is Ruti the Hero...!"

Altra and Habotan could do nothing but watch in awe.

It had all come from the slightest opening caused by Tisse's attack.

Ruti had slowed her sword enough to let the two demons keep up, all so she could take advantage of that opening. She had won exactly as planned.

She'd become even stronger since giving up being the Hero. That was because now she was fighting of her own free will, instead of letting her blessing decide when and where she fought. She had been determined to win that battle.

"You've gotten strong."

"I owe it to you. You saved me," Ruti said, smiling.

"Soul Seal!!!" Altra suddenly shouted.

"Wh-what?!"

Altra had drawn a seal in her own blood on a metal sphere about the size of a fist. Suddenly, the Asura demons' bodies turned into light and were absorbed into the orb.

"W-with this, they will not revive anymore... It is a secret art we developed to defeat Asuras."

"Lady Torahime!"

Habotan scrambled to support Altra, who wobbled unsteadily and let out a deep breath.

"So Asura demons do revive!" I exclaimed, and Altra nodded at me.

"Yes. They are not the creation of Demis, which places them outside of Demis's cycle of reincarnation. As such, they form their own cycle of rebirth... An Asura that dies is reborn as the same demon. Asura are undying, indestructible beings."

"But...!!!" Rit shouted. "That means Shisandan is still alive...and my master has

yet to be avenged?!”

I’d thought there must be some secret to Shisandan’s resurrection, but to think he’d been unkillable in the first place... That was just absurd.

I put my arm around Rit’s shoulders and pulled her close.

“However, it is possible to seal them like this. So long as this sphere remains unbroken, the Asura within cannot be reborn.”

“With that seal...”

Rit closed her eyes, then relaxed her shoulders and exhaled.

“If Shisandan ever comes back to Zoltan, I swear I’ll put an end to him.”

“And if that ever happens, I’ll fight alongside you,” I told her.

That put a pin in any talk of vengeance for now. Rit wouldn’t chase Shisandan, so long as he stayed away from Zoltan... She’d chosen to stay and live here with me.

“This is a major victory for humanity,” Tisse said.

Yarandralla nodded in agreement.

“With that, all of the heavenly kings of the demon lord’s army have been defeated, right?”

“Yes, Dreadonna of the Flame died so that we might escape. The air force and navy, both crucial for the demon lord’s invasion, were taken over by Asuras calling themselves heavenly kings, but they are both done for now, too. And the heavenly kings’ armies, which made up the bulk of the demon lord’s forces, will no longer function properly anymore.”

Air force, huh? That’s a concept that doesn’t really exist on this continent.

The airborne wyvern knights had been a major factor in humanity’s continuous, one-sided losses in the earliest battles of the invasion.

What was important was that the pursuers sent by the demon lord had been wiped out without being able to report back what they had discovered. More would eventually come, but if the Asura demons worked under the assumption that they could to bring back information even if they died, then the demon

lord's forces shouldn't notice anything wrong until the latest imaginable date for their return.

That would buy us around half a year of safety, I'd guess.

For now, we'd won.

"Altra."

"..."

"We're glad you're alive."

"Indeed!" Habotan responded loudly, in place of the silent Altra.

Chapter 5

One Year Together

It was the morning after that quiet battle for the fate of the world.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.”

Rit and I got up at the same time and greeted each other like always. As we opened the curtains, the sun shone in through the window like it did every morning.

““Mmm.””

We stretched at the same time and smiled at each other, then went out into the yard to bask in the sunlight, where we did some light exercise. A bird was chirping in a nearby tree. The wind blew, and Rit took a moment to enjoy the breeze. Moments like this were enjoyable, even during Zoltan’s summers.

“Okay, let’s have fun at work today, too.”

“Yeah!”

We had to work hard to make up for the time lost yesterday; we’d closed up shop early to deal with everything with Altra. And, after a day of hard work today, tomorrow would be a day off.

We washed our faces and went back inside the house.

I put on an apron and went into the kitchen to start making breakfast. Ruti and the others would be joining us today, so I’d be cooking for five. I melted a little butter into the frying pan and fried some bacon, then added eggs once the bacon fat started sizzling. While waiting for that to cook, I boiled some potatoes in salt water and added slices of lemon to cold water fresh from the well.

The idea for breakfast today was “simple but delicious.”



Rit, Ruti, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly, Habotan, and I were all sitting around the breakfast table.

““Thanks for breakfast.””

Everyone seemed to be enjoying the food. It wasn't a special meal, nor a special occasion, but this morning was still wonderful.

“How was Altra afterward?”

“She will be discharged in five days. The doctors were quite angry with her.”

“Haha, well she did leave without permission, then came back in as bad a state as when she was first admitted.”

Apparently using up every bit of her magic power and then pushing herself to perform the sealing had been too much; Altra had collapsed unconscious, and we'd had to quickly hurry her to the hospital... But anyone would collapse in that state, wouldn't they?

It would be a little while longer before Habotan and Altra could live together.

“Are you planning to live with Altra here in Zoltan?”

“Yes. Once Lady Torahime is discharged, we plan to rent a house near Sir Ruti's estate.”

Habotan and Altra hadn't decided yet what exactly they were going to do going forward, but they had settled on staying in Zoltan for a while.

“The plan today is to look for a home. Sir Ruti is also accompanying this one!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I'm Habotan's reliable senior here in Zoltan. She can count on me to help look for a home,” Ruti said, puffing out her chest confidently.

She sure was a dependable friend.

“With the failure of his invasion of Avalon, the demon lord's power to keep his forces together will weaken. The wyvern knights have been devastated, too—they don't even have the power left to fight Altra, let alone Ruti, do they?”

“And if they realize we know how to seal them, even Asura demons might hesitate to chase us down.”

“Very true. The one group of allies Demon Lord Taraxon won’t betray are his fellow Asuras. Demons, orcs, dwarves...all of them are only being brought to heel by force of strength.”

Now that she no longer had to hide that she was from the dark continent, Habotan could tell us a lot about her homeland and the demon lord’s armies.

However, having been born the daughter of the demon lord, she had spent most of her young life in the castle and had then been kept in confinement after Taraxon usurped the title, so she didn’t seem to have much firsthand knowledge of a lot of things.

Her journey with Altra had been her first trip into the outside world.

“Lady Torahime taught this one many things. The *oden* we had in the Jade Kingdom was delicious.”

“Right, *oden* did come from there originally, didn’t it? We have it here in Zoltan too, so you should try it sometime.”

“Really?! Once Lady Torahime is well, we shall!” Her eyes lit up.

“You still call her that, even after her identity as Altra was revealed,” Rit pointed out, and Habotan’s cheeks reddened.

“You know...it was this one who gave Altra the name Lady Torahime.”

Her tone had changed slightly, probably because she wasn’t speaking as a ninja now, but expressing how she truly felt.

“This one does not have a name.”

“You don’t have a name?”

“No. The clan of the demon lord inherit the demon lord’s name. Until then, they are nobody. This one was only ever called the demon lord’s daughter and was always treated as such; she has never seen her father’s face. So when Altra gave this one the name Habotan, it felt as if she had been born into this world for the first time.”

“...So that’s how it was.”

“This one wanted to give Altra something in return, so when Altra was

thinking of an alias, she suggested the name Torahime. It may be conceited for this one to say, but...Lady Torahime was pleased.”

Even the demon lord had it rough...

They must’ve decided it was better for future demon lords not to have any unnecessary experiences; otherwise, they might stray from their path as the lord of evil.

In which case, Habotan might be different from any other demon lord in history.

“I see. Then maybe we should keep calling her Lady Torahime as well.”

“Okay, so in Zoltan, she’s Lady Torahime, a princess of the Jade Kingdom and Habotan’s master.”

Hearing the way me and Rit responded, Habotan smiled.

...That smile reminded me of how glad I was we’d been able to save Torahime.

“Oh, you mentioned wanting to make a product for the one-year anniversary of Red & Rit’s Apothecary, did you not?” Habotan said, awkwardly changing the subject. She must’ve been feeling embarrassed about opening up to us with her feelings.

It was adorable.

“Yeah. Actually, I already have an idea. I was planning to work on it once we closed up for the day.”

“Then let me look after the shop today, and you can work on it now,” said Rit. But I shook my head.

“I want to do it the same way we did the cookies.”

“The same way...?”

“I want us to do it together. If we’re going to make a new product celebrating one year of Red & Rit’s Apothecary, then that’s the only way.”



“R-really...? Ehehe.” Rit hid her big smile behind her bandana.

I loved the way she did that.

“Then let me watch the shop today.”

“This one will help, too!”

“I’ll also provide assistance once I’ve finished work at the plantation.”

Ruti, Habotan, and Tisse all volunteered to help.

“You’re sure about this? Don’t you need to look for a place to live, Habotan?”

“It will be quite some time before the demon lord dispatches any more pursuers, so this one and Lady Torahime are not as pressured for time. This isn’t enough to repay you, but please allow this one to be of some use!”

“Big Brother’s shop is fun. I’m sure you’ll like it too, Habotan!”

“I really appreciate it, you three.”

Ruti, who had once been the Hero, and Habotan, who would one day become the Demon Lord, standing together behind the counter of an apothecary in a remote land... Torahime called it fate, but if it was, it wasn’t a fate sketched out by Demis.

I couldn’t help finding it incredibly exciting.



Rit and I sat together at a bench in the workroom of the apothecary.

“So what’s this idea you had?” Rit asked as she picked up a bottle filled with dried medicinal herbs.

“Well, we run an apothecary.”

“Yeah?”

“Most medicines people only use when they’re not feeling well.”

“Right.”

“I was thinking of trying to make something else people can use even when they’re healthy, but I want to try taking it in a different direction this time, rather than focusing on health.”

“What sort of direction?!”

Rit was getting excited. Her reactions were always so much fun to watch.

“Even if they don’t feel it, people’s bodies get damaged every day. So I was thinking of making a medicine to help heal that.”

I touched Rit’s beautiful blonde hair.

“R-Red?!”

“The new product for Red & Rit’s Apothecary’s one-year anniversary is a medicine to protect people’s hair.”

The idea was to make a tonic to protect hair from the rain or getting dried out, that had a subtle but pleasant scent and could be used for long periods of time without any side effects.

“I’ve already developed a couple of different recipes. All that’s left is to make a few minor adjustments.”

“Incredible!”

“But my hair’s pretty strong, so it doesn’t really need this sort of thing.”

“True, you do always have a nice head of hair,” Rit said, mussing it up.

“Mm... Ahem, so I wanted to make some samples today and get your advice on them.”

“You want my advice?”

“Yeah, I want to make whichever recipe you think is best. Wouldn’t that be perfect for our shop’s anniversary product?”

“Definitely! ...Ehehe.”

Rit was surprised but pleased, and that was more gratifying to me than anything.

“All right, I’ll try out a few different recipes, so you just stay next to me.”

“Of course. I’ll always be by your side.”

I felt my face go a little hot when she said that to me.

I made a bunch of different samples, Rit gave me her honest opinion on each

of them, and we kept testing and experimenting.

When the store closed, we had dinner with Ruti and the others, and after they left, Rit and I went back to the workroom.

We'd considerably narrowed down the options. All we had left to do was adjust the strength of the scent...

““It's done!!!””

We held hands and smiled at one another.

“All right, I'll make more for tomorrow.”

“And I can give out samples!”

I was looking forward to it.

Today had been another day filled with excitement and happiness in our quiet life.



The next day, Rit took a basket with samples around town for a couple hours.

Meanwhile, I recommended our new product to customers who visited the shop.

Unlike with the cookies, this time there were a lot of women buying it—a testament to how trusted our shop had become in the past year. The thought filled me with joy.

An older gentleman was picking up his medicine.

“Ohh, that looks good.”

He was a butler working for a noble in central Zoltan. Apparently, he was off today, because he wore a loose shirt instead of his regular butler attire.

He's married, isn't he?

“Why not get some for your wife? I'm sure she would like it.”

“There's an idea. It's almost our anniversary.” The gentleman put two bottles on the counter. “And your one-year anniversary product is an appropriate present, since we wish to be as close and affectionate as the two of you.”

“Ah, that’s, um, thank you very much.”

He smiled happily, seeing me at a loss for words.

Rit came back to the shop at around noon. Reactions had been good, and thanks to her handing out samples, there were even more customers in the afternoon.

By the time we closed up shop in the evening, we’d completely sold out of the new tonic.

“Good work today, Rit.”

“You too, Red.”

We looked into each other’s eyes and high-fived. I remembered back to the first time our shop had been filled with customers, when I’d gotten caught up in my excitement and lifted Rit up in a hug.

Maybe I should do that again now.

“Wah!”

“Thank you for everything, Rit.”

“Ehehe, just like a year ago.”

“No, it’s not just that.”

Our bond was even stronger now than it had been back then. Rit was irreplaceably precious to me.

“Rit... There’s something I wanted to give you,” I said, setting her down.

“Mm, I have something for you, too.”

Still standing close to each other, we took out our wrapped presents.

“Rit.”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for being with me this past year. I hope you’ll stay with me forever.”

Rit hid behind her bandana, then opened the gift.

Inside was the sea-drake-horn comb I'd bought from the sailor at the harbor and a bottle of the medicine from yesterday.

I had made it for the shop's anniversary...but also for Rit.

"Your hair is so beautiful, and I want to take care of it, too."

"Thank you. I love it!"

Then I opened my present from Rit.

It was a bandana with the same design as the one Rit wore around her neck.

"We do our own things a lot of the time, but with this, I feel like we'll always be connected."

I wrapped it around my left arm.

"Does it look okay?"

"Yeah! It suits you just as much as my bandana does me!"

I pulled Rit closer and kissed her.

Next year, we would officially be married, which meant that this was our first and last anniversary as just lovers.

That thought made me love her even more.

Epilogue

Setting Off

Deep in the dark continent, in the subterranean realm of the Underdeep, there existed the demon nation of Asura Kshetra. In the capital of Asura Kshetra stood the demon lord's castle, and in the demon lord's castle sat a throne.

Sitting upon that throne was an enormous Asura—the Raging Demon Lord Taraxon—in front of whom kneeled the Asura warrior Shisandan.

“This war is lost?”

“Yes, sire.” Shisandan nodded.

The demon lord closed his eyes for a moment, then stood with his sword in hand.

“Then, we must rise.”

“...Should you be defeated, the demon lord's power will be lost.”

“Indeed.”

“In your absence, Asura demons will be left without being resurrected.”

“You speak truth. Yet, we are a false demon lord and a true hero.”

“Sire.”

“We must stand. It is the duty of the Hero, the Asura king, to save the world from the demon lord and the evil god.”

“If that is your decision, then I shall accompany you, my lord.”

He possessed a single sword, a single set of travel clothes, a single pouch of medicinal herbs, and an unyielding courage. That was the Hero's way. The Asura knew that it was only when they were found lacking that a hero could grow stronger.

Thus began the final journey of the Hero Asura.



That same day, I was on my way back from picking up the bronze sword I'd left with Mogrim to repair. It had cracked stopping the attack from two heavenly kings, but now it was completely repaired.

Mogrim really was a skilled smith.

"Red."

"Yarandrala!" I stopped in my tracks. "I haven't seen you for a few days, so I was starting to wonder where you were."

"I've been making preparations." There was a slightly dark cast over Yarandrala's expression.

"Did something happen?"

"Not quite. But I came today to say goodbye."

"You're leaving?!"

"I plan to go back to Kiramin for a bit. There's something I want to investigate in the sealed archives."

"The sealed archives!"

According to rumor, the sealed archives contained the high elves' forbidden records filled with dangerous knowledge from the time of the wood elves.

"There was one wyvern left from the attack, so I healed it. I'm going to ride it there, but even so it'll probably take around a month."

"You can ride wyverns?"

"Not well, but well enough. This one was already broken in by the demon lord's armies, and I'm not planning to fight while riding it."

"Still though, what do you want to investigate in Kiramin all of a sudden?"

"...I want to find out about the Demon Lord blessing."

"Ahhh."

I could imagine why Yarandrala might want to do that.

"The Hero blessing was made to recreate the spirit of the first hero. So what

about the Demon Lord blessing?”

“The natural assumption would be that it’s to recreate the real demon lord fought by the first hero.”

“Yes... Habotan and Ruti’s New Truth are similar.”

“There was hardly any information passed down regarding the Demon Lord blessing in all of Avalon, but there might still be something in Kiramin, since the high elves survived from that era.”

Yarandralla was going all the way to the Kingdom of Kiramin in the north for Ruti’s sake.

“Thank you, Yarandralla.”

“Of course. You and Ruti are both precious friends to me.”

Yarandralla took my hand.

“If you’ll just indulge me for one selfish request...wait to marry Rit until I get back. I want to be able to celebrate it with you in person.”

“Ahaha, you got it. We’ll be waiting and looking forward to when you come back.”

Yarandralla smiled happily.

And with that, she set out from Zoltan.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book! This is the author, Zappon.

Volume 12, set in their second summer, features a lovely cover illustration of Yarandrala swimming in the sea. Once again, the colors in Yasumo's illustration are beautiful. From the moment I received the rough sketch, I was looking forward to seeing the completed art.

As indicated by the illustration, this volume is the story of Yarandrala indulging in her hobbies and going out to sea, and about a girl they meet there, and about Ruti, the former Hero.

Then, there's the necessary counterbalance to any hero's story—the demon lord. The story of Demis and the Hero has reached a conclusion for now, so next will be the demon lord's story.

If the hero's goal is to defeat the demon lord, then the demon lord's existence could be said to frame what it means to be the hero. There are stories where it feels tasteless to look for any special meaning in that, but this is a story in which blessings exist to limit people's ability to live a free and easy life, and the reason those blessings exist is due to the existence of the hero and demon lord...so I guess I thought that if I wrote about those sorts of ideas, then maybe I'd be able to write a story where the hero finds happiness.

Another important event is the marking of one year of Red and Rit living together. They have yet another important event coming up, too, as the two of them tie the knot on their engagement.

I hope you continue to support the three of them in the next volume, too.

Now for an announcement!

Volume 11 of the comic adaptation by Masahiro Ikeno and Volume 2 of the spinoff, *Rejected by the Hero's Party, a Princess Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside*, starring Rit, are scheduled to go on sale on May 26. They're

both fun manga, so please give them a try.

A lot goes into the making of each volume, and this book could only have happened thanks to the hard work of everyone involved. Thank you all so much.

I look forward to working with you on the next volume, too!

With that, let's meet again in Volume 13!

Zappon

Shuddering at the pollen dancing through the blue skies, 2023



This is
Yasumo.
Thank you
for picking
up this
volume
as well!

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