

BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,

I Decided to Live a Quiet Life
in the Countryside

7

ZAPPON
Illustration by
Yasumo





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Red

"I would've preferred
we never saw each
other again."

Leonor

"That's a rather
horrid thing to say
to the woman
who loved you."



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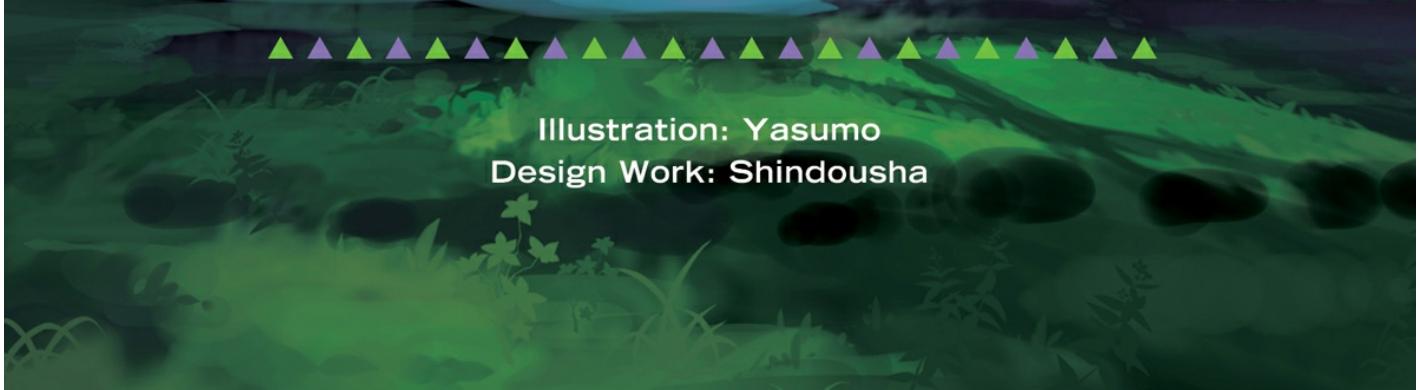
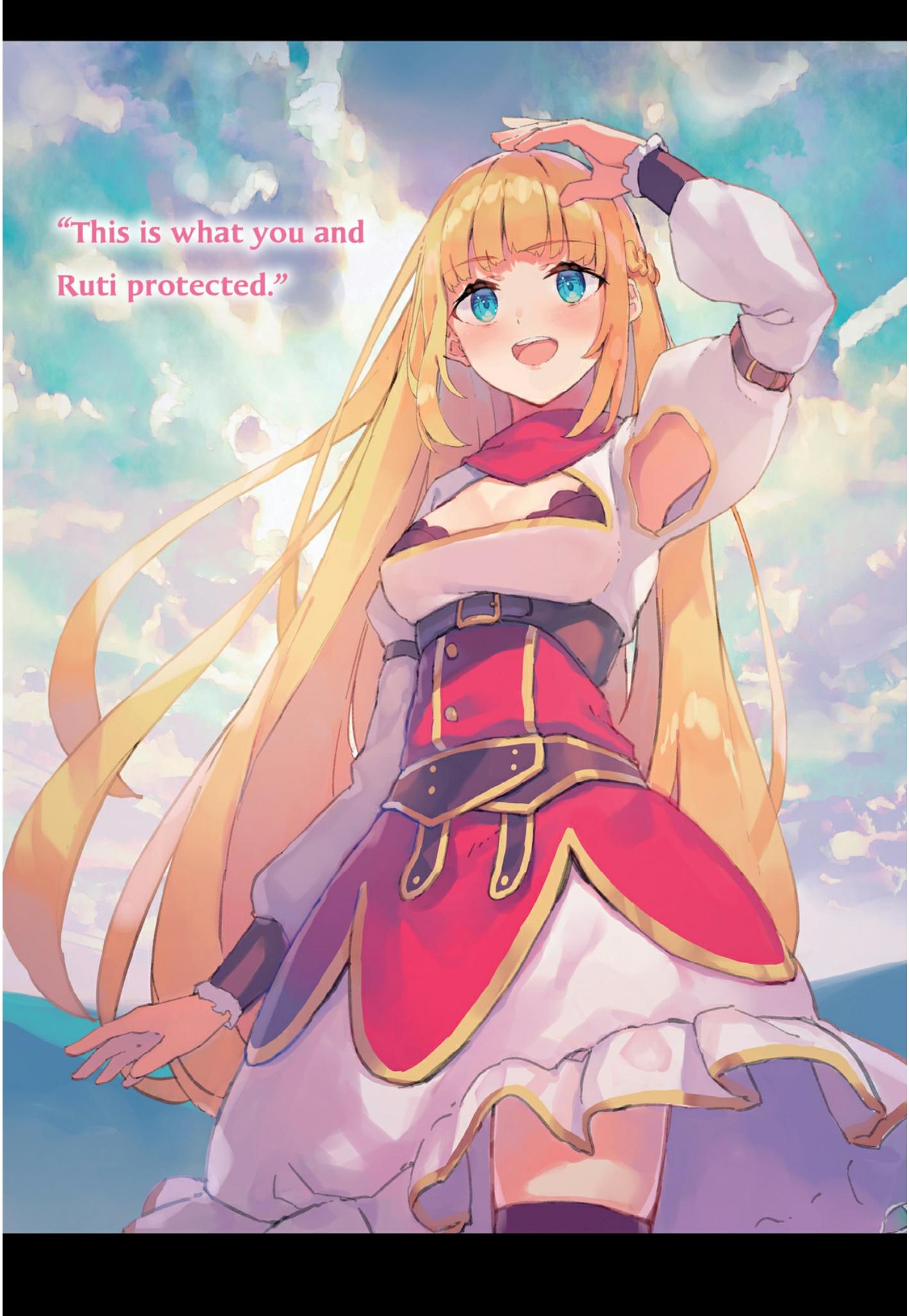


Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha



“Do you
want some
more?”

“Yes, please.”



“This is what you and
Ruti protected.”

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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 YUUSHYA NO PARTY WO OIDASARETANODE,
HENKYOU DE SLOW—LIFE SURUKOTO NI SHIMASHITA Vol. 7

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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. Excluding 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. A truly happy young woman who grew out of her more combative phase. She uses spirit magic, and can summon wolves and transform into one.



Ruti Ragnason

Red's younger sister and possessor of the Divine Blessing of the Hero, humanity's strongest blessing. Free at last from her blessing's impulses, she now enjoys life in Zoltan as a medicinal herb farmer while adventuring on the side.



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 together with Ruti to get their medicinal herb farm running.



Yarandrala

A high elf Singer of the Trees capable of controlling plants. Around seventy years ago, she and Lilinrala were rivals.



Leonor of Veronia

The second queen consort of Veronia. She maintains her youthful and childlike appearance using alchemical concoctions. An evil woman who drove Mistorm from her homeland. She also has a connection with Red.

Mistorm

An old lady with the Divine Blessing of the Archmage. She is secretly Queen Consort Misphia of Veronia, who was driven from her country.

Lilinrala

A high elf with the Divine Blessing of the Pirate. Fleet Admiral of Veronia and former captain of the Elven Corsairs. She has come to Zoltan in search of Queen Misphia.



Prologue

But the World Still Needed the Hero

The freight ship known as the *Brown Owl* sailed along the southern coast of the continent of Avalon.

It was supposed to bring supplies to the allied army fighting the demon lord's forces to the west. However, that delivery would never arrive.

The *Brown Owl*'s deck was covered in arrows and the bloody corpses of her crew. Below deck, men with cutlasses at their hips were fishing through the bodies and taking every bit of gold they could find.

A trio of galleys flying pirate flags had surrounded the *Brown Owl*—the freighter had been attacked.

The ship's captain, Lord Horace, drew his sword and barred the thieves' path to protect the precious cargo.

"Foul pirates! Have you no shame? Targeting resources the brave soldiers fighting back the demon lord's army require is utter villainy!"

One of the men cackled. "Hah, that's a right an' proper Avalonia knight for ya. This is when yer supposed ta beg for yer life, ain't it?"

"Have at you, curs!"

Lord Horace leaped forward furiously, but as he did, a volley of arrows sped from behind the pirate. The brave captain was struck multiple times, collapsing in a pool of crimson.

"Who'd be fool enough ta fight straight up in a situation like this?" The pirate stepped on Lord Horace's body while walking past.

"A-ccursed Vero-nians..." Lord Horace's croaked. Hearing that, the pirate laughed again.

"Careful whatcha say there. Can't afford to tick off Veronia while yer fighting

the demon lord, can ya? Talk about easy money!"

He waited for Lord Horace's reply, but...

"Oh, already dead, eh?"

After a disappointed shrug, he turned to his fellow raiders.

"You know what that means, ya sons of bitches! Hop to it and get that cargo out of the holds!"

"Hyaha!"

The pirates working for the kingdom of Veronia stripped the *Brown Owl* of the supplies intended for the army guarding the continent against the demon lord's army.

In response to recent Veronia's piracy, the allied forces of Avalon had increased the number of military vessels protecting their shipping. However, their opponent was the greatest naval power on the continent.

The number of ships lost was terrible.

And as casualties piled up, the righteous fury of nobles and archbishops across the continent grew, leading them to despise Veronia.

It was only a matter of time before things had to be settled on the battlefield; by then, even the highest-ranking allied military members couldn't stop it.

The only one who could resolve the problem was a person fighting solely for the sake of the world, an individual beholden to no nation—the Hero.

Chapter 1

Rain Today and a Bath Tomorrow

“Ugh, what rotten weather,” I grumbled at the rain pouring just beyond the window.

Rit and I had taken today off and planned a picnic for just the two of us, but a storm had put an end to that.

“Ugh...” Rit gazed at the dark clouds with clear disappointment.

“Give it up, Rit. There’s no winning against the weather.”

“If only I had Yarandrala’s magic!”

“She doesn’t use her weather manipulation spells lightly.”

Yarandrala did not enjoy employing that power because of the effect it could have on plants.

Ares had been able to control the elements to some extent, too, and Yarandrala had argued with him about not doing so brazenly.

I’d mediated things between them at the time, but honestly, I never wanted to get involved when they fought. The disputes were bad enough that even Danan, who was always starting things, recoiled and grumbled about how they should consider what a pain they were being.

“You’re scowling.” Rit stretched her hands toward my face and started massaging my temples. “Relax, relax.”

“Thanks, Rit. I’m okay now.”

She giggled in reply.

Getting here had been a difficult journey, but knowing that it had led to her made it all worthwhile.

Feeling emotional, I was struck by an urge to wrap her up in a great hug.

So I did.

“Wah?! Where did that come from?”

“I just got an urge to hold you.”

Rit wrapped her arms tightly around me as well.

We stood there hugging each other in silence, save the rain, for a little while.

Once we both started to grow warm from the embrace, Rit broke the silence.

“So where are we going today?”

“Where? The rain doesn’t look like it’s letting up any time soon.” I looked through the window. As best as I could tell, the storm was not about to let up.

Rit crossed her arms and pouted. Incidentally, when she did that, it really put emphasis on her chest.

“I don’t have any immediate ideas, but I don’t want to give up on our date because of some crummy weather.”

Evidently, Rit was in no mood to lose today, even if it was only to some precipitation.

She paced around the shop, deep in thought.

I watched with a smile and thought about how to spend our day. Gazing out the window again, I saw some of the neighborhood children playing in the rain.

“Ah.” When I spotted two kids walking outside, a solution finally came to me. “Let’s go for a stroll.”

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It was the cold sort of rain that heralded the end of winter. Our breath came out in visible white puffs before vanishing into the shower.

“The cold will probably let up in a few days. Last year, the temperature started going up pretty quickly once it started raining.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess that means fewer people will buy the hand warmers. We’ll have to think of some new spring products.”

"Yeah."

Rit's face had been red for a while, and she kept looking down.

While concealing a grin behind her bandana, she kept glancing at me from the corner of her eye.

"Still, it's a good thing you had an umbrella, Rit," I remarked with a smile.

Rit and I were taking a walk in the rain.

Neither of us had a raincoat. We were just strolling around in our regular attire. I was holding the big umbrella in my left hand to keep us dry. It was not the usual sort, however. This one was made of a sturdy, wax-coated fabric, making it typically reserved for nobles and their retainers.

Cheeks flushed, Rit answered, "Yeah. Who would've thought there'd be such an incredible way to use it, though..."

She and I were walking arm in arm, huddling under the single umbrella.

The children I saw running by earlier had been using big leaves as cover against the rain. When I saw two of them bunched up beneath one leaf, I got the urge to try the same thing with Rit.

Walking together like this was slightly embarrassing, but it was obvious Rit felt more bashful than I did. She kept quiet, primarily only responding to my small talk with single-syllable responses.

However, there was a happy aura emanating from her.

"Do you want to visit a shop for a quick break?"

"I want to keep going a little longer."

"Okay."

She was apparently really enjoying the umbrella.

Naturally, I was too.

Strolling in the cool precipitation made Rit's warmth prominent with us pressed so close together.



The heavy downpour kept our pace along our usual path slow, roughly half our typical speed.

Rit squeezed her body tightly against mine.

“Heh-heh... So nice. I’m so happy to walk in the rain with you. It is just wonderful. It’s not fair how sweet you can be. I love you.”

“Erk!”

I'd thought Rit too bashful to say much, yet she loosed a ferocious attack. And it was a critical hit, no less.

I probably would have crumbled to my knees if Rit hadn't been supporting me.

So this is what it's like, I realized. When you get really happy, you sort of stop talking.

I'd lost my tongue, but our little trek continued regardless. Being together with only the sound of the rain to fill the silence was plenty.

The storm continued until nightfall before finally relenting. By morning, the sky was a clear blue.

I entrusted the store to Rit and left to visit Ruti's plantation.

“Phew.”

Using a towel, I wiped the sweat from my neck.

It was still winter, but working inside the glass greenhouse was muggy business.

“Big Brother, I’m done over here. What should we do now?”

Ruti had returned from working in another part of the greenhouse. There was dirt on her cheek, so I wiped it with the towel.

“Mm.”

Ruti's eyes narrowed as a happy grin spread across her face.

“Nice job,” I praised. “All that’s left is this plot, I think, and that should be the

end of the cold mold.”

“Good.”

We were nearly finished dealing with the cold mold that had recently beset Ruti’s herb farm.

My examinations beneath the topsoil didn’t turn up any remaining fungus—nothing large enough to see anyway. Previously withered herbs had sprouted fresh green shoots.

“All right, shall we finish the last of it, then?”

“Mhm. I’ll start from the other end.”

“With the two of us, it should only take about fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Ruti clenched her fists with evident determination and ran to the opposite side of the greenhouse.

It was a charming sight. And I had to give it my all, too.

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Now that we’d finished, we left the greenhouse.

“Whew, it’s cold.”

Winters were short in Zoltan, and the solstice had already passed, but it still felt chilly outside, particularly after we’d worked up a sweat.

“Big Brother, the bath in my house is really nice. You can visit on cold days.”

“A bath, huh?”

We made our way to the brand-new storehouse on one side of the field.

The structure had just been completed yesterday. In addition to the shelved storage area, it also sported a small kitchen with a stove, a break room, and a washroom.

“Ms. Ruti, Red, good work out there.”

Tisse was inside taking care of some paperwork.

“Same to you, Tisse,” I replied.

The little former assassin stood and poured the hot water heating on the stove into cups for us.

“Warm.” Ruti smiled softly. Even simple boiled water was a nice thing when your body was frigid.

“Is the cold mold finally gone?”

“Yeah, it should be all good.”

Tisse smiled in relief.

There was a light knock. The door was in the storage area, but no wall divided it from the break room, so it was easy to reach the entrance.

I opened the door and greeted, “Yes?”

“Oh, isn’t this nice? Did you all make this building?”

“Hello, Mistorm.”

Archmage Mistorm, Zoltan’s former mayor and one of the old former B-rank adventurers, had stopped by. Incidentally, she was also a queen of Veronia.

“Mind if I intrude?”

“Please come in,” Tisse responded from behind me.

I showed Mistorm to a chair.

“There we go. Ahh, my hips always complain on cold days like this.”

“It’s hard to believe when it’s coming from someone who climbed the Wall at the End of the World.”

“I kept quiet at the time to keep from looking bad in front of my young friends.” Mistorm chuckled for a moment before her expression turned serious.
“Word has come in from the church in Central.”

“That’s awfully fast,” I commented. “I heard they’d strengthened their communication network because of the war, but still...”

“It doesn’t seem to have reached Father Clemens at Last Wall fortress yet. Here. This is from Avalonia’s church.”

Mistorm handed me an opened envelope.

I took out the letter and read it with Ruti and Tisse.

“Hmm... ‘The Kingdom of Veronia’s actions are difficult to forgive, and the Lord’s love and salvation cannot extend to a country that would dare ally with the blasphemous demon lord’s army. We faithful servants of the Lord in the College of Cardinals have recommended to Father Clemens that King Geizeric of Veronia be judged an enemy of Almighty Demis. Please wait with tranquility in your hearts. May Demis’s love be with you.’ Huh...”

“Unexpected.” Ruti wore a grim expression. I had reflexively gritted my teeth as well.

The galley led by Prince Salius of Veronia and the high elf Lilinrala still loomed in the waters just beyond Zoltan’s shores.

I’d anticipated some sort of movement after we caught the high elves targeting Ruti and killed the assassins after Mistorm, but the deadlock remained.

“I didn’t think they’d offer more than some political pressure and support with information gathering. An open declaration of war is taking it too far. The conflict won’t just stop at Zoltan.”

“You’re right. There’s no way the allied army has the leeway to fight on another front,” Tisse added.

Mistorm nodded. “I’ve been in Zoltan so long that I began to fear I’d grown out of touch with things in Central. However, it seems you all believe their decision is reckless as well.”

“Definitely,” I agreed. “I imagine this choice was spearheaded by a few cardinals who got ahead of themselves. If the church starts fanning the flames, there will be no holding back the nobility or the masses.”

“That’s no good.” Mistorm sighed.

“We have to speak with Bishop Shien.” Ruti broke her usual reserved manner of speaking to offer a decisive course of action.

“If the man in charge of the affected church in Zoltan talks to the College of Cardinals, they’d lose their pretext.”

"Shien isn't going to like leaving Zoltan, but it sounds like we don't have a choice."

"At the very least, it should be easier to convince the cardinals to abstain from another war than to urge them to fight when they'd prefer to keep back and observe." Ruti's voice sounded a bit lighter than usual, though only Tisse and I could recognize the slight difference in tone.

"True, that's certainly one way of looking at it." Mistorm bobbed her head. "Thank you. Guess I was right to discuss this with you all." With that, she pulled a book from her cloak and set it on the table.

"What is that?" I asked.

"I looked through my belongings and found my old journal. I brought it by since I recalled you had some interest in the dark continent," Mistorm explained.

Incredulously, I inquired, "Does this contain the ship's log from your time over there?!"

"Just a token of gratitude for all your help. It's really not special. But if nothing else, it should provide you with some light reading."

"This is much more than that! It sounds fascinating!"

"I'm glad you like it. Well then, I should be off to see Shien."

Bidding farewell, Mistorm strode off.

"I'm really curious to see what's in her journal. Shall we read it together later?" I proposed.

"Yes, but..." Ruti's intelligent red eyes turned to me. "...we should clean up first."

"Ah, right. I am pretty dirty from all that work."

"Let's take a bath, Big Brother."

Ruti's gaze made it clear she was completely serious.

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There was a bathhouse in the mansion where Ruti was living.

Obviously, it was far larger than the bath at our house.

“You can go first, Big Brother.”

“No, you bathe before me, Ruti. You don’t like waiting around while you’re messy, right?”

“It takes me longer, though, so it’s more efficient if you go first.”

“Okay, if you insist.”

Since she was going to press the matter, then I figured it was best to be grateful for the offer. I stood up with a nod and went to the bath.

After getting undressed, I opened the door to the bathhouse.

“Oh, a stone bath, huh?”

Ruti’s home had originally been owned by a Zoltan noble.

Local aristocrats tended to live in Zoltan itself rather than on their own estates. Calling them “estates” was a bit gracious, though. Their lands were mostly humble little villages and settlements, or even barely touched marshes. They left relatives or hired administrators to live at and manage their properties.

I took a seat and lifted a bucketful of hot water out of the bath, rinsing away the sweat and dirt.

Then I got a soapy lather going with a towel and started washing myself.

“Phew.”

It felt nice to clean up after getting dirty working.

“Hmhmhmm.”

I started humming to myself.

Creak.

The door slid open.

Ruti was standing there completely naked and without any attempt to cover her body.

“R-Ruti? What are you doing?”

She cocked her head while I got flustered.

“I said I was going to take a bath.”

Thinking back, she hadn’t actually specified anything about washing separately.

While I was hung up on that, Ruti poured some hot water over her head and then shook herself dry.

I couldn’t help smiling a little at how catlike that appeared.

Hmm, is it really okay for us to take a bath together? I guess so? We’re siblings after all.

As I decided to stop worrying and just accept the situation, Ruti spoke up.

“Big Brother.”

“What? Oh, did you want the soap?”

“No, not that.”

There was a strong determination in Ruti’s red eyes as she stared at me.

“Wh-what is it?”

I was glad that Ruti had grown better at asserting what she wanted, but there was something a bit different about her today.

“Big Brother.”

“Y-yeah?”

“Do you remember when we used to bathe together way back?”

“Of course. You were really little then.”

The old bell tub in our village.

Our village’s blacksmith had repaired the church’s broken bell, and it was used as a public washtub for the village. However, it wasn’t big enough for an adult to comfortably relax in it, so it was primarily used by children.

Ordinarily, a parent was present to watch over the kids bathing, but even when we were young, our parents had been put off by the peculiarity of Ruti’s Hero blessing. So in their place, I’d helped Ruti while she bathed, holding on to

her to make sure nothing happened. She'd had fun clinging to my shoulders.

Ruti was adorable back then, although she was even more adorable now.

"I came to Zoltan and did a lot of things I've wanted to do... Is that selfish?"

"It's a good thing. Everyone has the right to do what they like. There's nothing selfish about your desire for a normal life. And I'll keep saying that as many times as I need to."

"Okay...thank you. Then there's one more thing I want to do."

In the bath?

"I couldn't do it properly back then because I was small, but I think I can now."

This time, I cocked my head in confusion.

Ruti suddenly drew near my face, her red eyes appearing large from how close they were.

"I can properly wash your body now."

"Eh?"

"Back then I was weak, and I didn't know how to clean someone properly. All I ever did was rub a generic area like your back. It was all wrong."

Ah, right, I guess something like that did happen.

I'd washed Ruti since she was very young, and eventually, she wanted to copy me and return the favor.

Truthfully, she hadn't done a great job, but it had still been cute how hard she tried with her little hands. Moments like those had been a precious bit of comfort in my otherwise troubled childhood.

"So I want to try again."

I guess Ruti felt some lingering regret at not having been able to clean me well.

"Okay, in that case, I guess I'll defer to your kind offer."

"Please. Just face that way."

I turned my back to Ruti like she asked, and she began scrubbing my back with a sponge.

“Mm...”

Having someone else wash your body was a difficult-to-describe comfort.

It was still slightly awkward, however, Ruti did her best, washing under my arms and all the way down to my fingertips.

“Heh.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little at the feeling of her fingers in my armpits. Ruti pulled her hands back, flustered.

“Did that tickle?”

“Yeah. I’m fine, though.”

“Mrgh.”

Ruti gazed at her hands. She put the sponge to her armpits, evidently hoping to figure out how best to go about scrubbing—a truly endearing sight. After testing it a few times, she nodded to herself and resumed cleaning me.

The gap between her usual superhuman abilities and these sorts of absentminded bits really sparked the fraternal spirit in me.

My little sister truly is adorable.

“Hah, hah-hah...”

“?”

Ruti stopped at my laughing, likely thinking she’d accidentally tickled me again. However, if she saw the look on my face, I’m certain she would’ve understood I was just happy. A little smile tugged up the corners of her lips, and she moved on to washing my torso with lathered-up soap and a towel.

Once the cleaning was done, we sank into the water up to our shoulders. Ruti’s expression relaxed as she sighed.

It was a joy beyond words to see my sister enjoying this relaxing moment that so many others around the continent took for granted.

“So warm.”

“That’s because we’re in hot water.”

Ruti’s bath was quite large, yet we were sitting shoulder to shoulder.

“I never thought I’d be able to take a soak together with you like this again, Big Brother.”

There was a smile on her face as she closed her eyes.

“How is life treating you here in Zoltan?”

“Wonderfully.”

Ruti’s voice was tranquil. I couldn’t imagine her sounding like this during our journey.

“Being able to see you whenever I want, feeling cold in winter, enjoying a warm bath, eating your delicious cooking, and making friends. Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly are so kind and strong and reliable. I only have to wield a sword to protect the little world that I care about, and I fight because I decide to. When I work hard, I’m thanked like a normal adventurer, and no one gets scared when they look at me. I can sleep at night, I can wake up in the morning, and I can even sweat. And, Big Brother...” Ruti’s face got close to mine. Enough so that I saw tears in her eyes. “...when I saw the herbs had withered, I was scared.” The tears broke free and rolled down her face. “This must be what it feels like to be relieved!”

Ruti, who’d been robbed of fear from the moment of her birth, was coming to terms with the feeling of happiness that her crops were okay. There was vivid emotion in her quavering voice.

“It’s great that we were able to save your plants.”

“Mhm!”

Her expression reminded me how glad I was to have been able to help.

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After exiting the bath, I made two cups of coffee milk in the lobby of the mansion.

A strong coffee mixed with lots of sugar created a syrup. Then it was just a matter of mixing in milk. Four parts milk for one part coffee syrup was my preference. It was simple, sweet, and possessed rich flavor. It was probably one of the best drinks to have after a nice wash.

Ruti's eyes gleamed when she had a sip, and then she drank half of it all in one gulp. She sipped reluctantly at the remainder, just like she did with milk and honey when she was young.

"Do you want some more?"

"Yes, please."

Ruti's rediscovered happiness was a joy for me as well.

The two of us laughed as we partook in our coffee milk.

"Mhm. I got a good dose of Big Brother supplement."

"Big Brother supplement'?"

"It's a crucial nutrient for me to be able to work hard after quitting being the Hero. Unlike my blessing, it isn't a bad thing."

It didn't really make sense to me, but if it got Ruti motivated, then it was surely all right.

"Oh yeah, are those high elves still tied up in the basement?"

"Mhm."

"I noticed someone watching us recently, so I figured they'd come by to free them while the mansion was empty."

Ruti nodded.

"It would be more convenient if they did so soon."

A break-in like that would mean action on the opposition's part, at the very least. We'd already finished our information gathering, so their taking action would be welcome.

"Plus, it's hard to relax when I know there's strange men staying in the same house as you," I admitted.

“...Right...”

Ruti’s expression softened a bit as she looked down.

She was laughing at me. Perhaps I was acting overprotective?

When Ruti’s expression returned to normal, she continued. “It’s okay. There’s a chance the church will take things too far, but Zoltan’s in an all right spot. We’ll have the upper hand in negotiations.”

Ruti was more than a powerful fighter. She was also top-tier when it came to judgment. It had been more than her blessing that brought her victory against the demon lord’s army.

Thus, I knew entrusting this incident to Ruti was nothing to worry about.

“You really are reliable.”

“Mhm, just leave it to me,” she replied. Seeing how Ruti nodded was a proud moment for me.

I could leave this to Ruti and read the ship’s log that Mistorm gave us.

Geizeric’s and Lilinrala’s time as pirates, and their adventures on the dark continent.

There was no saying whether it would be useful to the present trouble, but it promised to be a fascinating story either way.

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At the same time, on the water not far out from Zoltan.

“I—I give up!”

A soldier whose sword had been knocked to the deck surrendered.

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m getting pretty good, aren’t I?”

The tanned Prince Salius beamed brightly. Resting his trusty cutlass on his shoulder, he looked around.

“It’s frustrating not being able to do anything despite the shore being so close, isn’t it?! How about it? Anyone else want to spar? Letting loose is quite refreshing!”

The men smiled cheerfully while debating who would go next.

A clear, sharp voice called, “Maybe I should volunteer.”

Prince Salius’s grin stiffened.

Frantically, the crew lined up, standing at ramrod attention before a high elf in an eye patch.

“What, done playing around already?”

“Y-yes, ma’am! Sorry, ma’am!”

Cold sweat beaded on the sailors’ faces as they gave their response.

“I was the one who suggested it. No need to look so serious.” Prince Salius shrugged.

The high elf, Lilinrala, glared at the prince.

“Don’t forget, we’re in enemy territory.”

“I haven’t, but the crewmen are topnotch. No matter how drunk they might get, they’d be at their stations by the first chime from the lookout bell,”

“Any sailor foolish enough to get drunk on my ship will be heaved overboard before any bell... But fine.”

Lilinrala drew her blade—not a cutlass, but an old-style longsword.

She was wearing gleaming green gauntlets.

Prince Salius furrowed his brow when he saw them.

“Those are both heirlooms, aren’t they?”

“I felt like getting a bit serious.”

“Ha-ha... So you really are mad, then.”

The prince’s expression tensed as he readied his weapon.

Pirate swordsmanship was all about bladework, and as befit two experts, Salius and Lilinrala immediately moved in for one another.

Schiiing!

There was a high-pitched screech of metal as Salius’s downswing was batted

to the side.

No sooner had the prince staggered back than Lilinrala's longsword was hovering before his neck.

"...Haaah. It's my loss."

"You need more training. Defense drills. Left and right, three thousand times each. And all of you sitting around watching will be joining him."

Salius and the crew groaned.

Lilinrala was on the ship as Prince Salius's adjutant, but there was no question who really held the reins.

"Hmph."

While watching the sailors practice, Lilinrala double-checked the feel of her equipment.

The Gauntlets of Swordsmanship that enabled her to use her ancestors' techniques and the longsword Elven Sorrow that was imbued with wind magic were items only usable by high elves.

Every person on the boat had been handpicked by Lilinrala and was the best of the best. Prince Salius's swordsmanship was in the realm of true mastery, for he was able to best the sailors. Save for Red and his friends, there was no fighter in Zoltan who could stand against him.

However, so long as Lilinrala had her magic items, the prince had no hope of surpassing her.

"It's been a long time since I broke them out, but it doesn't seem like that will be a problem."

The sparring match had allowed the elf to test herself. Now she was ready. Lilinrala had never lost when wielding Elven Sorrow and the Gauntlets of Swordsmanship.

"Still, that's no cause to hold back," she muttered as she left the prince and crew to their training.

Interlude

Misphia's Ship's Log

Ship's log. Misphia of Veronia.

05/17. The dark continent port of Jhilkaland.

Geizeric, Lilinrala, and I drank at a tavern starting at noon.

The drink was an alcohol made of horse milk.

“At first I thought it was weak bilgewater, but drink enough, and it starts to grow on you.”

We'd pillaged our way around the coast, but the raids had taken their toll. Geizeric's ship was the last one we had left, and it was barely hanging on. In its current state, it wouldn't last much longer.

There was nothing more pitiful than pirates without a boat.

“I've got a plan. That's why we're here... Oh, speak of the devil!”

Geizeric raised his voice.

“Shisandan! Gajasura! Chugarra!”

Three Asura demons walked into the tavern.

They had revolted against and were fighting the army led by Demon Lord Satan.

Smirking, Shisandan said, “Looks like things worked out.”

Geizeric poured a mug and offered it to the demon.

“Drinks first. This is a bar.”

“True enough.”

Shisandan took the flagon and downed the off-white alcohol in one go. “Does this place not have anything stronger?”

“Huh? No one said nothin’ about there being stronger stuff here.”

“They probably thought you didn’t have the money for it.”

The Asura demons couldn’t contain their laughter as Geizeric wheeled around to roar at the barkeep.

“Oy! I said gimme the best booze ya got, ya sunovabitch!”

“That’s good enough for you. Nice and healthy.”

“Goddamn! Who’s the fool that goes to drink thinkin’ about tomorrow!”

Geizeric was kicking up a storm. Lilinrala and Shisandan laughed at his uproar, while Gajasura and Chugarra grinned wryly and paid the barkeep a dark continent gold coin.

The next round was a clear distilled liquor. The barkeep also placed a small jar of water next to the bottle.

“What’s this? How’re ya supposed to tell which is the booze now?”

Geizeric poured a mug of the alcohol and took a big gulp.

“?!”

Immediately, the man’s face tensed. The drink had to be strong to elicit such a reaction from the hardened pirate. Chugarra chuckled at the sight.

“You’re supposed to cut this with water,” Gajasura explained as he poured some into a glass and then diluted it.

“Ah!”

I was shocked. Both the liquor and water were clear, but when mixed, they turned white.

“I hope you liked the surprise. Please enjoy yourselves.” With that, the barkeep left to check on another group of customers.

I tried a sip, discovering that the liquor had a slightly sour flavor, suggesting that, like the other drink, it was also a kind of alcohol derived from milk.

It was strong but tasted great.

“Booze like this’ll burn the throat. Let’s get down to it ’fore I’m hoarse.”

“Sounds good.”

Making sure there was no one around to hear, we moved on to our main business.

“We’ve verified the weapons you stole from the demon lord’s army. Everything checks out, and there’s more than enough of them too.”

“Excellent.”

“We also got our hands on what we promised.” Shisandan pulled out a rough sketch. “The location of the demon lord’s ship—the *Vendidad*—and a map of the docks.”

“This is...”

“Gajasura and Chugarra will go with you. If you manage to steal the vessel, you can sail it straight back to your continent. Should the plan go smoothly, it will have an enormous impact on our own battle, so feel free to use the *Vendidad* as you please.”

“Fine with me! Whoever said Asuras aren’t ta be trusted didn’t know what they were talkin’ about.”

At Geizeric’s easygoing remark, Gajasura and Chugarra looked at each other.

“Asuras aren’t afraid of death, but humans are different, right? There’s no way you’ll be able to get out alive once things get ugly. If you want to walk away, this is the time.” Chugarra spoke in a testing tone, and in response, I grabbed the mug in front of me, drained its remaining contents in one gulp, and slammed it down on the table.

“What pirate worth their salt would turn tail and run with treasure still there for the taking?!”

Geizeric slapped his knee and burst into an uproarious laugh.

Chapter 2

The Duel with Lilinrala

It was afternoon at Red and Rit's Apothecary.

"I'll be back."

"Take care."

Red left with a bag full of medicine.

He was off to deliver the curatives to a clinic in Southmarsh.

With Lilinrala's ship blockading the city, the inflow of medicine was slowly decreasing.

It was not a critical issue yet, but the effects were starting to show in the price of drugs. This was a matter of life and death for smaller treatment centers.

Meanwhile, Red and Rit's Apothecary kept stock with a large number of herbs from the mountains, and its owners were willing to accept deferred payment, so more clinics were turning to them to maintain their inventories.

Despite growing sales, Rit was sad because it meant Red had to set out for deliveries far more often.

Crack.

"Eh?"

The sound had issued from Red's teacup. When Rit inspected it, she spied a fracture.

Curious, as the cup hadn't fallen, she picked it up.

"Cracking out of nowhere..."

There was a big fissure running through the cup, wide enough that it wouldn't be able to hold tea anymore.

“Red.”

Rit furrowed her brow as her thoughts turned to his earlier departure. Then she closed her eyes.

“Wood Repair.”

Envisioning the cup’s original shape, Rit formed a seal, and the wooden teacup was restored.

“All better!” Rit cheerfully hummed to herself as she walked into the kitchen to put the cup away.

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It was pretty warm outside. The morning had been cold, but fortunately, the spring weather had chased off the chill.

I was walking down a rarely used path.

“Oh, a clover flower.”

The sight of the small white blossom on the side of the path hit me with a wave of nostalgia.

When we were young, I had made a wreath out of flowers like that one for Ruti.

Maybe I should try weaving one again...or is she too old to be excited for something like that?

While I pondered, I diverged from my usual route, cutting through a dense grove.

My hand went to the hilt of the bronze sword at my hip, confirming it was still there.

Although it was only a small copse, the deeper I ventured, the quieter things grew. You could almost forget it was in the middle of Zoltan. I slipped the box of medicine off my back and set it down on the ground.

“Hah... Is this good enough for you?” I made no effort to hide my annoyance.



A high elf woman with an eye patch appeared from the shadows. She had beautiful, glimmering green gauntlets on both hands, and an elven longsword in an elegantly fashioned white sheath at her waist.

“Why are you following me around? I’m just a simple apothecary.”

“Would a simple apothecary really notice me while I was hidden, let alone lead me into the middle of a forest to settle things?”

“Says the person intentionally leaving an opening so they’d be noticed.”

Her sharp gaze drilled into me. “You recognized that much?”

I could feel it on my skin. That special sense of pressure a skilled warrior exerted, that certain mixture of caution and fighting spirit.

“Are you Lilinrala?”

“Who knows?”

As if there were any other one-eyed high elf warrior capable of making me feel so on edge. Still, she played dumb. Her lips curled slightly.

To think she would show her face.

It went to show how much faith she put in her strength, and also that she understood how, at times, bringing your strongest power to bear immediately could limit losses.

“So who are you?”

I just shrugged at her sharp question.

“Red the apothecary. A simple, unimportant, normal guy.”

“In what world does a ‘normal’ person like you exist?”

“There’s no qualification for being normal.”

Step by step, we slowly moved toward each other while trading sarcastic jabs.

A gentle breeze rustled through the grove, as if the trees were whispering to each other, guessing who might win.

“What do you want with me?”

“Come along quietly. Obey, and I promise I won’t kill you.”

“Now why would I trust the word of a pirate?”

“Thing is, I quit the whole pirate life already.” Lilinrala stopped in her tracks.
“Is there no way you would be willing to surrender?”

“It’d be pretty lame to go and cause more problems for my little sister.”

There was a white gust.

Lilinrala’s longsword came free of its sheath without a sound, its silver blade gleaming as it swung down at me from overhead.

I evaded by slipping past on Lilinrala’s right side. Turning to face her, I drew my sword and slashed in a single motion. However, Lilinrala struck at the same time, knocking my attack away.

Clang!

I saw a magic crest appear on her blade and reflexively leaped backward.

“You’re mine!”

There was a victorious look on Lilinrala’s face. The wind surging from her sword formed a blade of its own, lashing out at me.

A magic weapon that releases a wind cutter to shred anyone who dodges the real sword!

I immediately flung my cloak at it. The wind cutter shredded the mantle, but it dissipated after losing strength tearing through the sturdy fabric.

“I really liked that one.”

The tattered garment fell to the ground, now utterly ruined.

My bronze sword sported a fresh nick and small crack.

I didn’t quite parry it perfectly, huh? This could get dangerous if it has to take any more abuse.

Lilinrala seemed astonished. “That’s quite the technique. I don’t know what sort of blessing you have, but you didn’t use a martial art or magic, and I didn’t sense any notable skills, either. You’re an unreadable one. Disgustingly so. Still...

there's a great difference in our weapons' quality."

The gulf between our swords was obvious, and as befit a legendary pirate, Lilinrala's swordsmanship was exceptional. It rivaled the knight captain who'd taught me to fight.

"I could've left this to the two of them and never had to fight. I suppose running off to the guards might've worked, too..." I raised my sword in my right hand while shifting my left foot back slightly. "Honestly, I wasn't looking to make a scene. I couldn't care less about prestige, and I don't particularly hate you for threatening peace in Zoltan." It would have been a simple task for Ruti or Tisse to defeat Lilinrala. There was no logical reason for me to engage her since I was just a simple apothecary now. "But...I can't really bring myself to make my little sister deal with something I could just handle myself."

"What are you talking about?"

I focused myself back on the fight. Lilinrala's expression tightened after seeing my disposition change.

I swayed the edge of my sword back and forth, holding for an opportunity.

Not wanting to wait, Lilinrala moved in, but caught her foot on a tree root. Her gaze shifted down for a split second.

"!!"

Holding my breath, I poured power into my legs, closing the gap between us in one leap. Her blade came up to defend, but...

"What?!"

Lilinrala's movements were more sluggish than last time. There was a shade of apprehension on her face as her eyes turned to her gauntlets.

"Impossible! When?!"

There was a big scratch along the armored glove on her left hand.

In our first exchange, I had scratched her gauntlet while leaping backward.

Those armored gloves offered more than mere physical enhancement. They housed complex and delicate elf magic. And fragile spells were weak to

damage.

The gauntlets' power waned with the engraved magic disrupted. And because Lilinrala was suddenly unable to move as she'd anticipated, she left herself open. She barely managed to guard in time against my thrust.

There was a metallic creak as the swords crashed against each other.

With our blades locked, I pushed in one step closer.

My bronze sword slipped past Lilinrala's defense like a snake, tearing into her shoulder.

Enduring the pain, she unleashed a wind slash to create an opening and retreated a bit.

There was blood flowing from her wound.

"Gh..."

It was a deep cut and would hopefully sap her of strength, too.

"Do you still want to keep going?"

"Zoltan is full of unbelievable surprises. I never suspected there was someone stronger than me here."

If Lilinrala attempted a recovery magic or skill, or made to drink a cure potion, I'd strike the moment she tried it. At our current distance, if either of us revealed an opening, it would be exploited immediately. However, the longer the stalemate remained, the closer Lilinrala would get to collapsing from blood loss. She had no hope of winning with her dominant arm crippled, and if she fled, I could chase with Lightning Speed and land another attack.

I had the upper hand, but...

"That's enough," declared a man.

...Lilinrala looked sure of her victory.

Emerging from the trees was a high elf man with a cutlass in his right hand. A trembling, crying girl stood beside him. I recognized her as one of the children from Zoltan.

"A hostage, huh? Awfully pirate-like."

“Soldiers use dirty tricks, too. All that matters is winning, after all. Now drop your sword.”

“And if I said I didn’t want to?”

“We kill the girl.”

She was a cheerful kid who said hi whenever we passed each other, but that was the only connection we really had. We weren’t even acquaintances.

“Do you go around kidnapping any child you happened to lay eyes on?”

“It’s effective on guys like you.” Lilinrala clutched at her wounded shoulder.

“I suppose so.” I threw my sword high into the air.

“What?! You!”

It traced a wide arc up and descended toward the high elf holding the hostage.

It was just a bronze sword falling under the force of gravity. The man could easily swat it aside with his cutlass or take a step to avoid it. And if it did hit, it was only a cheap bronze sword, a weapon unable of dealing a serious wound.

There weren’t many people who could bring themselves to ignore a blade plunging for them, though.

The man’s eyes focused on the plummeting weapon.

“Lightning Speed.”

The moment his gaze left me, I ran around the tree he was next to, coming up behind him.

“Eh?”

Before he could react, my punch connected with his clean-cut face.

He went flying to the side, unconscious.

Catching my sword, I dashed for the stunned Lilinrala, striking with an upward slash.

Unlike the kidnapper, she managed to react, taking a defensive stance. However, her movements were less refined than her reaction speed, perhaps

because of her wound.

“Gh?!”

There was a splatter of blood. My sword had been just a little bit faster. Now bearing a more serious injury, Lilinrala’s knees gave out, and she collapsed.

“Hahhh.”

After making sure that she couldn’t stand, I sheathed my sword. Wiping away the sweat on my forehead, I slowly exhaled.

After some emergency first aid, I can drop them off with Ruti. The medicine delivery will have to wait, unfortunately.

“Ugh, wahhh, Mr. Red...”

But she comes first.

I patted the girl’s shoulder and smiled to put her at ease.

“It’s okay, I took care of all the bad people. You were really brave.”

“Wahhhhhhhhhhh!”

It must have been terrifying being kidnapped by strangers and held hostage without understanding what was happening.

She clung to my waist, crying tears of relief.

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“Heave ho.”

“C-Cap’n?!”

I tied Lilinrala and her subordinate with rope and carried them to the basement of Ruti’s mansion.

The other two high elves who were being held down there had looks of absolute disbelief on their faces when they saw Lilinrala.

“Gh...”

The high elf groaned, finally coming to.

“Oh, you’re awake? I gave you first aid, but if you move around too much, the wounds will reopen.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“You’re the one who attacked me, you know,” I reminded with a grimace. “Anyway, now that I’ve handed you over to Ruti, I suppose my job’s over.”

All I’d done was defend myself.

“Who the hell are you people?”

Lilinrala sounded dumbfounded, as if the venom in her voice had been neutralized by my indifference.

Evidently, I’d escaped renown in Veronia during my adventuring days because the nation had been hostile with Avalonia since before the demon lord’s invasion.

Once, I had visited a Veronian castle as part of a formal negotiation while I was still a knight. In any other country, that would probably have been enough to be remembered.

“Bastard! Heal the cap’n’s wounds properly!”

One of the high elves Ruti and Tisse had captured earlier started complaining.

The bandage around Lilinrala was reddening. I guess her injury had reopened a bit while moving around.

“What gall to demand aid when you’re the ones who attacked us,” I fired back with a sharp tone.

Lilinrala and her subordinate had attempted violent abductions, even if they’d failed both times.

“I gave her proper first aid with medicine. Given high elves’ natural vitality and her substantial level, I’m sure there won’t be long-term issues.”

“There’s a treaty defining how prisoners are supposed to be handled!”

“This isn’t the Kingdom of Avalonia; it’s the Republic of Zoltan. City-states and independent countries aren’t bound by that accord. And since there’s been no formal declaration of war, don’t bother pulling the prisoner-of-war card. You’re all criminals being detained for attempted kidnapping.”

“Th—that’s...”

Sheesh.

“...Are you an ex-soldier?”

Bitterness showed on my face at Lilinrala’s inquiries.

Crap...she is really sharp. I don’t think that’s enough to reveal my identity, though.

“Perhaps you’re a general who caused trouble or lost out in a power struggle or something? Come to Veronia, and I can arrange for a special appointment to a generalship if you like.”

“Well, that’s certainly one theory.”

I ended the conversation there and sat on the ground, waiting for my sister.

After a while, Ruti, Tisse, and Rit all came down into the basement.

“Hm? You too, Rit?”

“I don’t want to be the only one left out.”

“I was planning to go home once I handed things over to Ruti.”

“I want you here, if that isn’t too much trouble.”

“See? Ruti wants you here.”

Well, if that’s her preference...

“Fine, then I’ll wait behind you in case anything happens.”

“Thank you.”

Ruti sounded happy. And looking at her face, I ended up feeling like there was nothing wrong with indulging her.

She didn’t ask too many questions, probably because she hadn’t expected to get much information to begin with. Recognizing that Lilinrala wouldn’t cooperate, my sister quickly shifted gears.

“So what should we do?”

“What about handing them over to the Zoltan authorities? They won’t get anything out of them, either, but these four might make useful chips for negotiating with Prince Salius.”

As expected of a former princess, Rit proposed a political strategy.

“That might work. We can’t be too careful with that galley lurking out beyond the harbor, after all.”

We were dealing with a key Veronian military leader. If we went too far with her, the entire Veronian navy could mobilize against us.

Just then, there was a loud knock from the mansion’s front door.

“I wonder who that is. I’ll go check.”

I stood and went to the door.

“It’s me, Red.”

When I opened the door, I saw Yarandrala standing with...

“Mistorm?!”

“Ah, yeah, sorry for the sudden intrusion.”

The very person that Lilinrala was after had arrived with an awkward look on her face.

“Let us in, please.”

“Can you wait a bit, Yarandrala? It’s kind of a bad time for a visit.”

“You have Lilinrala here, don’t you?”

“How’d you know?”

“Don’t think you can keep anything secret from a friend of all plants.”

It had to be because Lilinrala and I fought in the woods. Yarandrala sure had some convenient skills. I understood why Danan grumbled about how troublesome things got after Yarandrala left.

Hopefully, Danan was taking it easy during this latest mess. Knowing him, he’d likely burst out of the hospital to go looking for a fight.

I’d have to go remind him not to do anything reckless later.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Red?”

“Because if I did, I knew you’d come to kick Lilinrala’s ass.”

“It’s fine. I would’ve held back.”

“That isn’t fine at all! No torturing prisoners!”

“Awww.”

Yarandrala pouted, and it looked like she wanted to argue, but certain lines had to be drawn.

“And if you knew, why did you bring Mistorm? Lilinrala’s after her,” I said.

“Obviously. That’s why I brought her along, so they can resolve whatever troublesome, lingering issue is causing this once and for all.”

As usual, Yarandrala was decisive and quick to act.

But that swiftness wasn’t always a boon. It had led to some dangerous predicaments in the past.

“What do you think, Mistorm?”

“Well, if I’m being honest, I’m a bit worried.”

Mistorm held out her hands. Her wrinkled fingers were trembling slightly.

“Fifty years ago, I thought it was best that I disappear. To Lilinrala, I’m just a reckless consort who fled without a word. Had I only rejected her idea when she brought Salius, it would never have come to this.”

“But that’s...”

“Lilinrala and I made a bad decision. And though she’s after my life now, we used to be friends. I have to muster some courage and put an end to this.”

Mistorm clapped her hands together.

“Please let me in, too, Red. I’m going to see Lilinrala. I don’t know whether one of us will end up apologizing, but I can’t let things continue as they are.”

“...Okay. If that’s what you want, then I’ll respect it.”

I led the two of them to the others.

Yarandrala was the first to step inside.

“Now, where is she?”

It might have been better to ask Yarandrala to leave.

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Before letting Mistorm meet Lilinrala, I thought it prudent to quickly review the situation.

The incident began with Salius Prince of Veronia and Lilinrala demanding the Zoltan church registers.

Prince Salius wanted the records to find his mother, Queen Misphia, who'd disappeared from Veronia and was living in Zoltan under the name Mistorm, so that he could secure his succession to the throne.

However, Prince Salius was not Mistorm's real son. He'd been switched in when Mistorm's child was a stillbirth.

Leonor discovered that fact somehow and threatened to reveal it to force Mistorm out of the palace.

Thus, Mistorm was actually a threat to Prince Salius's succession instead of the key to his claiming the throne.

It was for that reason that Lilinrala sent hired killers to slay Mistorm before Prince Salius could find her. Hence, the assassination attempt during the solstice festival.

However, Lilinrala could not have imagined that the ex-Hero was in Zoltan. The assassins were defeated, and Lilinrala was eventually captured.

A reunion after fifty years...and hopefully it would end peaceably.

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"Wh— Y-Yarandrala?! What are you doing here?!" Lilinrala exclaimed when she saw her old acquaintance standing in the doorway. The two high elves had known each other for longer than Lilinrala had been a pirate.

"It's been a long time, you tumbleweed elf!"

"What'd you say?! Did you come here to start something?!"

The two of them were glaring at each other after less than a second.

"Tumbleweed elf?!" Rit broke in suddenly with a look of confusion.

"Ah, that's a high elf insult. They take pride in their homelands, so being called a rootless tumbleweed is a slight because it implies they are ashamed to say where they're from."

"...Doesn't really have much oomph to me."

Still, it was clear as day how furious Lilinrala was at Yarandrala's insult.

It didn't really register for Rit or me, but the remark was evidently enough to spark a fight for high elves.

"Like you're one to talk! There's no high elf stranger than you!"

"But I've never done anything so shameless as to betray a friend!"

"Gh! That's... Wait, what are you suggesting?!"

"You betrayed Geizeric, obviously."

"How do you know that?!" Lilinrala screamed, leaving her bound subordinates stunned by the sudden outburst. They looked between the two women, struggling to understand what was happening.

"Because I told her," Mistorm said as she stepped into the room. "It's been a long time, Lilinrala. Fifty years, but you still look the same."

"...Misphia? You've aged. Humans really...do grow old so fast."

Such a response was to be expected. To Lilinrala, Mistorm was still Queen Misphia from five decades ago.

"Why, Misphia? Why did you run away?"

"You know why. Leonor beat me."

The pair faced each other as they spoke. Lilinrala was glaring, but there was a powerful determination in Mistorm's eyes as she met the elf's gaze.

"Everything else is irrelevant... How could you abandon Geizeric? Why didn't you believe in him? If you were there, he would have recognized Salius."

"I did... You and I were the ones who betrayed him first!"

"No... You've got it wrong."

"Why come to Zoltan now, Lilinrala?"

“For Salius’s sake.”

There was no trace of doubt in her words.

“You’re awfully supportive of Prince Salius.” When I mentioned that, Lilinrala cast me a sharp look.

“Misphia... How could you reveal Salius’s secret? You know it puts him in danger!”

“Because the people in this room are all friends I can trust.”

Lilinrala’s fists clenched so hard her fingers turned white and her hands quivered.

“If any one of them lets it leak, it will be the end of Salius!”

“Worrying about that is a waste of time now. Save it.” Mistorm shook her head. “And... You tried to kill me to keep Salius and I from meeting.”

“Hmph. That’s right.”

“I’m sure it was a member of Leonor’s faction who told Salius that I might be in Zoltan.”

“...Yeah. I let my guard down. I didn’t expect them to try something so devious.”

“If nothing else, Leonor is top class when it comes to political schemes.”

“I know that nauseatingly well.”

Lilinrala and Mistorm broke into wry smiles.

“In that case, can’t you just say Mistorm is already dead or else gone permanently missing?” Lilinrala shook her head at Tisse’s naive question.

“An excuse like that will only mean that Leonor’s agents will come to capture Misphia next. She doesn’t leave loose ends.”

“But regardless of whether I’m alive or dead, isn’t Leonor’s son Yuzuk going to inherit the throne? Why waste her time on me? Was it just a bluff to get you and Salius away from the palace?”

“I considered that possibility...but there is still a chance that Geizeric might

name Salius as successor as his last act. If Geizeric did so any sooner, Leonor would get in the way, but no one would be able to overturn the declaration if it was the king's last words."

"Not even the king can change the order of inheritance without going through the proper steps, though. Leonor would claim his last words were spoken in a feverish haze, and thus invalid. For now, it's more important to preserve Salius's support after Yuzuk becomes king. Then he can wait for Yuzuk to lose standing."

Ruti nodded while watching Lilinrala and Mistorm debate.

"It's resolved."

""Huh?""

Both Mistorm and Lilinrala looked confused at my sister's abrupt comment.

I looked at Ruti, not sure what exactly she meant.

"The two of them are talking about the same goal, so things are okay now." There was a satisfied smile on Ruti's face.

And I was left with the out-of-place thought that it was unfortunate not everyone present could recognize how adorable she looked.

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Lilinrala looked dumbstruck, and Mistorm appeared at a loss for how to respond.

Paying no more heed to the two of them because she thought everything was settled, Ruti relaxed and sat down in a chair. Tisse and I were likely the only ones who recognized that she was actually relaxed, however.

"Ah, ummm, right."

For some reason, I wound up having to steer the conversation.

I was a complete outsider when it came to Veronia's internal political dynamics. Unfortunately, there wasn't much choice but to step in because Lilinrala and Mistorm had stopped talking.

"So are we agreed in the goals of saving Mistorm and getting Prince Salius to withdraw his demand to see the church's records?"

“...I never had any intention of letting him get his hands on those logs to begin with. We can set the matter of Misphia aside for now,” Lilinrala replied.

“I appreciate it. Those two points were really all that Zoltan wanted out of this. As for how to strengthen Prince Salius’s influence in the royal court...”

If the succession problem could be resolved, Mistorm would no longer have value to either faction.

But the fact of the matter was that Prince Salius was in an incredibly difficult situation.

I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about Veronia’s court affairs, so I couldn’t say for certain, but the prince’s opponents had to rank higher in the line of succession and surely carried more political influence. Plus, they had the leading queen consort backing them.

“Considering your personality, there’s no way you’ll get any support from the old nobility,” Mistorm remarked.

“I have people I can trust to handle negotiations!” Lilinrala snapped, her eyes narrowed.

Their discussion wouldn’t have gone far without some prodding, but fortunately, the nudging had pushed them into a heated debate. There was no longer any need for me to say anything.

I could almost envision the two of them getting along back when they were younger.

A bell sounded in the distance.

“What?”

We were in a basement, so the noise was weak enough to not be audible without a blessing or skill to enhance perception.

But before long, everyone in the room noticed it.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

The bells in town were ringing hard enough to reach the basement.

It was Zoltan’s emergency alarm.

“I’ll go check on things.”

Yarandrala pulled out a seed, creating a green vine. After opening the door, she extended it all the way outside. A few moments later, she cried out in surprise.

“...Ah!”

“What is it?”

“I hadn’t anticipated this. There could be a problem.” Yarandrala’s expression was grave. “Veronian marines have occupied the harbor district. They’ve taken several guards and residents hostage.”

“Impossible!” Liliinrala shouted before I had time to be shocked. “Are you sure?! Are they actually Salius’s men?!?”

“You know my abilities. There’s no mistaking it.”

“It can’t be! Salius knows that resorting to force isn’t an option!”

Prince Salius sent in his troops?

If that was true, the church issue we’d asked Bishop Shien to take care of would rear its head again. Were Veronia to invade and occupy Zoltan, the church would get involved no matter what Bishop Shien said. It would become impossible to stop a war between human nations.

Why did something like this have to happen right as Ruti was finally settling into an easy life in Zoltan?!

“We should head to the harbor district,” Rit suggested.

“Yeah, Rit’s right,” I agreed. Then I approached Liliinrala.

“...It can’t be. What happened to Salius?” She was aghast. Something about the sight of her gave me an ominous feeling.

“Big Brother.” Ruti nodded at me.

I’m confident she sensed what I was thinking thanks to the connection we’d cultivated on the Hero’s journey.

“Will you come with us, Liliinrala?”

“What?”

“R-Red!?”

Lilinrala’s had a dubious expression, and Mistorm looked downright shocked.

“We both have the same goal, stopping the Veronian soldiers, right?”

“...Yeah, that’s right! I swear on my high elf blood that I won’t do anything uncalled for, so please let me help. I must stop Prince Salius before he does something foolish.”

I untied Lilinrala and her subordinates.

“Let’s go.”

“Got it.”

All of us hurried out of the mansion.

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Ruti, Rit, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly, Yarandrala, Mistorm, Lilinrala and her three subordinates, and I all raced to the harbor district.

The town was filled with people running in panic, but there didn’t seem to be any signs of casualties. Fortunately, there were no signs of any large-scale fighting.

After running a few minutes, we reached the harbor and were greeted by a fluttering Veronian flag.

“What is happening?” Lilinrala’s shoulders slumped.

“The only foreign force in range of Zoltan is Prince Salius’s.”

When I pointed that out, Lilinrala muttered, “That’s impossible.”

“There’s no smoke, and it doesn’t smell like anything’s happened, either,” Rit pointed out. She’d seen her homeland of Loggervia scorched by the flames of war to a horrific degree, so no one was better equipped to make that call than her.

“It looks the same to me. The Zoltan army should have already been instructed to prioritize citizen evacuation and a quick retreat in the event of a Veronian invasion. There’s not many people living in the harbor district anyway,

so it's possible there's been no skirmishes or looting."

It was standard practice to begin the defense before the enemy landed, but if a war broke out in earnest, Zoltan had no chance of winning. The only option was to withdraw before suffering too many losses while focusing on diplomatic efforts. Naturally, that was only if Ruti and Tisse didn't join the fight.

"I'm going to check from higher ground."

Tisse ran gracefully up the wall of a nearby storage building and surveyed the surroundings.

"I can see the Zoltan battle flag over there. There's Lord William's banner as well. His drake knights are gathered and mounted... There's not much point in assembling the knights in the middle of town like that, though."

"He's never had to lead in real combat, and I'm sure he's got no urban warfare experience," I said.

Still, he'd be able to fill us in on what was happening.

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Zoltan's harbor district was right in the path of the yearly storms that blew through. The buildings in that section of town weren't made to last, almost all being dingy and cheaply constructed. The storage building where Lord William had amassed his forces was the same: a plain wooden frame instead of bricks, and the walls were dried mud.

Dark clouds hung overhead, threatening to rain.

I looked up at the big, one-armed man dressed like a soldier who was standing in front of me.

"This is Lord William's camp. State your business."

"...What are you doing, Danan?"

"Ga-ha-ha. Caught me, huh?"

The person standing watch at the entrance to the Zoltan army camp was none other than Danan the Martial Artist. His face was concealed behind a soldier's helmet, but there was no hiding that mountain of muscle or his overwhelming aura.

“It looked like something interesting was happening out here, so...”

“So?”

“I didn’t want you to have all the fun. I joined as a volunteer, and I’m on lookout.”

“You’re wasted on scout duty, Danan!”

The words left my mouth before I even realized it. Danan seemed to misunderstand what a lookout’s job was anyway.

Lookouts were supposed to alert their allies when they noticed anything abnormal, but as far as Danan was concerned, the position was just so he could go fight the enemies first because he’d spot them prior to anyone else.

“What, are you going to hog all the good stuff to yourselves again? You’ve been up to all sorts of fun things without me, right?! Let me join in, too!”

“...Once your wound has healed.”

Danan was still recovering. Any normal person would’ve been struggling just to walk.

I told him to go back to the hospital, and Ruti made him swear on his fist to get well before he left.

“Sheesh...”

Fortunately, Danan was able to get us to Lord William’s command post without any trouble, so it worked out that he’d been here.

Inside the building, Lord William stood before a map laid out on the ground, staring at a lot of enemy pieces and looking like he might cry.

Seeing Lilinrala and her subordinates, Lord William shouted, “Oh! Is that Admiral Lilinrala?!”

“You know Lilinrala, Lord William?”

“How could I not?! The men who occupied the harbor demanded we return her and her three subordinates. They’re offering to pay a ransom of forty-two thousand payrils, plus they’ll guarantee the return of the harbor and all hostages and give an additional eight thousand payrils for indemnity.”

"Th-that's something."

For a group that had occupied the harbor district by force, it was a pretty generous compromise. It gave off an incoherent impression.

However, if Lilinrala was to be believed, Prince Salius was by no means some incompetent noble.

"I don't know how Admiral Lilinrala ended up in custody, but you bringing her here is a tremendous stroke of fortune. I'll dispatch a messenger at once. No, I suppose it would be better for us to go directly there ourselves."

The relief on Lord William's face was obvious.

It must have been rough having the harbor occupied by a force he had no hope of defeating, and then being told to return someone he didn't know was in custody.

"Wait, please. We still don't really know what's going on here. Let's start with assessing the situation..."

I tried to urge a bit of calm, but Lord William wasn't having it.

"I don't know who you are, but you've got no standing to be ordering me! I have command of this army! Do you understand what will happen if they change their mind and start moving in?! We must return the prisoners at once and preserve Zoltan's peace and safety!"

It was a powerful, spittle-flecked bellow, but the contents were fairly weak-willed.

While I was at a loss for how to respond, Rit and Mistorm, who were standing behind Lilinrala, spoke up.

"Calm down, Lord William. We have Lilinrala, so we're in the better position. We should get a firm grasp of the events so far, then we can decide on the best path."

"Will, I understand that this is an unprecedented situation for Zoltan, but if you lose yourself, Zoltan's army will crumble."

"Rit?! And Master Mistorm?!"

Lord William's eyes widened when he saw Mistorm. And then he slumped to his knees, as if his strength had left him.

"Master Mistorm, I can't... Please take command of the army from me. It's too great a burden. Save Zoltan like you did once before..."

"Will, you can't keep relying on an old granny like me. It's up to your generation now."

A middle-aged man clinging to a graying woman for support. It certainly wasn't a good look for Lord William, but none of his subordinates seemed to think less of the man for it. They watched Mistorm with the same pleading gaze.

I knew this sort of scene well.

It resembled my memories of soldiers who'd fallen into despair in the face of the demon lord's armies pleading with Ruti for salvation—because the Hero was hope.

Ruti scrunched her face slightly at the sight.

"If you cower, then all the soldiers will do the same. Stand up, Will; it's okay. I know how hard you've worked. Now, please tell us everything you know about the predicament."

"...Yes, ma'am."

With eyes downcast, he explained all he could to Mistorm and Rit.

Unfortunately, he'd been so focused on getting residents to safety and gathering forces that he'd had little time for anything else.

I left the questioning to the two of them and went over to Lilinrala.

Yarandrala rushed over and whispered in my ear, "Red, there's something strange about Lilinrala."

The proud elf pirate was gone, and now someone else stood where she had.

"Again... It's my fault again..." There was clear regret in Lilinrala's eyes—despair, too. "I just... I only wanted to support him."

It was a quiet anguish, barely audible, but my powerful Perception skill let me hear it clearly... Which "him" did she mean, though?

“Lord William seems to be in favor of handing you over. Once they’ve finished talking, why don’t we go see Prince Salius?” I suggested to Lilinrala.

Her subordinates nodded in relief as they offered their leader support.

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The Favorable Winds was a comparatively nicer inn for captains and navigators.

It was the tavern Ruti had used when she’d first arrived in Zoltan. Prince Salius had commandeered it as his base. A tanned, high elf Veronian soldier led us in. He banged on the door before announcing us.

“Prince Salius. The messengers from Zoltan are here.”

It was rough etiquette for a prince’s royal guard. However, he was constantly watching our movements and was ready to draw steel at any moment, so it was clear he was a soldier with a wealth of experience. Such a demeanor was quite different from that of a refined high elf from Kiramin. There was a sharpness and dangerousness to it that could have only been forged on the waves and in the navy.

“Show them in,” commanded a man’s voice that came from inside.

I glanced at Ruti and Tisse, who nodded in reply. They had already met Prince Salius, and thus recognized the voice.

The soldier opened the door. Within was a man sitting before a desk wearing the same equipment as the soldier, but his was engraved with the crest of the Veronian royal family and a rune that indicated the armor was enchanted.

Salius was supposed to be nearing fifty years old, but he only looked to be in his thirties.

“Good. She’s safe.”

Looking at Lilinrala first, he then turned to us and flashed a white smile, more menacing than amiable. The sort of grin you would save for someone you were about to fight.

Hmm...that face...

Right when I sensed something off about it...

Crack!

There was a sharp slap.

“Wh-why?”

Prince Salius was holding his cheek, stunned.

Lilinrala stood before him, breathing heavily and clearly unable to contain her anger. She had leaped forward and struck the prince.

“I’m the one who should be asking that! Why did you do something so stupid?!”

The subordinates standing beside Lilinrala and the soldiers protecting Prince Salius all suddenly froze.

Naturally, Ruti had noticed Lilinrala leaping forward; if she felt like it, she could surely have stopped it. But she just watched quietly.

Yarandrala glanced at me to check what to do. I shook my head slightly, letting her know I intended just to watch and wait for now.

She nodded but still looked concerned.

“If Leonor finds out about this, it will be the end for you! You can’t be foolish enough to think otherwise!”

Lilinrala’s voice was trembling. Anger showed plain in her expression. Prince Salius gritted his teeth and cast his gaze down. “It was only because you were captured.”

“What?! I’ve taught you that someone fit to be king must have the resolve to leave behind a subordinate when necessary!”

“If it meant losing you...then I don’t need to be king! I wouldn’t want to be king! You should understand that!!!”

It was a thundering proclamation. Those soldiers outside undoubtedly heard it, too. I could hear whispers from beyond the tavern walls.

The look on Lilinrala’s face was beyond description.

Enraged, despairing, tearful...and joyous. Some complex feelings warped her features and seemed to be tearing her apart.

Silence settled over the room. The Veronian soldiers looked around, nervous and unsure what to do. And in the middle of it all, I shifted next to Mistorm, who stood at the back of our group staring dumbstruck at Prince Salius's face.

"Does he resemble him?" I inquired.

Mistorm's shoulder twitched when she heard my question.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I'd been considering the possibility for a while now. Lilinrala is a pirate. She should be working for Geizeric's sake, not Veronia's. Why would she go so far for Prince Salius?"

"Resemblance, nothing! He's the spitting image of Geizeric when he was young! But they shouldn't be related at all!" Mistorm shuddered as she whispered.

Then it was as I'd suspected. Prince Salius really was King Geizeric's son. Which meant...

"Lilinrala...is Prince Salius yours?"



Mistorm covered her mouth with a trembling hand, quelling the urge to shout.

Who was that love and malice for? And what of the betrayal and sacrifice? Who was served by everything that had happened?

Prince Salius wasn't trying to look younger, but rather, older.

The light makeup he wore wasn't to keep him appearing youthful. If he removed it, he would probably look like a handsome young man—barely an adult. He wasn't even fifty years old yet, a juvenile by high elf standards.

"Red...Prince Salius is..."

I nodded to Rit.

"Yeah, Prince Salius is half high elf and half human...Geizeric is his father, and Lilinrala is his mother."

Because Divine Blessings dominated the world, people sought a backstop of support outside of blessings in the form of lineage and political power.

Society did not trust blessings enough to obey a person with a powerful one unconditionally.

Even King Geizeric, who both possessed the Emperor blessing and had rebuilt Veronia into a great power was still viewed as a pirate and a scoundrel.

If people acknowledged him, then they'd have to do so for the next bandit, thief, or arsonist with the Emperor blessing to come along. And there was no telling what such an individual might do.

If you asked me, royals were the perfect example of the paradox of blessings. Rit, princess of the Duchy of Loggervia, had undoubtedly considered that a situation like this could have befallen her.

She squeezed my hand as if to affirm that we were still together.

And I did the same to reassure her.

Chapter 3

The Secret Revealed

My name is Salius of Veronia.

I am the son of King Geizeric and Queen Consort Misphia, and I am a prince of Veronia.

I hardly remember anything of my mother.

All I have is a faint image of a woman's figure watching quietly from a short distance while I played.

When I heard the stories of how my parents captured the capital when they were pirates, I struggled to imagine it was the same woman from my faint recollections.

Veronian nobles didn't raise their children directly. So the person I remember best from my earliest days, is the one-eyed high elf Admiral Lilinrala.

"What are you doing, Salius?"

That was always the first thing she would ask whenever she spoke to me.

No matter what, even if I was playing a game that was obvious at a glance, she always started conversations that way.

Despite becoming a noble, she still wore the same kind of black eye patch she had during her pirate days. Even when in an elegant, flowing dress, Admiral Lilinrala kept a plain cutlass at her waist. Most preferred to avoid her for not belonging, but I enjoyed the time I spent with her.

The stories she told me were not fables of elegant aristocrats or brave knights, but stirring tales of the sea.

When I was bored and stuck in my room, she would quietly sneak me out to her ship to teach me about the sights and smells of the ocean.

I was on an adventure with a radiant dragon named Al-Haytham when I found out that my mother was not my actual parent.

A prince and a dragon exploring a forest and fighting an evil witch. It was a glorious journey, but it didn't have anything to do with this, so I'll save it for another time.

The important point was that I had taken the pair of gauntlets in Lilinrala's room with me.

They were beautiful items made of a green metal, and, almost magically, they fit me even though I was not fully grown.

Despite being a child, when I wore those gauntlets, I could swing my sword like a veteran, and I used them to beat back the forest's monsters.

And when we defeated the witch, she laughed upon seeing the armored gloves. With her dying breath, she told me they were a magic item called the Gauntlets of Swordsmanship and only high elves could use them.

It was a shock. My mother and father were humans, which meant at least one of them wasn't my natural parent.

When I considered the notion, the visage of a certain high elf flashed through my mind.

Once I was aware of that, it wasn't long before my doubts became absolute confidence. Suddenly, everything fit together perfectly.

My slow aging also supported the witch's claim. Over the years, my appearance had changed too little for me to be fully human.

Lilinrala was my true mother.

The days of power struggles were by no means tranquil, but I was happy to know my mother was fighting for me.

Having been left by my human mother, Father declared that there was nothing I would inherit, yet Lilinrala remained at my side, always protecting me.

I wanted to thank her, to tell her that I loved her. My deepest wish was to treat her like my true parent.

When Father fell ill, it seemed our struggle was to end in defeat, precisely as it had been destined to conclude. At that time, one of the nobles of Leonor's faction came to me, claiming they knew where my human mother could be found.

I understood that it was a trap, but I had another idea.

If my human mother rejected me and declared that I wasn't her child, then Lilinrala and I could leave Father and the kingdom behind.

Were we to abandon Veronia like my human mother did so long ago, then maybe Lilinrala and I could find somewhere to exist like a normal family.

There would be nothing tying Lilinrala and me to Veronia if Father died and I was unable to succeed him.

That's what I'd believed because I didn't want to lose my mother for a second time.

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"That's what I'd believed because I didn't want to lose my mother for a second time."

Prince Salius finished his story and let out a long, deep breath. There were beads of nervous sweat on his hands as they rest on the table, and his eyes were cast down.

I took out the green gauntlets I'd recovered after defeating Lilinrala and set them on the table.

"You can have these back."

The polished armored gloves reflected the faces of Lilinrala, Prince Salius, and, from a little farther away, Mistorm.

The three of them kept silent for a while.

"Lilinrala." In their place, Yarandrala spoke. "It's your turn now. How is Salius your son?" There was something threatening in her gaze.

"Because there was no other way... Geizeric and Misphia have been affected by the poison known as Stealth Extinction."

“‘Stealth Extinction’?” Yarandrala looked at me.

I remembered something from a book on demon studies I had read in the forbidden section of the royal archives.

“If I recall, it’s a demon toxin. If you drink the correct amount of it every day for about a month, it transforms your body to make it secrete poison.”

“You’re awfully knowledgeable. I only learned about it after getting a scholar to investigate for me.”

“I see... Stealth Extinction... So that’s what happened.” Knowing the poison involved, it wasn’t difficult to piece together what had transpired.

“What do you mean, Red?” Yarandrala questioned after seeing my expression.

“It’s a concoction developed by demons who live on the dark continent. What sets the toxin apart is that it’s contagious.”

“Contagious?”

“It’s a poison when mixed in a compound, but it can transfer through the bodily fluids of someone who has been afflicted, like a disease.”

“What do you mean by bodily fluids?”

“Well, there’s a few different ways. But in this case, having sex.”

“Then...!”

Yarandrala looked stunned.

“Yes. Leonor drank the poison herself and spread it to Geizeric. And then it passed from him to Misphia. Leonor’s plot successfully deceived even a high elf.”

“Then the reason why Mistorm’s child didn’t make it is...!”

“Undoubtedly, the fetus couldn’t endure the toxin in her blood. That effect is likely what gives Stealth Extinction its name. By poisoning captives and releasing them, it’s possible to eradicate a whole community’s population.”

“But then how was Prince Salius born? He’s Geizeric’s son, isn’t he?”

Lilinrala averted her eyes, as though to flee the gazes of her fellow high elves. “Yarandrala, you know very well we high elves possess a great vitality. A human baby might succumb, but there was a chance that a hybrid could survive. It was the only way for Geizeric to have a child.”

Geizeric, the mighty pirate who stole a country, had known the truth about Prince Salius from the start. Yet after taking the throne, that iron will began to crumble. Perhaps he grew frail beneath the powerful impulses of his Emperor blessing, which demanded he ensure his lineage.

I wondered what the pirate king thought as he faced his death.

“Lilinrala, tell me this honestly.” Yarandrala was glaring straight at the high elf pirate.

“What?”

“Was there nothing else to it? Did you betray your friend Misphia solely to protect Geizeric’s line and your positions?”

“That’s...all it was supposed to be.” Lilinrala’s expression twisted. “But I loved him. I loved Geizeric, and I love Salius. I was willing to betray anything and everything else if I had to. Was there anything else? There was, Yarandrala. My heart swelled every time I saw Salius’s face.”

“I see.” That was all Yarandrala offered. Her voice was flat, and her eyes were closed.

More so than most other races, high elves were reluctant to trust others. But once they did, if they did build a proper connection, they would never betray that bond.

To high elves, that act of treachery was far more wicked than human morals could comprehend.

Yarandrala had been so enraged as to attack Ares for pushing me out of the party because, in her view, Ares committed the most unforgivable sin.

“Lilinrala, Misphia...”

Prince Salius was next to break the silence, and the two women looked at him.

"Whatever the reasons, and whatever fate may lie in store, I'm glad to acknowledge my true mother properly. And I'm also happy to meet the human mother I thought I'd never see again. I just...wanted to let you both know that."

No malice or regret colored Prince Salius's words. His face was pure and clear, betraying a hint of the high elf features he'd inherited.

"Shall we step outside for a moment?" I suggested.

Ruti nodded. "Mhm."

The rest was a problem for the three of them to handle.

It would surely take time, but if they could talk things through, I believed they would come to an understanding.

Yarandrala had gone still, so I took her by the hand, and we all left.

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We went to the next room over, leaving Prince Salius, Lilinrala, and Mistorm to themselves.

"Good job holding it in, Yarandrala."

When I said that, she let out a long sigh, as if expelling everything that had built up in her chest. "I've seen a lot of different humans, and I recognized their kind of perspective and doubt in her."

To a high elf, what Lilinrala had done was an unforgivable betrayal. Considering Yarandrala's usual temperament, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd attacked the pirate upon realizing the truth. Honestly, the look on her face during Lilinrala's story was terrifying.

"She's become far more human than I have," Yarandrala remarked.

"Is that right?"

"Yes. The humans that we high elves hate, fear, and love. It's kept secret, but high elves believe that each of us loves a human once in our lives."

"Really?"

"To us, your lives are so short. Look away one day, and you're gone. But in that short time, you achieve things that we never could. Not for far longer

anyway. That radiance charms us, but it's something we can't attain because we're high elves. No matter how much we might love a human, we're proud of who we are."

As Yarandrala spoke, her anger appeared to subside, and she took on a tranquil air.

"I last saw her sixty-eight years ago. And in that time, she's become an entirely different person."

"A high elf who became human?"

"That was just how intense her love was, I suppose. So powerful she forgot that she was a high elf."

"And the one she loved was Geizeric."

"Yes."

What was Yarandrala thinking? How did she feel upon realizing who Lilinrala was now?

"You know, Red..."

"Hm?"

"I was much happier than her when I met you."

It was just like Yarandrala to say something like that so directly.

"Ah, well, if you say so."

"Ah-ha-ha, you're so quick to get embarrassed."

Evidently, Yarandrala had put her anger at Lilinrala to rest. Their rivalry had existed because they were both high elves. Now that Lilinrala was human, she was no longer an enemy to be held to the same moral standards.

I thought I saw a trace of loneliness on Yarandrala's face as she smiled at me.

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After finishing the conversation with Yarandrala, I went to a different room.

I opened the door and found the high elves who'd been held in Ruti's mansion.

“To think they were keeping it secret for so long.”

“Ugh, Cap’n, thank goodness.”

“Does anyone have a handkerchief I can borrow? The tears just won’t stop.”

The three of them were bawling.

There was nothing else to do, so I lent them my handkerchief.

“There’s something I’d like to ask, if you all don’t mind,” I said. Waiting for them to stop sobbing might take all day, so I tried to push things along. “Do you know what blessings Prince Yuzuk and Silverio have?”

“““Huh?”””

They looked at me with obvious confusion.

“They’re both Warrior, from what I’ve heard.”

“Have you ever seen them using any skills?”

The three pirates glanced at one another.

“I never have, but Warrior’s innate skills are all physical enhancements, so they don’t really stand out.”

“There’s no mistaking their physical strength, however. They’re undefeated in the castle when it comes to wrestling.”

“I know a guy who said he went a few rounds with them once, and he told me they were powerful and had some crazy good techniques.”

“But you’ve never seen them use a skill or heard of them using one?” I pressed.

“Y-yeah...”

The high elf trio looked suspicious at my questioning.

Saying my thanks, I returned to the room where Rit was waiting.

“Why the serious look, Red? Is there something bothering you?”

“Where did Prince Silverio and Prince Yuzuk come from?”

“Lilinrala said that Leonor probably had an antidote.”

“But where did she get the poison in the first place?”

“The previous king of Veronia had an Herbalist blessing, right? So maybe it was in a collection of medicines he’d gathered?”

“I’d believe that if it were a normal toxin, but Stealth Extinction is from the dark continent, and not even a high elf could neutralize it. Leonor is a royal family member, but it’s still hard to accept she’d obtain such a rare concoction on Avalon. It would’ve required connections to the dark continent.”

I’d read about Stealth Extinction in a book. Curing someone after they’d been affected by it was no simple matter. A miracle like the Hero’s Healing Hands was one thing, but there was no way simple magic or medicine could expunge it quickly.

And if Leonor had drunk the potion and passed it to Geizeric, then both of them would need to be healed for her to conceive.

If she was actually going to heal Geizeric, it would surely be a long process, and there was no way he or Lilinrala wouldn’t notice.

“So there’s no way she had the poison neutralized.”

“Hmm. I guess she could’ve brought in adopted children.”

“That isn’t very convincing, either.”

“...Yeah, there are two of them.”

Lilinrala not noticing anything amiss was unusual, but it was even stranger because Prince Silverio and Prince Yuzuk were brothers. It went without saying that switching out a king’s child was dangerous.

If the truth leaked, Leonor would be ruined.

Thus, if she were going to claim a kid to be hers, the most logical thing to do was only have one. There was no reason to borrow trouble by having two.

“Of course, if there was no risk of getting caught, then for Leonor’s purposes, the more princes she bore, the better. I’m sure Lilinrala believed the Stealth Extinction cure was beyond even high elves because that fit best when she trusted the princes were truly Geizeric’s sons.”

But given what I knew, an antidote seemed impossible.

“As far as Leonor was concerned, her second son, Silverio, wasn’t a risk.”

Leonor had absolute confidence that her trick would not be discovered.

“...If my guess is right, Leonor is a terrifying monster.”

I know of two who could fill the prince roles perfectly—the Asura demons Gajasura and Chugarra.

They’d followed Geizeric to Avalon.

“I’ve seen Gajasura before,” I said

Rit raised an eyebrow. “Gajasura? The Asura demon in Mistorm’s ship’s logs?”

“Yeah. When I met Leonor, he was there as a guard.”

“So the Asura demons joined Leonor’s faction.”

“No, I think they *are* her faction.”

“That’s...”

I recalled Shisandan, who’d transformed into an adventurer named Bui.

The people of Zoltan didn’t notice that Bui was an Asura demon, and I couldn’t tell at a glance, either. It was a perfect disguise because he was functionally human. His hair grew out like anyone else’s, as did his fingernails. He was indiscernible from the genuine article.

So if an Asura demon transformed into a baby, would it grow up as a person did?

“Do you think she’d really go so far for personal ambition?” Rit wondered.

I’d encountered Leonor when I was still a boy, and she was the most terrifying woman I’d ever met.

It was over six years ago...

Interlude

The Young Boy and the Evil Woman

Six years ago.

I'd already carried out several missions as a squire for the Bahamut Knights.

"Sir Flores, I see the castle."

As I rode my drake along the forested path, the palace walls grew visible in the distance.

Flores, an old knight, was my superior. "We'll finally be able to rest in a proper bed," he replied from his mount beside mine. A lighthearted grin spread across his face while he rubbed his hip.

We were headed into enemy territory.

It was a castle in the Kingdom of Veronia, a country presently in a low-level conflict with Avalonia.

Our current mission was a diplomatic one—to negotiate a reconciliation. However, we were also traveling to the palace as spies to verify that the agreement was genuine on Veronia's part.

I felt an imposing stateliness to the castle while gazing upon it. Sweat gathered on my palms as I gripped the reins.

Despite my concern, we swiftly reached an accord. There were still details to be worked out, but overall, the negotiations proceeded without any major upsets.

"...Phew..."

During a short respite in the talks, I walked around the castle, searching for any signs of danger.

I didn't notice anything unusual, though.

One of the key points of the dispute between Veronia and Avalonia was supposed military mobilization at this very place. I saw nothing that suggested as much, however. It was tough to imagine Veronia would agree to the peace treaty and then launch a surprise attack from this castle. And with that conclusion, my mission was half-completed.

I returned the way I'd come, back to the room where Sir Flores waited.

It happened while I was walking down a corridor that ran the length of the inner courtyard.

"Hm? Someone's there."

A girl was sitting in the courtyard.

She looked to be in her teens, but there was something peculiar about her that I couldn't rightly express. In my confusion, I stopped walking.

"Oh? Good afternoon."

Noticing me in the hall, she offered a greeting like a proper noble lady.

Ignoring her risked causing a diplomatic issue, so I answered politely, if a bit awkwardly.

"Good afternoon, beautiful lady. I am Gideon Ragnason of the Kingdom of Avalonia, squire of the Bahamut Knights."

"Oh my, a goodly squire."

Goodly squire, huh?

Truthfully, a squire was basically only a trainee who accompanied a proper knight.

Generally, nobles tended to look down on squires, but this young woman was giving me a cheerful smile. Something about her caused my heart to stir. She possessed a quality that was difficult to forget.

Had I been more experienced, I would have recognized instinctually that this girl was dangerous. However, young as I was, a pretty face was still very disarming.

"I am called Noelle."

“Lady Noelle, it is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“You are quite collected for one so young, good Squire Gideon.”

She smiled—a calculated gesture.

All I could think of was that I needed to leave as soon as possible and return to Sir Flores.

Noelle...was a fake name. Her real one was Leonor of Veronia.

That innocent maiden facade was the result of secret alchemical tinctures. Leonor was the great figure feared by all Veronian nobles, and that was the day I met her.

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Noelle claimed to be the daughter of a local lord.

By her telling, she'd been sent to the castle because the conflict imperiled her father's territory.

“Please have a look. This is the sunflower field. It's quite well known to locals.”

Her voice was bubbly as she spoke. She wore a riding outfit and sat astride a horse, riding at a slow pace.

I was alongside her on my riding drake.

Drakes and horses did not tend to get on well, but Noelle was well trained and relaxed.

It was probably a highly disciplined war steed.

“It is lovely.”

I looked out at the sea of yellow blossoms rustling in the breeze.

I couldn't say why, but Noelle had taken a liking to me. Over the past few days, she had dragged me all over the lands surrounding the castle.

As her request for my company had been a strongly worded one from Veronia, Sir Flores had been unable to turn it down.

In truth, the negotiations were going fine, so there wasn't much for me to do

had I been there.

Perhaps someone had noticed I was investigating the castle and had me accompany Noelle to prevent me from learning anything.

“Squire Gideon,” she called, tugging her reins lightly to bring her horse to a stop. I did the same with my drake and faced her.

“Do you prefer fighting and cultivating your blessing over admiring the flowers?”

Hmm, how to answer that to the liking of a young lady, I wondered.

I started to piece together an answer that would sound nice, but I sensed a piercingly intense emotion in Noelle’s eyes hidden behind her cute, fake smile, so I stopped.

“I enjoy time with the flowers just as well. I suspect one who battles endlessly would forget why they were fighting after a while.”

“Doesn’t one’s blessing dictate why they enter combat?”

“I believe it is up to people to decide their purpose for fighting. A blessing is certainly one motivation, but it is the person who chooses whether to accept that reason.”

“Oh? You’re quite mature for one so young, Squire Gideon.”

Noelle’s expression was that of the perfect young lady save for her eyes.

There was a fiery intensity in the gaze bearing down upon me.

I felt a bit cautious. But also, I had written her off as just a troublesome aristocrat with a good ingratiating smile, but for the first time, I felt some interest in her.

“What do you think, Lady Noelle?”

“Me?”

“Admiring the flowers, or fighting. Which do you prefer?”

She smiled—the same calculated, perfect expression.

“I much prefer admiring the flowers.”

“Is that so?”

I didn’t say anything more and looked back to the field.

The blossoms were indeed beautiful, swaying in the wind.

I had been fighting ever since I was six, constantly pushing myself to get even a little stronger. It was all to support Ruti when the day came for her to set out on her journey.

No sunflowers bloomed in our village, but I could remember going to see the spring buds that did open with Ruti. If we could return to that hill again someday...

“Mm.”

I sensed a murderous intent and put my hand on the hilt of my sword.

“Squire Gideon?”

Noticing the change in my demeanor, Noelle called out to me nervously.

“There are enemies. Please get behind me, Lady Noelle.”

“...Very well.”

A whistling sound split the air when she started to move her horse.

“!”

I struck down the arrow with a drawing cut.

“There’s...eighteen.”

Three archers in distant trees and fifteen more approaching on horseback.

“Pretty extravagant bandits to have that many horses.”

Seeing the enemy charging in with spears, I considered how to fight.

What is their goal?

The natural thought was they were aiming for a nice ransom by kidnapping Noelle, who was the daughter of a local noble. It would be challenging to fight while protecting her.

In which case, I guess that means I should go on the offensive!

“Please wait here, Lady Noelle.”

I pushed my drake to run. The bandits, seeing me racing straight at the fifteen oncoming spears, shouted in shock, “The kid’s gone mad!”

For one brief moment, there was hesitation on their part.

However, they quickly readjusted and ran straight down on me at full speed.

I sensed a gaze at my back, likely Noelle’s.

My drake reached top speed. The spears were rapidly growing nearer. In that instant, I kicked the drake’s stomach with my heels, giving the signal.

“Gyaaa!!!”

With a cry, it spread its small wings and leaped over the polearms.

“What?!”

I saw the bandits’ shocked faces below me.

“Drakes can jump better than horses!”

My mount stomped on one of the outlaws, crushing him, while I beheaded two others with my sword.

I’d moved past the spear’s superior range and was now close enough for a sword. Since we were in a chaotic melee, the archers in the trees wouldn’t be able to attack for fear of hitting their allies.

I swung my sword down on one bandit after another as they fell into a panic.

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“Haah-haah...haaaah.”

That was tiring. All the assailants were skilled.

If that first surprise attack hadn’t worked, there was no way I would’ve won without injury.

“Squire Gideon, are you hurt?”

Noelle had dismounted and was coming over to me. I came off my riding drake as well.

“Yes, I am fine.”

“You are so strong. I was afraid it was all over.”

“Though I’m still in training, I’m a knight. I could never allow bandits to get the best of me.”

“Oh my.”

Noelle’s expression was radiant. It was a beautiful smile, but her eyes were different.

She was holding a silk handkerchief and reaching out to my face, dirty with blood from my slain enemies. However, I gently stopped her, being as careful as possible to avoid being rude.

“It would be a shame to dirty your handkerchief.”

“Handkerchiefs are made to be used.”

Noelle’s expression was troubled. I’m sure anyone else would’ve described it as adorable.

But her eyes. Those blazing eyes.

When she looked at me, a far greater chill ran down my spine than I felt while fighting for my life.

“So cold. It is also a knight’s duty to accept the affections of a lady, is it not?”

“My deepest apologies. For the moment, we really should return to the castle as soon as possible. There may well be more bandits lying in wait.”

“Hee-hee, true. But with you to protect me, I am not scared in the least.”

“I am scared, though...were something to happen to you, it would be blamed on Avalonia.”

“You really are so cold.”

Just a little bit miffed...it was another flawless performance.

I stopped, signaling Noelle to fall back with my left hand.

“Squire Gideon?”

“There’s someone here.”

Not coming. Here.

I hadn't noticed until they were close. I immediately drew my sword.

"Not bad, kiddo."

A shadow stirred in a tree, and a large figure appeared.

A well-built, handsome visage. However, he had six arms instead of two.

"An Asura demon?!"

Unique even among demons with their shared blessings, Asura demons were the only creatures in the world without Divine Blessings.

This was my first time seeing one in person.

The Asura demon slowly took a stance, two-handing a massive greatsword.

"Gajasura!" Noelle shouted.

"Ha-ha-ha, just playing with you, kid."

The Asura demon laughed out loud and stowed his weapon before raising all his hands to prove he wasn't holding anything.

"That isn't funny."

"My apologies, Lady Noelle. The boy's fighting was so much better than I expected that I wanted to get a taste for myself."

He walked over to me and held out his right hand.

"It was a splendid fight."

"...Thank you..."

Although a little unsure, I shook his hand.

I could feel the massive calluses on his palm, indicating how many years of training he'd undoubtedly amassed.

"I was hired to be Lady Noelle's guard."

"An Asura demon as a guard?"

"Even on this continent, lower-level demons are hired as mercenaries. This is similar."

It was true that soldier demons, who were skilled infantry and could even

serve as platoon leaders, and fat demons, able to topple poorly fortified gates with a good shove, were sometimes employed. However, the church frowned on cooperating with demons, so it was not something that a country as large as Veronia regularly did.

“My position isn’t significant here.”

“...If you’re an official guard, then that makes things simpler. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Hmm? Not going to ask anything?”

Gajasura was smiling, but I leaped onto my riding drake without a response.

“Please wait, Squire Gideon!”

“I will return to the castle at once to report to the ruling lord.”

Noelle frantically tried to stop me, but I bowed my head and afforded her every courtesy before leaving.

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I left everything about dealing with the ambush to the Veronian side.

They didn’t seem to know who the attackers were, but it wasn’t my duty as an outsider to get more involved than I had. Ultimately, they never found the mastermind, and the investigation was dropped.

Afterward, I was still called to accompany Noelle on strolls or for meals.

“Our meetings will end tomorrow.”

I was lying on the bed in a guest room, breathing a sigh of relief.

All the negotiations had concluded today. Sir Flores, representing the Kingdom of Avalonia, and the castle’s Duke Antonius, representing the Kingdom of Veronia, had both signed the treaty.

There would be a gala in celebration tonight. Tomorrow morning, Sir Flores and I were to return home, which would end this mission.

Suddenly, I felt a chill.

Leaping from the bed, I grabbed my sword leaning against the wall by the bed.

“Wait, I haven’t come to fight.”

“Gajasura!”

The door to the room hadn’t opened, but an enormous shape was standing in the dark room.

“I guess this isn’t the time to ask how you did that.”

“Yes, I came to request an urgent favor.”

“Something regarding Lady Noelle?”

“That’s right. There’s no time, so I’ll keep it quick.” Gajasura stepped out of the shadow. “Lady Noelle was kidnapped. I want you to help me save her.”

“Kidnapped? While you were with her?”

“They caught me off guard.”

“...In that case, you can just ask the duke, can’t you? There’s no reason to come to a foreigner.”

“Like I said, they caught me off guard.”

There was a grating sound as Gajasura grit his teeth.

“You don’t mean...the duke was behind it?”

“That’s right. As long as I’m with Lady Noelle, I can protect her no matter how many people come at us. But a demon can’t stand by her side at all hours, and they took advantage of that. The escort provided by the duke betrayed her.”

According to Gajasura, the duke had hired mercenaries to kidnap her for ransom and intended to dispose of the mercenaries and Noelle when it came time to hand over the payment.

Apparently, there were many schemes among Veronia’s nobles.

“So Lady Noelle really isn’t just some local lord’s daughter.”

“Sorry, I can’t elaborate further. Will you help me? There’s no other human in this castle who’d be willing.”

“...So is that the truth, or is this just another lie?” I stared down Gajasura.

The mercenaries who’d attacked Noelle previously had surely been hired by

Noelle herself through Gajasura. It was only slight, but they'd shown reluctance to kill someone as young as me. That was an awfully kindly reaction for bandits trying to kidnap a noble.

"If she'd been abducted while an Avalonian was guarding her, it would have been a total humiliation for Avalonia."

"Smart kid. You're right. Apparently, there was one clause in the negotiations they really wanted to get changed."

"And had I perished, you would've saved Lady Noelle yourself and then killed the assailants to keep it secret, just like the duke."

Gajasura nodded at my hypothesis.

"So then, is this time different?"

"It is. Last time, the duke was not involved at all. When he found out afterward, he apparently took it very badly."

"Is Lady Noelle generally disliked?"

"No, more like she has lots of allies, but many enemies as well." Shaking his head, Gajasura turned around. "If you've seen through the earlier ruse, then this was a fool's errand."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not like you have any reason to help the woman who tried to frame you."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"There's no option but to save her alone. Sorry to waste your time. The duke might be planning to hang the crime on you, so you should probably report this to your commander and put together some sort of alibi."

With that, Gajasura departed.

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The next day, in a nearby forest.

Noelle let her hatred show plain, having dropped her usual facade at the humiliation of being bound in rope.

With her in the center, Veronian soldiers and mercenaries were squaring off

against each other.

“Heh-heh, do you have the gold?”

It was an easy job for the mercenaries since the party standing across from them was actually the mastermind.

It was an even split of the ransom, but even half the payout was enough to ensure the hired men would be living easy for at least a year.

However, their smiles faded swiftly when a line of crossbows suddenly turned on them.

“Wh— This ain’t what we talked about!”

They’d come from a small farming village and became mercenaries hoping to make a name for themselves, so they didn’t know anything about the devious wiles of nobles.

Upon seeing the coldness in the duke’s eyes, they finally realized they were dealing with someone who held wholly different morals.

“Ahhh!”

They frantically tried to flee. Only Noelle alone kept her eyes narrowed at the duke.

Taught crossbow strings were released.

“Lightning Speed.”

I leaped in front of Noelle and thrust the rectangular greatshield I’d borrowed from the castle into the ground. Arrows thudded into it.

“Squire Gideon!”

“Hold on to me!”

Pulling three smoke sticks from the pouch at my waist, I slammed them against the ground, breaking them.

Black smoke filled the air.

“What? The Avalonian squire?! Curses! Don’t let them escape! Attack!”

A second volley of bolts lanced into the haze to pin me down. Veronian

soldiers drew their swords and charged.

“Gajasura! I’m counting on you!”

“Leave it to me!

The Asura demon leaped over my head with a beastly speed.

“It would have been rough battling while protecting her, but it’s no problem if I can fight freely.”

“I-it’s Gajasuraaaa!!!”

I could hear the Veronian soldiers’ screams from beyond the smoke. I left the shield in the ground, picked Noelle up, and ran into the forest.

“Run, mercenaries! Run if you want to live!”

My shout brought the hired men back to their senses, and they beat feet.

It should’ve sufficiently muddied the waters for us to get away.

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Disappearing into the woods, I hurried to where I’d left my riding drake beforehand.

“Haaaah.”

After setting Noelle down, I took deep breaths to get the air back into my screaming lungs.

Lightning Speed was convenient, but it was too stamina intensive.

All it did was increase my movement speed. The actual physical effort to sprint across the distance was unchanged. I needed to find some other skill to pair with it.

“Squire Gideon.”

When my breathing finally returned to normal, Noelle spoke not in her girlish performance voice, but in her cold, natural tone.

“What is it?”

“Why did you save me? You’ve surely realized the truth of the previous attack.”

"Yes, I have."

"Then why? As far as you are concerned, I am an enemy who tried to have you killed."

"That's correct."

"...Then is it just some impulse of your blessing to save people?"

An impulse to save people? My heart ached a little bit because I thought of Ruti when I heard that. Once this mission is over, I should take some leave to visit her.

"No, I do not have any such impulse."

"Then why would you rescue me?"

Why? If I had to say...

"To be honest, I do not have a particularly favorable opinion of you, but even so, I wouldn't want your death keeping me up at night."

"...That's all?"

"Yes, that's all."

For the first time, Noelle looked at me as though she were genuinely stunned.

I couldn't help chuckling a little.

"I see. You risked your life to save me because it might disturb your sleep."

"That's pretty much it, yes."

"Heh-heh. What a selfish boy you are."

Had I upset her?

Despite my unease, Noelle grinned, took my hand, and kissed the back of it. Seeing my shocked reaction, she giggled again and then easily leaped onto the riding drake.

"Very well, Squire Gideon. What is the plan now?"

"We'll meet up with Sir Flores and make our way to a fortress in the south."

"I see. There is an army directly under the Veronian royal family there, so it

should be safe. Duke Antonius cannot afford to draw his blade against the royal family publicly. However, I am concerned about Gajasura."

"...You needn't worry. I cannot imagine a warrior of his caliber being defeated."

Surprisingly, Noelle appeared concerned for the Asura demon's safety.

Thinking back on it now, Gajasura was actually the prince, so his death would've ruined her plan.

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We managed to safely throw off the duke's pursuit and escape to the southern fortress.

Two nights later, Gajasura arrived, looking totally fine.

Seeing me, he flashed a fanged Asura demon grin.

"You did good, kid."

To think the day would come when an Asura demon complimented me. A knight saw many unusual things in the line of duty.

When I mentioned that to Sir Flores, he laughed wryly and said, "Yeah, it's certainly not a normal job."

Duke Antonius's castle was currently encircled by the Veronian army. It was only a matter of time before he surrendered, but that was someone else's battle.

Sir Flores and I received an award and a letter of thanks from the Veronian royal family.

An award from a different country. It wouldn't lead to a bonus or a peerage, but it would at least be good for future negotiations. In the end, it turned out that saving Noelle had also been good for Avalonia. That's what I'd believed at the time anyway.

"Lady Noelle has requested your presence."

As we were preparing to return home, I received a summons from a Veronian soldier.

Since arriving at the fortress, Noelle hadn't led me around like before. The only time we met was during dinners.

"Exchanging a proper farewell, perhaps?"

The Veronian soldier guided me to where Noelle awaited. It was the first time I'd been in that chamber.

"Gideon."

I opened the door, and there was a row of soldiers in spotless dress uniforms on either side. Past them, Noelle was lying on a luxurious sofa.

The guards were part of a force that reported directly to the royal court, and they attended to Noelle reverently.

Soldiers slipped behind me, and the door closed.

"Thank you for coming."

"I know you couldn't be just some daughter of a local lord. Who are you really?"

"The name Noelle is, of course, an alias."

She stood. The sofa was on a platform, allowing her to look down at me.

"I am Leonor of Veronia. Queen Consort of the Kingdom of Veronia."

"Queen...?!"

"I've taken a liking to you, Gideon."

"That is... I'm honored, Your Highness."

Noelle—no, Leonor walked toward me. Each step was brimming with confidence and a bewitching charm. There was no more playing at girlishness.

"Gideon." She smiled lasciviously. "I want you to be mine."

It didn't seem like she was joking. Evidently, she carried a genuine interest in me.

"I am a knight of Avalonia, my lady."

"Leave behind the Bahamut knights and your country. The reason you take up your sword, the reason you are a knight, the reason you live, the reason you

die, everything. Devote it all to me. In exchange, I shall love you. Wealth, glory, power, I will give you everything. I want you to love me, protect me, and become my joy until I die.”

I looked Leonor in the eyes as I responded, “Please forgive me, my lady, but I cannot accept your generosity.”

“...Do you find my appearance distasteful?”

“Not at all. You are beautiful. More so than your appearance, however, your fiery eyes are alluring to me.”

“Really?!”

“However, there is a reason I carry my sword, and a person for whom I would devote my life. Were I to lose them, I would have no reason to continue on.”

I was trying to become strong for Ruti’s sake. It was why I’d become a knight. Wealth, power, and the love of a queen all paled in comparison to Ruti.

“Please forgive me, Your Highness.”

I apologized once more. Leonor wore a tranquil grin, as if she’d expected this turn of events.

“How unfortunate. However, that spirit of yours that surpassed blessings was what I loved about you. I suppose this is the natural result. Very well, Gideon.”

“Thank you. If it should please yo—”

“Capture Gideon. If he resists, you may kill him.”

“Wha—?!”

The soldiers surrounding me all drew their blades as one.

I didn’t have a sword at my waist. I didn’t have the right to freely wear a weapon in a foreign castle.

“Gideon, you saved my life. You have my heartfelt gratitude for risking yourself for my sake. However, being grateful does not mean I will allow you to go against my designs. I shall have to return your kindness with malice... It is unfortunate.”

“P-please wait, my lady! I may just be a squire, but I am here as part of the

Kingdom of Avalonia's diplomatic delegation! We've only just negotiated a peace agreement! If I were to be killed, it would surely ruin everything our nations have worked for! We were so close to ending the conflict! Do you intend to start hostilities again over me?!"



“Yes. You refused to love me. If it is to kill you, I care not how much blood is spilled.”

“That’s...”

Her eyes showed no hesitation, and the younger me was left terribly confused.

It was the first time I’d encountered a truly incomprehensible human evil.

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Sir Flores and I were both arrested and thrown into jail.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I apologized. In my naive youth, I’d believed that those I’d aided would thank me.

Sir Flores laughed and patted my head with his big hand.

“That was a pretty terrible betrayal. The queen of Veronia’s quite outrageous.”

“...Yes, sir.”

“Don’t let it get to you. You don’t need to feel bad about it. There was a knight’s spirit in the way you fought. Chivalry is an expression of your way of life. It isn’t something that can be demanded of you by others.”

“But...”

“Don’t be discouraged by this. In the future, if you believe that fighting is the correct choice, then you should do so without regrets.”

“...I will do my best, sir.”

“Now then, how to escape. Our deaths would spell full-on war between Avalonia and Veronia.”

Just then, there was a clanking sound from the door.

“Hmm?”

Sir Flores and I both cautiously approached.

“Yo, that was a disaster, wasn’t it?”

“Gajasura?!”

The Asura demon was peeking through the window into the cell. There was a creaking sound as he opened the door.

He was holding my and Sir Flores's swords in his hands.

"You're saving us?"

"Lady Leonor's beliefs aside, I'm grateful for what you did."

"So you brought us the key and our swords?"

Gajasura shrugged.

"She never told me not to help you. Still, I can't fight her soldiers, so this is where my aid ends. There won't be a second time."

"No, this is more than enough. Thank you."

I took my weapon from the demon.

"Gideon, I'd love a chance to fight you someday. Try not to get yourself killed."

Gajasura watched as we made our escape.

As we ran, Sir Flores grinned. "There's no guarantee your chivalry will ever be rewarded, yet a little reminder that it can be on occasion is nice, too."

We encountered several dangerous situations, but somehow managed to cross the border. The war had been averted.

And upon our return to the capital, I was knighted.

Chapter 4

Zoltan's Pitiful Heroes

Five days after the harbor district incident, in the working-class neighborhood of Zoltan, I was walking along, carrying a basket full of oranges on my back.

“Big Bro, why’d you get so many oranges? Are you making jam?”

Tanta, who must have been out getting lunch, was in a good mood when I ran into him.

“No. You know how there is going to be a party for Prince Salius and all the important people in Zoltan?”

“Mhm. That’s tonight, right? Miss Mistorm, Ms. Ruti, and the others really managed to solve the problem!”

The problem of Prince Salius’s standing in Veronia still existed, but from Zoltan’s perspective, the trouble was over. The matters of the harbor, the church records, and Mistorm’s assassination were all resolved.

Prince Salius had paid the promised reparations for the harbor attack and withdrew his demands.

To preserve the dignity of a prince of such a large country, Zoltan permitted the Veronian sailors to use the harbor and procure supplies. The official signing ceremony was happening this afternoon with a celebration afterward.

“There’s also going to be a buffet for the regular sailors at a different location, and that’s what these oranges are for.”

“Why are you delivering them?”

“Well...the truth is, I got roped into making a couple of things for the event.”

“Really?!”

I cocked my head while grimacing. I was only an apothecary, not a cook.

“Your food is really good. So I’m sure they’ll all like it!”

“I hope so.”

Tanta’s innocent smile lightened the burden a bit, yet I couldn’t hide my unease at having to prepare food for so many people. It was totally new for me.

My stomach ached from nervousness.

To explain how things ended up like this, I’ll need to go back a bit...

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It was the day we returned Lilinrala and her subordinates to Prince Salius.

While we left Mistorm, Prince Salius, and Lilinrala to discuss in private, the rest of us went down to the hallway where the Veronian sailors were staying.

They seemed to be taking turns getting food, eating soup and bread.

“Oh, right, I haven’t eaten.”

It was already dark out.

I had left to deliver medicine to Dr. Newman’s clinic before noon, fought Lilinrala on the way, taken her to Ruti’s mansion, Mistorm and Lilinrala had come over, Prince Salius attacked the harbor, and we had brought Lilinrala and the others here. With how busy the day had been, I hoped to take things easy tomorrow.

“Hey. You hungry?”

The soldier, seemingly a man with high elf ancestry, called out to me. His ears were only slightly pointed. The rest of his physical traits were mostly human, too.

His high elf ancestor had to be a great-grandparent.

Rough, tanned skin made it obvious he was a crewman on a ship, but there was no hair on his face, and I spied a trace of elf in his clear eyes.

He and his fellows had been hostile to us when we entered the hall because we’d captured Lilinrala. Fortunately, those high elves we’d taken with Lilinrala had explained the situation. Now the sailors were downright amiable.

“If you don’t mind, you can have some.”

He pointed to the soup table.

Veronian navy food, huh?

As a former soldier, I was curious about how the meal was seasoned.

“Sure, could we have a bite?”

“No problem.”

The man had to be a junior officer, because he barked an order, and a bunch of other crewmen with stubble carried over bread and bowls of soup for everyone.

The broth was a cloudy white but transparent enough to see to the bottom of the bowl.

As for the scent...well, there wasn't really any.

There was pork and unevenly cut green onions and carrots floating in it.

The pork was thick and was still red.

“...”

Is this...?

I took a small spoonful of soup to my mouth and discovered it was salt water.

The meat and vegetables hadn't been cooked through—still either hard, cold, or both. In other words...

“Disgusting,” Ruti, who was eating next to me, declared.

There wasn't an expression on her face, but her eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly. She truly appeared to dislike it. Instead of getting angry, though, the junior officer just laughed.

“See, Kurt?! It really does taste awful!”

“Sorry, I don't have a Cooking skill.”

The sailor named Kurt laughed.

If you asked me, it wasn't because of any skill. This was a plain lack of food preparation knowledge.

Kurt was bashful as he explained, “Truthfully, I make all the meals on the ship...”

Come on, now, that’s a little too much.

“Out of curiosity, what experience do you have with the culinary arts?” I asked.

“The first time I ever did it was after I joined up.”

“Did no one teach you?”

“Not how to make food, but I was instructed on how to manage the stock of supplies and how to stop the crew from stealing from the pantry.”

“Yeah, he’s an awful chef, but Kurt’s a Sniper, so he’s a perfect watchdog.”

“Thank you.”

I couldn’t deny that was important, but...

“All right.” I stood up. “I should do a bit of cooking.”

“What?”

“No proper resident of Zoltan would accept food like this made from Zoltan ingredients.”

“Oh?”

In all honesty, the main reason was that my empty stomach wouldn’t be able to take such nasty food.

Without giving the sailors time to argue, I entered the kitchen, and without concern for Kurt, who’d followed me in with a troubled look on his face, I quickly made some preparations.

Anything that took a long time to prepare was out because I wanted to eat as soon as possible.

“Guess that leaves pork-and-vegetable soup.”

I cut the carrots finely without peeling them. Root vegetables were the tastiest closest to the skin. Then I cut the green onions diagonally for the white parts and finely for the green portions.

Next, I sliced off a big chunk of butter and melted it in the pot. Using that, I fried the vegetables. Frying them kept them from falling apart while cooking and helped prevent the flavor and nutrients from escaping.

I gave the pork a light spicing and then set it on top.

With that done, I added enough water to cover half the vegetables, taking care not to submerge them entirely. I would make the soup later. Once the water was boiling, I put the lid on to steam everything for seven minutes. That way, the heat would spread faster, and the vegetables wouldn't lose their taste.

After a little more water and salt, I left it all to simmer. I added salt and pepper to taste, and then just a little fish meal from a small jar to give the soup some kick. My final touch was a sprinkling of chopped parsley.

“Okay.”

The broth gave off a nice vegetable smell when poured into a bowl.

“G-give me some.”

“Help yourself. I made about twenty servings’ worth.”

Kurt took the bowl from me and sampled my handiwork.

“So good!”

Life on a warship was harsh, and most people couldn’t take it.

When ships docked and let off all their crew, there were often a few who disappeared.

Should that become too rampant, officers would limit the number of people going ashore to a manageable amount and take leave in turns. Most of the crew’s downtime would still be on the ship.

For crews with particularly strict captains, it might be years before they could step onshore again. Even in port, they could be dining on the ship for the most part...eating that terrible food.

“It’s been a long time since I had something that good. Do you have a Cook blessing?”

“No, I’ve taken the first level of the common Cooking skill, but that’s all.”

“It can be this good with only one level?!”

“The skill helps, but the more important thing is just learning the basics on your own.”

Knowing why and how to do certain preparations, the fundamentals of seasoning, and just actually thinking about the flavor that would result from what you were doing were all key.

That’s really all there was. However, plenty of people believed that all abilities began and ended with Divine Blessings, creating a tendency to ignore the basics.

The fact that, even without the fundamentals, you could just sort of make things happen if you increased your level contributed to that sort of misconception.

I suppose that’s one way to get by.

My opinion was that this caused a problem. People quit on something before even trying because they didn’t have a relevant skill.

“I see. If you think about cooking that way, it changes things, huh?”

I offered to teach Kurt the basics and how to use seasoning. He repeatedly nodded while he listened and seemed profoundly moved. Somewhere along the way, he slipped into a polite and respectful tone.

“All right, help me out with serving the food.”

Ultimately, I wound up playing chef all night, showing him several dishes that he would be able to do even while out at sea: a bread porridge and fried preserved fish, salty mashed potatoes that would go well with beer, and more.

As a result of all the food discussion, I got hungry again.

I had Kurt assist me in making the extra food, since they were all pretty simple dishes.

“Aye, sir!”

He saluted and carried out the dishes of food briskly.

There was no way it would feed everyone present, but it was enough that

most people would be able to eat.

Just as I realized that I had no obligation to do this, there were cheers from the other room. I couldn't help but grin.

Sounds like the food was a hit.

"It's been a long time since I've had anything this great!"

The Veronian sailors who had been our enemies just hours ago crowded around and heaped praise on my cooking.

"And the most amazing thing is that Kurt actually made this side that tastes good!"

Anyone can make mashed potatoes, I mused. However, I could only think that because I understood the basics of meal preparation. It was no different than handing someone a sword for the first time—they wouldn't be able to cut anything. Giving a person a pot and telling them to fry some meat when they were entirely new to the concept wouldn't turn out well.

The bigger problem was if they accepted that the failure resulted from them lacking a helpful skill and assuming that anything edible was the limit for someone without a beneficial Divine Blessing.

"This truly is delicious."

"Right? My Red's amazing."

"Mhm, mhm. My brother's amazing."

At some point, Prince Salius, Mistorm, and Lilinrala had come down to the hall, and for some reason, Rit and Ruti were standing proudly side by side and bragging about me.

"Hmm, I thought we needed to do something to improve the food situation. Lilinrala never really cared much about things like that."

Prince Salius nodded to himself as he spoke.

Since hearing his words, I'd been on edge, sensing that danger was brewing.

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Back to the present, at the banquet hall where the sailors' party was being

held.

After the trouble had concluded, both Mistorm and Mayor Tornado had made a point of stopping by my shop to say that there was a request for me to hold a feast for the sailors in addition to the formal one, and this was the result.

“Sir! I look forward to working with you today!”

Kurt greeted me with glimmering eyes.

I had tried to insist that a person with a proper Chef blessing was the better choice, yet Prince Salius and Lilinrala had been adamant about me providing the meals.

Apparently, the goal was also to teach Kurt more about cooking.

At least the pay for the work was fair, good enough to totally outweigh the shop’s normal sales.

“To serve *oden* in a place like this... It’s an honor!”

Oparara, master of the *oden* cart, was rolling up her sleeves next to me.

“I’m really glad to have your help.”

I’d been fretting over the idea of serving so many, so I’d requested her aid.

“You’re top chef tonight. I’m just here for support. Gotta *tend on* things properly.”

She had a big grin on her face as she started prepping the beef tendon.

What was that? Was that an *oden* joke?

“Well, I suppose I should at least earn what they paid me.”

I took out my trusty kitchen knife and put on an apron.

“Huh, your knife isn’t bronze.”

“Obviously.”

“What do you mean, ‘obviously’? Wouldn’t a better sword be more important?” Oparara grinned at the disconnect.

When she pointed it out like that, it was a bit strange that the weapon I trusted my life to was a bronze sword, but the cooking knife was steel.

“Red.”

Turning around, I saw Rit and Ruti.

“Ready and reporting for service.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Rit was wearing a red apron, and Ruti was wearing an apron with a round kitten face drawn on it. Curiously, they both had ladles hanging on their right hips.

“It felt more chef-like this way.”

Rit covered her mouth with her bandana as she giggled.

It was cute, but neither of them was particularly good at making food.

Thinking about how superhuman abilities and spirit magic were powerless in meal preparation made me appreciate how deep cooking was.

Now then, time to get down to work.

I lined up the ingredients I had brought on the table.

“I’ll be doing mostly my usual *oden* fare. What are you planning, boss?”

Since Oparara pulled her cart around and handled customers one after the other all night, facing a banquet with over a hundred soldiers didn’t seem to faze her.

She went about her job easily and precisely while still talking to me. That natural ease was really reassuring.

“I’ll be making an onion soup, two types of salad, garlic steak, fried potatoes, and a berry tart and custard trifle for dessert.”

“That’s a lot of dishes. Are you going to be okay handling all that yourself?”

“I’m not alone, so I’ll be fine.”

Rit and Ruti were taking care of the prep. They were currently peeling the vegetables and cutting the beef into steaks.

“But neither of them has a Cooking skill, right?”

It was not a simple thing to have multiple people preparing food together in

this world, because the result was impacted by the skills from the Cook blessing. As such, the work was typically split up, with each person handling one whole dish on their own. Anything else and the consistency of one's skills from their Divine Blessing of the Cook couldn't be maintained.

"It's okay. They're both reliable support."

I'd already figured out the timing for when and how to use my Cooking skill for tonight's dishes. As long as you had a grasp of what parts could be left to others and what parts you had to do yourself, entrusting others with things like prep work wasn't an issue.

"Red! I'm done peeling the vegetables!"

"I'm done cutting up the steak."

Although the girls lacked relevant skills, their physical abilities were far beyond normal. If they understood what needed to be done, their speed with simple tasks surely rivaled a first-rate culinarian's.

"Okay, next is..."

Oparara was clearly surprised as she watched me give instructions and Ruti and Rit prepped one dish after another.

I grinned back at her.

"See, pretty dependable, huh?"

"You're all crazy."

She raised her hands in joking surrender and returned to her own work.

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The food was lined up neatly on large plates.

Oparara and some other chefs would be handling later rounds of food, so my responsibilities ended once the party began. All that remained for me was to snack on some of Oparara's *oden* while watching the Veronian sailors' reactions.

"This steak's great. Way different from the meat we get on the ship."

"The sauce is different. And the little garlic chips really add to the flavor."

“The onion soup goes wonderfully with it.”

“White cheese, red tomatoes, and green basil. It’s a feast for the eyes, and the taste’s mind-blowing, too.”

The reviews were positive, and all the sailors had cheerful grins.

“Unwilted vegetables! Holy shit!”

“Meat that isn’t half-cooked!”

Evidently, a lot of their happiness might only have been because their standards were so low. If they said it was delicious, however, that should mean I’d done a good job.

“Hot damn!!! There’s actual flavor!!!”

Some of these exclamations had me scratching my head.

“Ha-ha, sorry about that. But he didn’t mean it in a bad way.”

“Oh, Prince Salius.”

The prince grinned when I turned to him. He held a plate with steak and fried potatoes.

“Weren’t you attending the formal reception?”

“Lilinrala is taking care of things there. Everyone was asking her about stories from her time as the captain of the legendary Elven Corsairs. They even got the band to play backing music while she regaled them. It was a sight to behold. After a while, she grew embarrassed and started begging Mistorm for help.”

“Sounds nice.”

“I slipped out to check on how things were getting along here. Though honestly, with how much everyone was talking it up, I wanted to try your cooking, too.”

“It’s nothing fit for the tongue of a prince.”

“So humble. I seem to recall a certain Loggervian princess mentioning how exceptional your dishes were.”

That certain princess happened to help with making this meal, but there was

no way you would guess that.

Something about that thought was funny to me, and I chuckled a bit.

“Then please help yourself,” I said.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Prince Salius took one bite of steak. Shock colored his face, and he swiftly cleared his plate.

It was quite the sight, but there was still a feeling of refined elegance to it. I couldn’t say whether that was because of his royal upbringing or his high elf blood.

“That’s excellent. I’d love to have you as a cook on my ship.”

“I’m honored, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline your kind offer.”

Prince Salius guffawed at that. He was wearing a tuxedo, but casually, instead of all buttoned down. It was a cool look, yet stuffy nobles would have undoubtedly pursed their lips at the sight.

“Hm? What, this?” Noticing my gaze, Prince Salius tugged at his lapel a bit. “These sorts of suits are too stuffy. I just can’t stand them.”

“Don’t you have to wear them fairly often at court?”

“Even as a kid, I always preferred clothes I could move around in. Lilinrala... Mom always scolded me about it.”

He flashed a bashful smile.

“I’m a bit like Father in that regard, probably. He was always doing things that troubled his retainers.”

“Your father?”

The pirate Geizeric, who bore the blessing of Emperor, was both a hero and a man who’d ruined many lives.

“You all are good people,” the prince stated.

“Hm?”

“When my father came up, your expression changed slightly. Do you worry

for us?"

"Well, I do have some thoughts."

"Father's blessing is inordinately strong. It couldn't be helped."

My sister, Ruti, bore the blessing of the Hero. She'd been bound by impulses, yet still labored to remain herself. Thus, I was a little irked at excusing a man's actions because of his blessing.

Prince Salius's eyes narrowed.

"I suspect we've caused you all quite a lot of trouble."

"It certainly was an unprecedented uproar for Zoltan."

"And yet you went to such effort to cook for us, and the other Zoltanis have been accommodating as well. No other place would let this slide with merely an apology. I'd expected a few people to hurl stones at us."

"I'm sure it wouldn't have been this peaceful if actual fighting had occurred."

"Having been raised in the swirling machinations of the Veronian court, it's a dazzling level of simplicity... Is it true that Zoltan's powerful stations are chosen based on seniority?"

"It is."

"Wow. If Veronia were like that, we wouldn't have to worry about all these succession problems."

"If a country as large as Veronia were to operate as Zoltan did, it would quickly collapse," I replied.

"Really? You never know. Maybe it would work out well? The person at the top can just be a figurehead. It's the people who move a country forward."

"Should the son of an Emperor really say that?"

"I can. My blessing isn't Emperor. I'm only a plain old Archer. What sense does it make for a simple Archer to be king?"

"Didn't you just answer that question?"

"...What?"

“It’s the people that move a country forward, not Divine Blessings.”

Prince Salius was stunned for a moment before breaking into an obviously wry smile.

“This is problematic. I seriously want to bring you on with me now.”

“Sorry, but the answer’s no.”

“Just who are you? No, forgive me. It’s rude to dwell on that.”

Prince Salius called to one of the waiters who was passing by and handed him the empty plate and cutlery.

“I should be heading back. The last of the negotiations will be finished in no more than a couple of weeks. We’ll send a messenger to Veronia, but we’ll likely end up heading to another country.”

“Will you fight?”

“I’d considered abandoning everything and heading to the east, but I don’t think I’d be able to stand my country becoming the demon lord’s vassal state after Father’s death. As long as his blood flows in my veins, I’ll hoist my flag for the freedom of Veronia.”

I smiled and shook Prince Salius’s hand.

“Best of luck to you.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to hear words of encouragement without any ulterior motives every once in a while.”

It would be a painful battle fighting against his homeland, but he had an invigorated look to him.

Approximately 1,500 kilometers west of Zoltan.

A steel warship belching black smoke coursed along the sea.

In one cabin, there was a girl in a dress who looked to be in her teens. She lounged on a sofa.

She was Leonor of Veronia, queen consort. With Geizeric on his deathbed, she had become the most powerful figure in Veronia.

“Well? Has Salius made a move?”

Hearing her melodious voice, the two princes who sat cross-legged in meditation opened their eyes.

Each of them were almost two meters tall and quite handsome.

Yuzuk and Silverio slowly opened their eyes and smiled broadly at their mother.

“Mother, Salius has attacked Zoltan at last.”

“I see. Well done.”

Leonor hid her mouth with her fan as she let out an elegant laugh.

She was well over sixty and should have looked it, for she wasn’t an elf. Medicines and magic had preserved her youth, however. The cost of creating and maintaining that appearance was far more than her weight in gold. Yet, for all her efforts, the effects were only skin deep. Leonor was still aging. Even with the power of alchemy and magic, there was no known way to extend one’s life. If there had been, the question of succession would never have arisen in the first place.

“This is the end for Lilinrala and Salius, and for Sister as well.”

At last, Leonor now possessed justification to take out Lilinrala and her faction.

She had both the ship she was riding—the demon lord’s *Vendidad*—and eight top-of-the-line galleons appropriated in Lilinrala’s absence. Those Veronian sailors who refused to obey Leonor were removed. Presently, the ships were crewed by mercenaries.

It was a fleet that could easily destroy the likes of Zoltan.

“But why did you come personally, Mother?”

Silverio’s question was entirely reasonable.

Unlike Misphia, Leonor had no combat skill, nor any for leading troops, sailing ships, or reading the weather. The woman’s presence served no role. However, she still shook her head in reply to her son.

“I am monitoring my health, since I want to live longer than Sister. I never killed her because I wished for her to live out a life of disappointment. The longer, the better. Meanwhile, I have enjoyed a blessed existence.”

Leonor touched her side.

“I’m managing the liver disease with medicine, but I will surely die not long after Geizeric.”

“Hm.”

Humans, elves, and demons all eventually perished. It was an experience foreign to the immortal Asura demons.

“But if I must die, it will only be after I see Sister suffering and meeting her end with my own eyes.”

Hatred for her elder sibling still burned in Leonor. Even knowing her time was near, she still brimmed with vitality.

“Humans are truly fascinating.”

“Indeed.”

Humans were fascinating.

That was the reason the two Asura demons had remained in Veronia for so long, choosing such a circuitous path to take over the kingdom.

Geizeric, with his rare Emperor blessing, became king as his blessing pushed him to be.

Lilinrala, a high elf with a Pirate blessing who’d given up her ideal life running the Elven Corsairs to become an admiral for Geizeric.

Misphia, the powerful Archmage, was forced to flee her homeland.

And Leonor, despite bearing the utterly generic Divine Blessing of the Warrior, had made a mockery of all three of those champions with her strategic ploys. After many years, she was set to claim her final victory.

“I can’t be satisfied until I see how it ends.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to seeing how Mother will die.”

The Asura demons spoke as if they were watching a performance, laughing at the lives of all four players.

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After two weeks, Zoltan's harbor was back to normal.

The port was small, connecting to a river instead of directly to the sea.

Lesser trade ships could enter all the way up to the wharves, but larger vessels, including military ones designed to carry hundreds of troops, could not enter the river and had no choice but to anchor on the sea.

Dozens of rowboats filled with supplies exited the mouth of the river and bobbed into the sea, headed toward Lilinrala's galley floating in the harbor.

"Looks like a lot of work."

"It's a backbreaking effort. And it's always like this. Observing from a distance leaves me amazed that we manage it at all."

The galley had sailed straight from Veronia to Zoltan. It needed to stock up and resupply before departing.

"So wouldn't you normally be helping out Prince Salius while he directs the crew? Why are you taking it easy fishing in a place like this?"

While the Veronian sailors were busy, Lilinrala was on an isolated pier at the corner of the harbor with a fishing line, absentmindedly angling.

"I've beaten all I know about running a ship into Salius. Even with a late start, he could become a big enough pirate to leave a mark on history. He won't have any problems during the loading."

"A prince becoming a pirate, huh? So the reverse of Geizeric, then."

"Ha-ha. Yeah, I suppose so."

"So back to my question—what are you doing acting so listless here?"

With her black eye patch and the scar across the side of her face, Lilinrala ordinarily looked intense, but her present expression was flat, almost dejected. There was more intensity to Oparara when she made *oden* than to Lilinrala now.

“Did you come out here just to ask me that?”

“Maybe.”

“You sure like sticking your nose into things.” I flashed an obviously annoyed look, and Lilinrala continued.

“Are you really one to be lecturing people about acting listless, Red?”

“That’s rude.”

“How can a man of your caliber keep such a tranquil face? Aren’t heroes supposed to have a strained expression, always chasing after some unending dream?”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to respond to that. Lend me some spare line and a hook.”

“Sure, but I don’t have a spare pole.”

I sat down next to Lilinrala, took my bronze sword—sheath and all—off my belt, and tied the line through the little hole at the end of the sheath.

“Pretty convenient, right?”

“Looks pretty terrible if you ask me.”

“It’s not too suited for catching fish, but it’s perfect for sitting by the river and taking it easy for a while.”

“For having such brief lives, humans do the oddest things.”

Lilinrala shrugged at my response, but I just laughed wryly and pointed to her line.

“Can you really say that when you’ve just left your line hanging without any bait this whole time?”

“What?”

Lilinrala reeled in and was greeted by a dangling empty hook. She grimaced and affixed a fresh worm.

“A legendary pirate letting a fish steal her bait...”

“Don’t assume all pirates are good at angling.”

The high elf dropped her line back into the river with a splash. It bobbed gently.

For a while, the two of us aimlessly gazed at the water, holding poles that wouldn't catch a fish.

Finally, she started talking.

"If I'd only been honest about it all back then, I wonder if this all could've been avoided."

"You mean before Mistorm left Veronia?"

"If I'd told her everything, would she have accepted Salius, and would Leonor's scheming have failed? It's too late now, but I can't help wonder if things might have worked out better that way."

"Are you worried whether going back with the prince to fight Veronia is the right choice now?"

"Something like that. There's no point dwelling on it, though, and I'm not going to suggest we run... Still, the thought that I'll end up regretting my choice again makes me want to forget about the future."

"Mistorm accepts things now, but there's hardly a guarantee Misphia would've done the same fifty years ago."

Mistorm was well removed from her old despair. She'd changed her name, left her past behind her, and spent a long time surrounded by friends.

Back then, cornered as she was, would she really have been able to accept the reality of it? Raising Lilinrala and Geizeric's child as her own may have proven too much.

"If you ask me, I think there's a good chance it would have caused a total split between the two of you."

"Maybe..."

"And more than the two of you, King Geizeric would have been a problem," I added.

"What?"

"Geizeric is an Emperor. There's not much information on that blessing because of how rare it is, but he likely wouldn't have accepted Prince Salius forty years ago."

"You've never even met him. How can you be so confident?" Lilinrala questioned.

"What he needed then was an heir with the blood of the royal family, not one who carried his blood. If Geizeric knew about Prince Salius's mother, he would absolutely still have placed Leonor's children over yours in the line of succession."

Lilinrala furrowed her brow and glared at me.

"If he could have controlled the impulses of his blessing, he would never have had relations with Leonor in the first place."

The high elf looked indignant, but she didn't argue the point. Letting out a little sigh, I continued as gently as I could.

"Anyway, the point is, there's nothing to be gained from regret. It would be one thing if you held back at the time, but you were always doing what you thought was best at the moment, right? If so, then that's just life."

"So just or wrong, Demis only knows...I suppose so."

Lilinrala quickly pulled in her line. The carp she caught was squirming around frantically.

"Looks like I was first."

"If you can tease me, then you must be feeling better," I remarked with a little grin.

"Red..."

Lilinrala stared into my face closely.

"Hm?"

"Are you secretly a fey and even older than I am?"

"Obviously not."

"Heh. Just kidding."

Lilinrala laughed. Considering that we'd fought each other less than three weeks ago, it was a surprising demeanor for her to take.

But high elves behaved differently around people they trusted. And, apparently, I'd crossed that line in Lilinrala's book.

"It seems like Salius has taken an interest in you, too... What do you say? Our ship's about to face down a wild storm, but if we make it through to the other side, all the treasure and fame you could ever desire will be yours. I'm sure a man like you could even win himself the throne of a duchy. Want to join my crew?"

"I'll have to decline. I like living here in Zoltan."

"Immediate rejection, huh? A pit... Oh, you caught something."

"Yeah, feels like something big... Gh, it's heavy."

The thread attached to my scabbard was taut.

There was no give at all to the sheath, so it couldn't dampen the pull of the thread. If the fish went wild, the thread would snap. It would take carefully angling in time with the movements of the fish.

"You really should've gone to get a proper rod!"

When I began to think she was right, I spotted a blue shadow in the middle of the river.

Uhh, that's...

"Wait a second..." I yanked firmly with both arms.

"Tada."

An expressionless girl emerged from the water, holding the line and doing some kind of pose.

"Wh— You're?!"

Even Lilinrala was genuinely shocked by what I'd landed.

Well, Ruti doesn't have any skills for controlling boats or dinghies, so it makes sense that swimming would be quicker for her.

“Do you need a towel?”

“I’m okay.”

My little sister shook her head. From what I could discern, she was pleased at Lilinrala’s stunned reaction. After climbing onto the pier, Ruti inhaled and tensed her body.

BAM!

There was a sound like something popping, and the water evaporated from her in tiny droplets.

“That’ll do.”

Once she’d confirmed she was dry, Ruti turned to Lilinrala, whose brain had seemingly shut down from astonishment.

“Veronian battleships have arrived. Queen Leonor is in command, and they will reach Zoltan in sixteen hours.”

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I was fishing by myself on the pier.

Ruti and Lilinrala were undoubtedly at the Zoltan assembly by now.

Out on the river, Lilinrala’s ship was making preparations to set sail at a feverish pitch.

If Veronia’s navy were pursuing them on Leonor’s orders, then the battleships would have no business with Zoltan itself. Lilinrala and Salius had no intention of holing up here to fight, and they didn’t have a chance of winning even if they did.

Thus, the best option was to flee somewhere else.

“Leonor, huh?”

The face of the woman I’d once saved, who’d then confessed her love to me and tried to kill me, surfaced from my memories.

“There we go.”

A small fish had bit my hook, pulling the line attached to my scabbard.

"Even without a proper rod, I can still catch something from time to time... This'll be good for soup."

It was almost hard to believe a Veronian fleet was closing in on Zoltan while I was killing time like this.

"If she sees me, she'll recognize me immediately."

For Mistorm, Leonor was an enemy from Misphia's past. It was not too different for me. Leonor was one of Gideon's old enemies.

It was a little depressing how the past always caught up to you, no matter how many times you tried to make a clean break from it.

"Red."

Rit had come by holding a steaming cup in both hands.



“Catch anything?”

“Just one small fish.”

She sat next to me and offered out the mug. It was hot cocoa. She had warmed it with her magic, and the heat spread through my body, a welcome change after sitting around fishing in the cool not-yet-spring weather.

“How is it?”

“Delicious.”

“Right? I’ve been practicing.”

“Practicing?”

“The cocoa and tea you make are great, but I’m sure you want to drink things someone else has made for you too. I’ve been learning so I can provide that.”

I took another sip. It had a gentle sweetness and an enveloping warmth that eased the cold.

“It’s great.”

It felt like my frozen lips were melting into a grin.

The two of us sat together, staring at Lilinrala’s ship across the water.

“Red.”

“What?”

“You told me once that our slow life isn’t supposed to limit us.”

“That was back when we fought Shisandan.”

“I’ll say it for you this time. Our slow life together isn’t supposed to be holding us back from what we want. It’s about living at our own pace and doing things without any regret.”

Rit’s shoulder pressed against mine, and she peered at me with her sky-blue eyes. Her beautiful lips curled into a gentle smile.

“We can think about what to do when the time comes. If we have to fight, we can. But if it’s not worth it, we’ll run or ignore the conflict. What matters is that we do what we want, and never harbor bitterness when we’re done.”

“...You’re right.”

I pulled my line out of the water, took the bait off the hook, and tossed it into the river. A fish that hadn’t given the worm a second glance when it was on the hook snapped it up immediately.

That’s a smart fish.

“And also...” Rit stood. “...I’ve had it up to here with what Leonor’s done. I think it’s a shame I didn’t get to kick her ass for trying to seduce my Red! How evil can one person be?!”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

I remembered a time when I was in the Hero’s party, staring down at a map by myself, trying to come up with a plan. All the magic items I’d possessed from that part of my life were gone, as was the honor that came with being a member of the Hero’s party.

All I had was a cheap bronze sword on my hip, a lover willing to support me, my beloved little sister, and trustworthy friends.

I’d rather have that any day.

Rit and I walked together to the Zoltan assembly in the middle of the city.

We entered the hall without any guards stopping us. I suppose that much was to be expected since I was with Rit.

“Red, sir. I saw you fighting Albert. Please teach me how to fight someday.”

“Huh?”

A young guard saluted me.

“Looks like people are starting to understand just how great you are.”

Rit smiled happily.

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A carpet lined the floor of the hall we were walking down.

Most years, the main assembly hall was only used for meetings to determine how much money to allocate for reconstruction after storms, but ever since the winter festival, it had seen continuous activity. That there hadn’t even been

time to clean boot prints off the carpet was a testament to the recent chaos.

Noticing us, Tisse called out, “Red, Rit.” She’d been standing near the door, playing with Mister Crawly Wawly, who was riding on the back of her hand. “So you two decided to come as well.”

“Is the meeting in recess?” I inquired.

“Yes. Everyone was glaring at one another, so they took a break to cool their heads.”

“The assembly can’t come to an agreement? Honestly, that’s a bit surprising.”

All Zoltan could do was have Prince Salius’s ship leave the harbor. There was no way anyone believed fighting Leonor here was a wise choice.

Leonor’s fleet would not be able to invade Zoltan from the mouth of the river, but they could easily land troops and subjugate the city that way.

Lilinrala and her crew were masters of naval combat, so they’d be at a disadvantage fighting on the shore. They’d be trapped and overwhelmed if they holed up in Zoltan’s waters. Prince Salius’s only option was to leave as soon as possible or else fight Leonor out on the open sea.

“It feels like from Zoltan’s perspective and Prince Salius’s, the clear strategy is for them to flee,” I remarked.

“Yes, that was where things settled at first, but...”

Tisse pursed her lips slightly and shrugged. Rit and I glanced at each other, wondering what was up.

“Was there some problem?” Rit asked.

“I suppose you could say that.” Tisse sighed. “The meeting proceeded without issue initially. Prince Salius was to leave Zoltan, and Zoltan would do its best to help with the remaining restocking effort. After that, Zoltan would be unable to cover for Prince Salius and would not be able to refuse the Veronian fleet’s requests for information and supplies. That was the general understanding.”

“That’s all reasonable.”

“I agree. However, the problem arose after, when Mistorm arrived late.”

“When Mistorm arrived? She didn’t try to suggest that Zoltan should fight to protect them, did she? No, that would make no sense given her character.”

“You’re right, of course. After she reviewed the secretary’s record, she voiced her agreement.”

“So it was following that then?”

“The trouble began when Mistorm declared she would leave Zoltan with Prince Salius.”

“I see...”

I could see Mistorm saying something like that.

“What was Zoltan’s reaction? She’s beloved by all of Zoltan as the country’s hero. Were they against her leaving?”

“There was resistance at first, but she revealed her identity to the assembly members.”

“So she told them she was the Veronian queen.”

“And Zoltan’s side had no choice but to accept her leaving with Prince Salius.”

“That’s everything resolved, then, isn’t it?”

“Well...”

A metallic noise sounded from the stairs at the far end of the hall.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know.”

Tisse peered down the corridor after the source. The clanking was accompanied by heavy footsteps as it drew nearer, clearing the stairs and finally appearing in the doorway.

“Ohh, if it isn’t Red and Hero Rit! So you came as well!”

It was Mayor Tornado, and all the members of Zoltan’s leadership were gathered behind him. He was wearing an outfit that neither Rit nor I had seen him in before.

“We’ll give those dastardly Veronians what for! Now’s the moment to show

Zoltan's pride!" a chubby aristocrat bellowed as he raised his fist.

There was another clatter as he did.

Everyone gathered was middle-aged at least, and there were even a few over seventy, but they were sporting full plate armor and had hot-blooded expressions on their faces as they marched down the hall.

Gleaming new swords dangled at their hips.

"What's going on, Mayor Tornado?" I couldn't hide the shock in my voice.

The mayor's round face split in a dauntless grin.

"Zoltan has decided to join the battle against the treacherous Queen Consort Leonor!"

That settled what the arguments were about. Still, I'd never have guessed that the cautious Mayor Tornado would end up saying such a thing.

"What is this all about?!"

It was Mistorm, having been drawn out by the commotion. Behind her stood Prince Salius and Lilinrala, who looked just as shocked as we did.

"Isn't it obvious?" Lord William answered in Tornado's stead. With his slightly tubby, middle-aged physique hidden by the armor and all the effort he'd put into training over the years, he carried a certain presence. "We're going to fight to protect our beloved and fellow Zoltan citizen!"

Mistorm froze. Faced with Lord William's earnest gaze, she must have felt unable to respond.

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Rit and I had joined the discussion in the assembly hall.

"Huh? Where are Ruti and Yarandrala?"

"When conversation broke down after Mistorm arrived, they left to take care of preparations in the event that the decision to fight was made."

"Preparations?"

"They entrusted things here to me and said they were headed to Mistorm's hidden village."

Ruti had elected to act, preferring to use her limited time more efficiently instead of wasting time with a fruitless meeting.

"Still, this is surprising."

"Yes, to think Zoltan would go to war with a large country like Veronia for a single person."

Lazy Zoltan.

The city was blocked off to the east and north by the Wall at the End of the World. It was hammered by storms every year and was surrounded by sprawling marshland that made it difficult to start new settlements.

There was an abundance of water, and there was fertile soil that would support plenty of crops without too much effort. However, things were still occasionally ruined by hurricanes, and a preference not to work too hard had naturally become one of Zoltan's defining characteristics.

Why do today what could be put off until tomorrow? That was Zoltan in a nutshell.

"You'd risk all of Zoltan for one person?! Where's your duty toward the populace?!" Mistorm exclaimed.

"We can ask them, too. We won't stop anyone who wants to run away. But Zoltan's army has the resolve to protect the citizens."

"The Mages Guild owes you greatly. It's time to test the true worth of all our studies."

"As far as the Adventurers Guild is concerned, you are a hero. When we told our members that you intended to fight Veronia with Prince Salius, we were overwhelmed with volunteers willing to aid you."

"The Thieves Guild didn't get along great with you, Mistorm, but even we denizens of the underworld still respect you. We intend to throw our weight behind quelling the panic in the city."

Mayor Tornado nodded.

"Every individual citizen has a right to make their own choice. We carry our own reasons, but we all want to protect you. If our homes are burned, we can

build them again. Zoltan is used to such losses. But we also know that there are some things you can never get back once they're taken from you."

There was no doubt in his words.

Lazy Zoltan, huh? I mused.

"That's true."

"Yeah."

Rit and I nodded.

We lived here. And as slothful as our neighbors could be, there were also countless times we'd seen the lengths they would go to for their friends.

After the incident with Bighawk, the populace hadn't grown wary of Southmarsh. Everyone got along as they always had.

"That's the sort of place Zoltan is," I said.

Rit smiled and nodded. "The princess of Loggervia might call it foolish to pick a fight with no hope of winning, but Zoltan's Rit is proud of how everyone comes through for their friends in a pinch."

Seeing the two of us whispering to each other, Lilinrala rushed over.

"What are you doing muttering?! Stop them already! We can't let them get caught up in a hopeless fight!"

"After all the trouble you've caused? Pirates really just do as they please," I replied.

"This isn't the time for jokes!"

"Sorry. No, really, I am sorry. Rit and I happen to agree with them."

I looked at Rit, and her expression tightened. She approached the conference table, brimming with confidence.

"Our opponent is the powerful nation of Veronia, led by Queen Consort Leonor, a woman so evil that her story will surely still be told in history books centuries from now. Their fleet consists of eight top-of-the-line galleons and the demon lord's ironclad vessel, *Vendidad*, which Geizeric brought back from the dark continent. Meanwhile, we have Prince Salius's older warship and Zoltan's

three caravels. Zoltan's walls are easily toppled, there is nothing stopping an invasion via the river, and we have no time to prepare. Does that about sum it up?"

Lord William and the rest looked troubled, but Rit grinned dauntingly.

“Then all that’s left to do is to win.”

Why had Rit earned the nickname “Rit the hero”?

It was undoubtedly because of the confidence she exuded. Her voice and smile had the power to make you believe that she could overcome anything, no matter how hopeless.

"I'm proud of them, too. But I'm more proud of you," she whispered so that only I would hear.

I followed Rit to the table to help plan.



“This is not a battle to protect Zoltan, so I won’t blame anyone who doesn’t wish to fight. Our fight is one to safeguard the hero who rescued Zoltan.”

Lord William clenched his fist while addressing the troops.

Standing before him were Zoltan's lightly armored drake knights with their sabers, the guards in chain mail equipped with halberds and crossbows, nobles sporting slender and decorative swords, adventurers with a motley collection of gear, thieves with sharp blades peeking from black cloaks, and citizen volunteers with simple spears and wooden shields.

"Master Mistorm came to Zoltan forty-five years ago, appearing with her shining ship the *Regulus* when Zoltan was menaced by the remnants of the goblin king's bands. I was only a small child at the time, but I still recall the cheers of the people Master Mistorm saved."

Those old enough to remember the time all gulped.

It had been decided at the time to conceal Mistorm's past, and Zoltan's top general was breaking that shared secret. The people of Zoltan had realized that their idol's history was the root of the conflict with Veronia.

Tisse and I inspected the crowd to see how they'd react.

“Khhh! We can finally repay Master Mistorm,” a veteran adventurer shouted.

“An enemy of Master Mistorm is my enemy, too! Bring it on!”

The people roared courageously and grinned happily. Particularly those old enough to remember the trouble forty-five years ago.

They’d hoped to repay the heroes who’d helped them back then, but there was an unspoken arrangement not to record the events to keep word of Mistorm from reaching Veronia.

The gratitude they’d held back for four-and-a-half decades overflowed, and they laughed and grinned in the face of imminent danger.

“This really is a great place.”

“Yes, it is.”

I nodded to Tisse, and she returned the gesture.

Someone hurried over to us.

“Ohh, if it isn’t Ms. Tifa and Red. So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

“Hello, Mayor Tornado.”

He’d doffed the armor he wasn’t used to and switched to a chain mail shirt and a tabard with the Republic of Zoltan’s coat of arms embroidered on the chest.

The full plate must have been too heavy.

“Rit the hero’s really something. I’m sure we can win any plan she devises.”

The mayor was in high spirits.

Rit’s strategy was a sea battle. However, our side would remain in the river delta while attacking. Zoltan’s small ships were no match for the Veronian ones, but the demon lord’s enormous vessel and the Veronian galleons couldn’t enter the shallow river. In order to land, they’d have to resort to smaller rowed crafts, and Zoltan’s ships would have the upper hand against those.

It would be a problem if they landed at the beach, however.

“It’s a bold decision to use the caravels that are our main fighting strength as

fire bombs."

The crux of Rit's plan was to load up the caravels with alchemic oil and firewood and then ram one into a galleon as an explosive, hopefully forcing the Veronians to be more cautious. A caravel's storage capacity would give it more than enough firepower to sink a galleon.

If they tried to bypass the river and land from the beach, Rit would use that opening to crash a caravel into one and set it off. As long as the possibility of more explosions like that remained, the Veronians wouldn't be able to unload troops carelessly.

This was a battle that Veronia was unlikely to lose, owing to their superior force. Thus, they were liable to consider *how* they would win more than the *if*. That was especially true because Leonor didn't have access to Lilinrala's navy and was relying on mercenaries.

Because of that, Veronia essentially had to win without losing a single warship. If Zoltan was forced to fight under the same restriction, it would be a hopeless effort, but that one difference changed everything.

"It's a marvelous strategy based on the enemy's psychology. It really is a waste for Rit the hero to end up as the wife of an apothecary... Whoops, that was rude of me."

Mayor Tornado quickly took back his remark while I eyed him.

"You know, Mayor, it always seemed that you didn't like Mistorm very much."

"I can understand why it might appear that way. I don't believe her time in power was exceptional. A country ruled by the strength of will of a single hero is fragile. You can't say the country is standing under its own power like that. I believe it should be the people who protect a country, not just a handful of powerful figures."

"Blessings are unequal, so it's only natural for a few outstanding types to dominate. That's the normal view, anyhow. You've got an interesting viewpoint," I said.

"Even heroes have a right to enjoy normal, everyday happiness, don't they? Although..." Mayor Tornado trailed off for a moment. "You two seem like you

can keep a secret, so perhaps I should just say it.”

“Is there something else?”

“Nothing too dire—it only matters to me, really. But, well, I might just die in the upcoming battle. Leaving behind one embarrassing anecdote will at least give you a funny story to tell later.”

“Is it truly that big a deal?”

“Ha-ha-ha. It’s only something I happened to remember after seeing you and Rit.

“Me and Rit?” I repeated.

“Had Mistorm set aside her burden sooner...perhaps she would’ve accepted my proposal.”

“What? You proposed to her?”

“It’s a story from my younger days. At the time, her prime years were already behind her, but she was a stunning woman nonetheless. She still is, in fact. Though I suppose a hero and a Merchants Guild accountant would not have fit together.”

Mayor Tornado smiled bashfully.

Tiny Zoltan, situated far to the east on the frontier of Avalon. Nothing here would ever end up in the history books, yet there were still many kinds of people living in this corner of the world. Why shouldn’t they fight for what they believed in?

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“There’s a catapult in the back of the storage building from forty-five years ago!”

“Will it move?”

Zoltan was readying its defenses.

Soldiers and volunteers with javelins and bows were lining the harbor and the city walls. Zoltan’s three caravels and several lesser merchant ships loaded with soldiers were deployed in the river.

Surprisingly, Lilinrala's galley had entered the river as well. It was a shallow draft galley, but the only way such an enormous boat maneuvered so skillfully was thanks to Lilinrala's naval proficiency.

"With this, I believe we have a chance of repelling the Veronian invaders."

Tisse watched the people of Zoltan hurry about their preparations.

The situation definitely could've been worse, and yet...

"Is there something else troubling you, Red? The difference in fighting strength is clear, but I believe it is safe to say this is the best possible situation."

Tisse cocked her head at my long face. Her skepticism was definitely warranted.

"Rit's strategy takes everything into account, but there's plenty that could go wrong."

There was no telling what might happen in a battle, even if it was a random accident and not due to any particular flaw in a strategy.

It had been like this in Loggervia, too. I recalled several times when Rit got a smug look on her face, and she declared that she had devised a great plan. However, on occasion, something about it didn't work out right, and we'd have to cover the shortfall somehow.

"That isn't Rit's fault, though. Surely that won't happen this time," Tisse assured.

"Yeah, I'm probably just overthinking it."

We shared a smile.

Things would go according to plan.

Still, discussing what to do just in case couldn't hurt.

"What's going on with Ruti? Should we go check?" I suggested.

"Yes, let's."

Tisse and I headed for the hidden village where Mistorm's old crew was living.

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By the next day, the people of Zoltan were resting in shifts. It was just after dusk when Rit got a visitor.

“Rit the hero.”

“What is it, Lord William?”

“I’ve noticed that Ruhr, Tifa, the high elf Yarandrala, Master Mistorm, and the apothecary Red are missing.”

“They will be acting separately.”

“Separately?”

“I haven’t heard all the details, but they said they’ll link up with us once the fighting starts.”

“Is that so? I don’t fully understand, but as long as you have an idea of how it works, then it’s fine.”

As the head of Zoltan’s army, Lord William was in position to command this operation, but he’d chosen to entrust Rit with Zoltan’s forces, subordinating himself to her for the battle.

Lord William was a general without any actual fighting experience, but he still wasn’t the sort to casually yield his authority to an adventurer—not with all the considerations of status and responsibilities after the fighting was over.

Rit was secretly surprised and moved by his decisiveness.

It was a courageous thing to do, especially considering how Rit herself had struggled with the same sort of dilemma and quarreled with the Hero about it back in Loggervia.

Lord William was sailing on the explosive-laden caravel together with Rit.

“This ship has Rit the hero and Zoltan’s best drake knights. The remaining two boats have Galatine and his adventurers, and Prince Salius and his marines.”

There were ten more small merchant ships loaded with soldiers that would meet Leonor and her Veronian troops. It was a force of a scale that Zoltan could not begin to imagine. Lord William was in high spirits, looking like a knight setting out to combat the demon lord’s army.

“Lord William, a commander like you mustn’t lose track of the reality before us. The enemy is tens of times stronger than we are. It was only a few weeks

ago that we worried about Lilinrala's single galleon suppressing all of Zoltan. Now, we're about to face eight superior warships and Veronia's ultimate trump card, the demon lord's own vessel."

"Th-that's true."

Lord William looked uncomfortable, as though he'd been doused in cold water.

Not too long ago, Rit had been going around stirring the soldiers' spirits, telling them how they would surely triumph.

"I can motivate them, but it is up to you to rein them in. If you don't, the troops will be shaken by the gap in expectations when they face the reality that's about to hit."

Lord William gulped as Rit pointed out to sea.

Something huge was visible in the distance. It was far enough yet that the soldiers couldn't get a proper feel for its scale, but they would understand soon.

"I heard the stories, but still...that's enormous!"

Rit was already struck by *Vendidad*'s presence. Mistorm had described the dread ship, but seeing it in person was very different.

One hundred and twenty meters long. It was big enough to make the forty-meter-long galleons accompanying it look small.

Black smoke was pouring from its smokestack, and the ship was sailing closer to Zoltan, powered by a giant paddle wheel. A coal-powered steel paddleboat. It was a vehicle constructed using technology unknown in all of Avalon.

"Wh-whoa, what is that ship? It's smoking."

"Is it really a boat? It's bigger than a noble's mansion."

"I bet even Central doesn't have something that large."

As the *Vendidad* approached, a disturbance spread among the Zoltan troops.

"L-Lady Rit!"

Lord William was trembling as he looked to her. The *Vendidad* and the galleons would soon reach the mouth of the river.

"Lord William, the troops are watching. A superior officer needs to remember their pride no matter how hopeless the situation appears."

"I—I know it is shameful...but I can't stop trembling."

Lord William's eyes watered. He struck his thighs to steel himself, but his trembling continued.

"Even so..." Rit smiled at Lord William. "...I don't think you are a coward. You entrusted this battle to me. There is courage in delegating a task you can't perform to someone else rather than insisting you can do it and failing in the crucial moment."

Rit raised her right hand.

"I'll turn this around."

She focused on the wind.

"Spirit of the wind, guide us to victory! Control Wind!"

The gentle breeze blowing upriver stopped.

"Hold on tight to the halyards!" Rit shouted.

The next moment, a powerful gust pushed the Zoltan ships forward.

"The breeze!"

The sailors steering the ships frantically worked their sails.

Once she'd confirmed that all the ships were prepared, Rit called, "When it comes to fighting on the water, upstream and upwind are both advantageous!"

Her voice boomed, though it was not unpleasant. There was a mysterious resonance to it that made people want to listen.

"Scared of such a big ship? Terrified of a fleet the likes of which you've never seen? I can understand. We wouldn't have a chance on the high seas, but this is Zoltan. You all know there's no port here that can take a ship that size. None of those vessels can reach our home. We'll engage their smaller landing crafts. The wind, the river, and Zoltan itself are our allies, barring the enemy at every turn!"

"...Can we win...?"

It was a quiet murmur among the crowd, yet Rit caught it.

“Can we win?”

Rit fell silent, slowly looking around to all the soldiers focused on her. They couldn’t look away, hanging on her every word.

Rit the hero. People in Loggervia had called for her to skip ahead of the crown prince to become the duchy’s next ruler, and it wasn’t because of her powerful Divine Blessing alone.

“Of course we can! I swear it on the name Rit the hero! We aren’t fighting to say we died protecting Mistorm. This battle will be remembered as the one where Zoltan protected its champion and sent Veronia packing with its tail between its legs!”

There was silence, and then a shout.

“To victory!”

Rit loosed an even stronger blast of air with her cry. The wind carried her voice, reaching every soldier.

“To victory!”

It rang in their hearts.

“To victory! To victory! To victory!”

They were shouting, stirring each other’s spirits, raising morale.

Rit’s natural charisma surpassed Divine Blessings.

There was relief, a trust that everything would work out if they followed her.

“To victory!”

Lord William had joined the chanting soldiers, and Rit grimaced. Undoubtedly she would get more requests to return to adventuring once this was over.

I’m happy enough just living in peace with Red.

Because of her charisma, she had been able to stand shoulder to shoulder and fight alongside Red as an equal in Loggervia, and it had also forced her from her home, allowing her to reunite with her beloved.

Thus, Rit couldn't deny her strengths.

Life is a funny thing, though.

"Now then, let's get this over with so Red and I can go home."

Wielding her two trusty shotels, Rit stared out at the Veronian fleet.



Chapter 5

The Unblemished Evil Woman

Veronia's proud new galleons slowly approached Zoltan.

The enormous warships lined up near the entrance of the river.

Each one's three masts were covered with all number of sails, allowing them to perform complex maneuvers, even against the wind. Hundreds of armed and armored mercenaries swarmed the decks, which were lined with landing craft and large ballistae.

And the massive steel ship that put even the continent of Avalon's most advanced vessels to shame took up station in the middle of the line.

"W-we're really going to fight that?"

Lord William's voice trembled quietly.

It was understandable. One of the basic factors of fighting on the sea was the height of a boat. Projectiles had a greater effect when fired from higher elevation, and it made boarding or defending against boarding easier as well.

A fair engagement with that monstrous thing spelled doom for Zoltan. Rit felt something other than nervousness, however.

"Something's strange. It's certainly an armada capable of conquering a country, but it's way too much for Zoltan. How much did it cost to move this many ships and people?"

Being assured of victory was crucial in war, but it was also important to consider the cost of achieving that win. As princess of a country with a powerful military, Rit knew that well.

An insurmountable advantage was not inherently the correct choice. It was important to consider what would come after, and what costs were actually worth paying in order to triumph.

And in that regard, Leonor's armada was far too big.

Zoltan was just a minor backwater far removed from Veronia's sphere of influence. From Rit's perspective, the fleet she faced seemed akin to a hysterical flailing than the behavior of a confident ruler assured of their superiority.

There was movement on the deck of the *Vendidad*.

"That's Queen Leonor. And Prince Yuzuk and Prince Silverio as well."

Three figures had appeared on the deck.

Leonor looked like a dainty, delicate young woman. Flanking her was a pair of handsome men who looked like heroes from legend.

The enemies were still a bit distant, but Rit could make them out thanks to her blessings-enhanced vision.

The two princes formed a magic seal with their hands.

Rit stuck her left sword into the deck, ready to respond with magic at a moment's notice if needed.

The princes' spell activated, and a massive projection of Leonor appeared in the sky.

"People of the Republic of Zoltan." It was a beautiful, mellifluous voice, but something about it felt unnatural. "I am Leonor of Veronia, second queen consort of the Kingdom of Veronia. I have come this day in the name of the great King Geizeric of Veronia."

The projection's smile was both enchanting...and dripping with malice.

"We are here to help you. Salius's soldiers have attacked your humble country without the permission of the king, so we have come to punish the foolish prince and his lawless subordinates who would sully the honor of Veronia. Have no fear."

Having said that, Leonor's projection looked toward Lilinrala's ship. It was just a constructed image; the real Leonor couldn't see what her massive duplicate could. However, the projection's gaze was fixed unflinchingly at Lilinrala's galley, making it almost seem real.

“She’s used to this,” Rit remarked

The real Leonor was standing on the deck of the *Vendidad*, looking down at nothing. She was familiar with how to make the projection move how she wished.

As Leonor continued, Rit remained on guard.

“We have come to help our Zoltan friends. There is no cause for alarm, and no blood needs to be spilled. We request only your assistance.”

“Our assistance?!” someone shouted.

The giant Leonor’s eyes gently cast themselves in the direction of the outburst.

“Yes, it’s quite simple. We ask that you direct us to the location of those who are a threat to Zoltan. That and nothing more. Simply turn over Salius, Lilinrala, and my elder sister, the Queen Consort Misphia—the woman who calls herself Mistorm and who has deceived you these many years.”

Judging that there would not be any room for negotiation, Rit started to move, but Lord William stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

The middle-aged general stepped forward and, glaring up at the giant Leonor in the sky, gave Zoltan’s answer.

“We refuse.”

His curt response resounded firmly over the water.

Like Rit’s speech, his words had the inspiring power of a hero.

“We will not concede on any point. Your scheme to have us betray Master Mistorm, whom you would call Queen Misphia, is vile and dishonorable. We may be a small country, but we are not so shameless as to betray a friend to curry favor with her enemy. Draw your sword, Witch of Veronia! Come and take her if you can!”

For a brief moment, the massive face of Leonor recoiled. The force of a middle-aged, backwater military commander had overwhelmed the queen of a major power, if only for an instant.

“I suppose it was inevitable. The sin of looking down on the great Kingdom of Veronia, the unforgivable insolence of ordering me to draw my sword, and the crime of being precious to my sister. Heh-heh, if I scorch this country to the ground and place your heads on the ashes, I wonder if Sister will fall into despair for me.”

The projection smirked hideously. Leonor had abandoned disguising the vitriol that burned in her heart.

“Draw my sword? There’s no need for the likes of you. I require but a single order. With my word and nothing more, you will all die meaningless deaths.”

For the first time, Leonor’s projection looked straight forward at nothing in particular because the real woman on the deck of the *Vendidad* was gazing at Zoltan.

“Kill them all.”

Landing crafts filled with mercenaries were lowered in droves. The tanned, powerful-looking sellswords started rowing toward Zoltan.

“Wh-what should we do, Lady Rit? I just sort of snapped.”

After all his bluster, Lord William was trembling in fear.

It was a little bit pathetic...

“What do you think?” Rit asked the knights around her and Lord William.

They all grinned.

“Don’t worry, General! I’ve never been more proud to be a knight of Zoltan.”

“I was a little worried fighting on the sea and without my partner drake, but your words erased any doubt in my mind.”

“We’re the proud Zoltan knights of Lord William. I’m sure my father, who passed last year, would be jealous of the honor I have to fight alongside you during such a momentous event.”

The knights raised their swords.

““Your orders, sir?””

Lord William’s eyes grew wet. He cleared his throat, preparing to give the

command. "Ah, the commander here is Lady Rit, not I."

The knights all smiled as Lord William's voice went flat.

Rit nodded, satisfied with how they were doing. "Then, Lord William, may I borrow your sword for a moment?"

"Huh? Yes, of course."

Rit took the man's weapon and held it aloft.

"As Lord William's proxy leading the army of Zoltan, Rit the apothecary commands all heroes of Zoltan!" Rit pointed the sword straight at Leonor's warship. "Deploy in line with Lilinrala's galley. Do not approach the enemy vessels! Soldiers of Zoltan, advance!"

Landing crafts were already pushing up the river, with the demon lord's metal ship looming behind them.

This would not be a particularly large battle when compared to others in Avalon's history. It was not two great armadas clashing. Leonor's galleons had taken up station behind the landing boats with their sails furled, not even bothering with evasive action. Only small vessels would engage, but it was still a naval skirmish the likes of which Zoltan had never seen.

On her galley, Lilinrala sighed as she beheld Zoltan's forces.

"There's nothing for you to gain from all this, so why are you risking your lives to help us...! Don't go letting them die, you sea dogs! We already owe them more than a ship full of treasure could cover! If the debt gets any larger, all the riches in the world won't be enough!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am!"

An arrow volley rained down on Leonor's encroaching army.

Hired soldiers screamed and thrashed as the projectiles found purchase. Some rowboats capsized, leaving mercenaries clinging desperately to the sides of them.

Lilinrala's galley had the advantage as the battle opened.

"It's no good! Back! Pull back!"

Leonor's hirelings on the rowboats retreated from the hail of arrows launched from Lilinrala's ship.

Seeing that, a graying mercenary commander ordered his band to divert around it.

"It's like attacking a fortress. There's no money in it for us if we fight that head on, so leave it to the others."

But what awaited them was Rit with a shotel in either hand. A shadow flew through the sky, landing with a thud in the middle of their rowboat.

"Wh-what?! A woman?!"

Even in their shock, the mercenaries did not hesitate to thrust with their swords.

They really were different from Zoltan's adventurers. The experienced troops could still rely on their training and experience even in a wild melee.

However...

"Hahhh!" Rit shouted while her shotels tore through them like a storm. The mercenaries' blades cut only air, while Rit used the curve of her shotels to bypass their shields.

Leonor's hired troops missed, their defenses failed, and they were felled in the blink of an eye. Having pacified the one rowboat, Rit leaped again without rest.

"Eeep?!"

By the time she'd knocked out the third boat, the mercenaries leaped into the sea in a panic to escape.

"That's what you get from soldiers paid in gold."

Mercenaries might flirt with danger, but they weren't so faithful as to fight when they knew they would die.

"The drake knights are doing a good job disrupting the ones trying to land from the sea. And it looks like Leonor's hirelings aren't interested in the extra work of a siege after fighting their way onto shore and are mostly still trying to

land using the river anyway," Rit continued, assessing the situation. "Their movements are getting duller. It was supposed to be an easy win for them, but they're losing faith now that things have turned out tougher than anticipated."

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"Just one more push."

The masked Salius ordered his marines to advance.

Using the tailwind Rit had created and the river's flow, the prince's vessel flew forward at high speed, charging straight toward the side of one of the Veronian galleons.

Although the galleon's crew loosed arrows at the approaching caravel, they also continued to lower landing crafts. Evidently, they didn't believe the small Zoltan boat to be a threat.

"Hmph, amateurs."

Laughing, Salius gave the signal to his subordinates.

They all leaped into the small ship tied to the back of the caravel and immediately cut the rope.

Salius's escape craft moved at full speed away from the caravel still riding the tailwind. By the time the galleon's crew realized the intent to ram, it was too late.

The timing was perfect. Just before the caravel crashed into the galleon, there was a massive explosion. The mercenaries on the galleon's deck were sent flying, and a big hole was blown in the side of the ship as it listed and started to sink.

"Th-they stuffed their ship with explosives! Raise sail! Evasive maneuvers!"

"Hold off lowering boats! We need troops to protect the ship!"

The remaining seven galleons frantically raised sail, but because of the headwind, the giant galleons' formation was thrown into chaos.

"Oy! Watch it! Don't hit us!"

"You watch it! We can't move here!"

“What’d you say?! We can’t...!”

Two of the galleons collided. The ships shuddered, and many soldiers fell overboard.

The remaining Veronian ships couldn’t employ their sails well enough to regain control.

Lilinrala grinned as she watched.

“Did you not consider why I left those new galleons in Veronia even knowing you would take them? They’re Avalon’s strongest, newest designs, but half-assed training isn’t enough to sail them well. They’re more ship than a bunch of mercenaries can handle.”

As the reinforcements that were supposed to be coming from the galleons dried up, the mercenaries already in rowboats grew less and less interested in fighting.

The nobodies of the hapless little backwater of Zoltan were far stronger than expected.

Rit went without saying, but even Zoltan’s average soldiers were fighting courageously.

It became increasingly obvious to the mercenaries that if they pushed onward, they’d suffer severe casualties. Their advance stalled, and some of them halted altogether to make a show of firing arrows from far enough away that they would not find purchase.

Once it reached that point, more and more hired warriors started to break until the battle line was on the verge of collapsing. The best course for the Veronian side would be to order a retreat before that happened and gather its forces again.

Rit was confident they had won the opening encounter.

I wonder if Leonor will be a bit chagrined after this.

Rit looked over at the demon lord’s ship, which still waited patiently. Leonor and the two princes were standing on the deck, seemingly in the middle of a discussion.

“...She’s smiling...”

There was a grin on the queen consort’s face, as though she were enjoying herself.

Bottling up ominous unease, Rit readied herself to deal with whatever might come. However, what actually happened left Rit incapable of anything but staring in open-mouthed shock.

“That’s impossible...!”

The two princes formed a seal, and five other Veronian mages around them were also focusing their minds. Even to someone with no knowledge of magic, it was clear that the seven of them were up to something.

“The ship is...rising?!”

It was not as if the *Vendidad* had completely left the water and was flying around, but the great steel boat began to climb upriver, a feat that should’ve been impossible for it.

The magic was raising the ship’s draft. By all rights, such a huge vehicle should have run aground in the estuary, but it was steaming ahead without issue.

The *Vendidad* was over one hundred meters long and made of metal. Raising it with magic was unthinkable, even for seven working in concert. The task was beyond Ares, humanity’s greatest mage.

“Asura demon magic.” Rit gripped the hilts of her shotels tightly.

That power surpassed human understanding. The Zoltan side, and even Leonor’s mercenaries, stopped fighting and stared at the demon lord’s ship.

“Not good!” Rit was the first to return to her senses. She immediately returned to her caravel and shouted. “Lord William! Ram it with our caravel! If it reaches Zoltan, it’s all over!”

“U-understood!”

Her ship’s sails billowed as it moved forward.

“...Gh!”

Suddenly, Rit leaped off the ship. She swatted down a single arrow that had

come flying toward them with her sword. There was a thud and then a violent explosion.

“Lady Rit?!”

Lord William stopped the caravel in a panic.

Rit had been sent flying backward by the blast, and though she landed safely back on board, she was injured.

“There’s a high-level Magic Archer on that ship! That arrow had a Fireball spell imbued in it!”

“Fireball?! From that range?! Is there really a blessing like that?!”

A man holding a tall bow and wearing a hunter’s hat with dragon eyes sewn into it smirked down at Rit and Lord William.

Their caravel was packed with explosives. If fire magic hit it, it would set the whole ship off. Even for Rit, fighting a Magic Archer at long range would be difficult.

And on top of that, the mercenaries on *Vendidad* let fly a storm of arrows, too.

Despite lacking any blessings that boosted archery, the hired troops protecting the Veronian flagship were the cream of the crop that Leonor was relying on. Such a situation was undoubtedly a challenge for anyone to break through, even Rit the hero.

“Wh-what should we do, Lady Rit?!” Lord William cried.

“Red...” Rit muttered with a smile.

It’s okay because I have Red and the others.

Rit did not despair. She had something even the elite mercenaries could never hope to deal with—the world’s strongest heroes, who had been living a relaxing, slow-paced life in Zoltan.

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Leonor looked at the rabble scrambling on the water with satisfaction.

It was always a pleasant feeling for her to see the moment when people

drunk on courage and the idea they'd win an impossible battle learned the truth and fell into despair.

The despondence on the face of that impertinent high elf pirate Lilinrala as she rallied her crew to fight was exquisite. Her skill meant there was already anguish in her eyes, for she understood that her side had lost already.

"You chose poorly," Leonor spat.

With Zoltan as an ally, Lilinrala must have believed she'd claimed a superior position from which to fight, yet with the river mouth blockaded, her galley was afforded no avenue of escape. They were in the palm of Leonor's hand. All that remained was to squeeze and end it.

"But I won't kill you yet...not until I can do so before Sister, and only after days of torture. Once Sister is sobbing and begging me to kill her instead, then and only then will I end you."

Flames blazed in Leonor's eyes. Confident that she would achieve the final aspiration of her life, she broke into a loud laugh.

"That's precisely why you're going to lose, Leonor."

"Sister?!"

Leonor spun at the voice that should not have been so close. Perhaps the twisted bond between the siblings had carried the words to her ears.

A single ship appeared together with a column of water. Leonor knew the ancient vessel that was cutting through the sea at a ferocious speed and headed straight for her.

"The *Regulus*?! That's impossible!"

Rit beamed at the sight of this latest arrival.

"Red!"

"Sorry we kept you waiting!"

Standing on the deck were Red, Tisse, Yarandrala, and...

"Leonor! Did you really think you could beat Pirate Princess Misphia when it came to surprise attacks and dirty tricks?!"

“Sister!!!”

Mistorm gazed down at Leonor, who answered the look with a dark glare. However, the younger sibling’s expression changed when she spied another familiar face.

“...! That’s Gideon!!!”

“Mother! Please hold tight to us. They are going to crash into our ship.”

“Someone! Anyone! Capture him! I want him kneeling before me!”

“You are being unreasonable, Mother!”

Prince Yuzuk grabbed Leonor’s hand just as the *Regulus* smashed into the side of the *Vendidad*. Even Leonor’s hero-class mercenaries were forced to hold the vessel’s sides to remain standing. The mages concentrating on their magic were not so fortunate, though. By the time they realized what was happening, they were already tumbling into the water, leaving Leonor and her two sons standing alone.

The spell broke, and the demon lord’s ship pushed a little bit farther up the river before its bottom scraped the bed and locked in place. Red and the others on the *Regulus* leaped onto the demon lord’s ship.

Leonor’s astonishment left Red exasperated.

“Well, that’s what happens when an amateur with no command experience is in charge of an operation.”

Leonor had opted for a surprise attack to break her enemies’ spirits. It was a fitting strategy for her. However, if you hoped to win a standard fight on the battlefield, the orthodox approach was simply to engage normally. The side with superior forces generally shouldn’t opt for a risky tactic.

Now Leonor would pay the price for it. Her overwhelming strength was going to be stolen out from under her.

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Turning back time to before the battle between Veronia and Zoltan started.

Tisse, Mistorm, and I headed to the hidden village where Ruti and Yarandrala were.

“Do you know what Ms. Ruti’s thinking?”

I thought about Tisse’s question for a little bit and then looked at Mistorm.

“I’d guess she probably went to get a ship.”

“...My old boat, the *Regulus*, is in a hidden cove not too far from the village. We brought all the furniture to the settlement, but the ship itself is fine. I’m surprised you realized I still had it.”

“There were pieces there that looked like they came from a boat, but the houses themselves didn’t appear to be made from the hull, so I figured the ship was still intact.”

“Did Ms. Ruti notice as well?”

“I’m sure she did.”

If I’d noticed it, she definitely had. Ruti was brilliant.

“Then we should head directly for the ship instead of the village. Could you guide us, Mistorm?”

“Got it. Follow me.”

Following Tisse’s suggestion, we changed routes and headed for the cove where the ship was hidden. And as expected, we saw lots of the old people from the hidden village getting it ready to sail.

“Young miss!” one of them called out when he saw Mistorm, and she waved back.

“Are Ruti and Yarandrala here?”

“If you mean the blue-haired missy and the high elf, then yes.”

We found them quickly. They were reviewing a map and making a plan.

“Big Brother.” Ruti smiled happily when I went over.

“Sorry, did we keep you waiting?”

“No, it’s fine. We were thinking about how to board the demon lord’s ship.”

The map outlined Zoltan’s surroundings, and Ruti pointed to one small inlet.

“We’re here.”

"Hmm. This is a dead angle for vessels sailing into Zoltan from the sea. However, there's still quite a distance between here and the enemy ships. If the galleons intercept us, we won't be able to reach the *Vendidad*."

"Mhm. I can move it."

"Move it?"

"Push it by hand."

Ruti raised her arms and flexed her muscles expressionlessly. Her strength came from her Hero blessing, though, so she still possessed the slender, not-particularly-muscled arms of a normal girl.

She looked adorable.

"Leave it to me."

Mistorm cast me a look, not knowing how to respond.

"Ruti can do it."

"...It doesn't look like you're joking. Okay, I'll trust you."

"We'll only have one shot. We have to board the *Vendidad* and launch a surprise attack. Once we do, it doesn't really matter how powerful that ship is," Ruti explained. Then she took my hand.

"Big Brother...I'd like you to help, too."

Grinning, I answered, "Of course. Let's fight together."

She squeezed my hand and smiled. "Thank you."

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Casting Sacred Shield over the water to create a foothold for herself, Ruti tackled the ship with all her might.

"I'll catch up soon..."

Her words trailed off far in the distance as the *Regulus* was launched across the sea at a tremendous speed.

Mistorm was understandably shocked, but even Tisse and Yarandrala, who knew Ruti better than most, were surprised.

That's my Ruti. Big Brother's proud of you.

Threading the needle through the chaotic mess of galleons, the *Regulus* slammed into the stern of the *Vendidad*. It was no longer seaworthy after that impact. We immediately leaped onto the deck and ran toward the bow, where Leonor waited.

“Stop them!” Prince Silverio commanded, and the mercenaries responded immediately.

The Champion, Sword Devil, and Rune Knight. A veritable parade of top-tier blessings lined up to block our way. These were the elite hirelings that Leonor had gathered. And the one who stood out in an already-illustrious group was the Magic Archer with dragon eyes woven into his hat.

“Now there’s a familiar face, Gideon of the Bahamut Knights.”

“Oh yeah, aren’t you Fried, the dragon slayer of Flamberge?”

He knocked an arrow and took aim at me.

“Just when I thought there wasn’t anyone worth hunting in this backwater, a big name suddenly appears! Perfect, you’ll make good quarry.”

Fried formed a seal as he released his bowstring.

“A magic shot that will kill you even if you evade! Parry and die or just let it hit and die! Your choice!”

The arrow was imbued with the spell Gravity Sphere.

It was true that even if I dodged, it had enough force to turn everything in a ten-meter radius to ash.

In which case...

“What?!”

I caught the projectile with my left hand.

The magic imbued in the arrow would only trigger upon impact. If I kept it from hitting anything, the spell would fizzle out without going off.

“You’ve specialized your skills too heavily in magic. If the attacks don’t hit, they don’t matter.”

“Youuuu!!!”

Fried tried to unleash a second arrow, but I immediately closed the distance using Lightning Speed. My opponent was an elite through and through, however, swiftly abandoning his bow to draw a sword.

My blade was not so weak as to be stopped by a sword that was just a fallback option, however.

“Gyaah!”

My attack found its mark, and Fried slumped in a pool of blood.

“He got Fried?!”

One of the mercenaries screamed, pulling attention from Tisse and the others who were standing in front of them. It was not even a full second, but that was more than enough.

Tisse’s blade flashed, and Yarandrala’s staff swung down. The mercenaries with powerful blessings collapsed in a shower of blood without having time to scream.

“Who are they?! They’re way too strong!”

Fear and panic spread among Leonor’s elites.

“Their movements are getting duller. Time to break through.”

“Roger!”

We started running.

“Mistorm, can you stop the enemies to our flanks?”

“Leave it to me! Ash Storm!”

A vortex of corrosive ash attacked the mercenaries. Cutting through our retreating enemies, we ran the full 120-meter deck without slowing.

“Leonor!” Mistorm shouted. She was staring at the young woman ahead.

Protected by the two burly princes who looked like archetypal warriors from old legends, Leonor leveled her gaze at Mistorm...and at me.

We had finally reached her.

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The demon lord's ship, *Vendidad*, made use of unknown technology for locomotion but had run aground and was presently useless as a boat.

At the ship's prow, Prince Yuzuk and Prince Silverio were standing at the ready, both wielding enormous greatswords in either hand.

"Dual-wielding greatswords, huh."

Typically, such weapons couldn't be lifted one-handed, but the princes' thick arms almost made it appear natural.

And Leonor was standing calmly behind them.

"I'm pleased to see you again like this before I die, Sister."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're a past I left behind long ago. I didn't think you would still be hung up on me after all this time."

"I prefer not to hold back when I want something."

"How did you ever become so foolish?"

There was a murderous crackle in the air, as if the pair might come to blows at any moment, yet the princes kept them apart.

We would have to defeat them first.

When I took a step forward, Leonor's attention fell to me.

"Gideon, I never imagined I'd be able to see you again, too."

"I would've preferred we never saw each other again."

"That's a rather horrid thing to say to the woman who loved you."

"Are you sure you didn't mean to say the woman who tried to kill me?"

"I loved you and tried to kill you. Both are me. I won't let you escape this time. I will properly end you."

"...I really could have done without this reunion."

Seeing my expression twist in displeasure, Leonor grinned.

The memories from when I was a boy came back to me. I was a different person now, though.

“Please step back, Mother. This is our job.” Prince Silverio took a position to protect Leonor.

“Gideon, I’m glad to meet you again.” Prince Yuzuk’s lips curled into an elated, ferocious grin as he approached me.

I brought my sword to a high stance and ran at Prince Yuzuk. He crossed his swords and blocked the slash. There was a metallic screech.

“Mother! I beg your pardon, but allow us a short break from being your sons until this fight is over!”

“It can’t be helped, I suppose. Everyone who sees you transform must be erased, however. This may be a backwater, but it’s still too early for your identity to be known.”

“Understood. Fortunately, we’re on a ship. We can easily kill all the mercenaries here.”

Both of the princes’ figures swelled. While I was being held back by two blades, four more crashed down from overhead.

“Hah!”

In response, I shouted and pushed the two swords locking mine back and then thrust my sword at the face of the prince whose body had transformed. Unfortunately, he dodged my attack by the skin of his teeth.

I leaped away before my opponent could land a counterattack, and by that time, both of the princes had finished morphing into six-armed Asura demons.

“You’ve gotten strong, Gideon. I’m truly delighted to be able to fight you like this.”

“Gajasura!”

The Asura demon’s shoulders heaved with joy.

“I-it’s a demon!”

I heard screams from behind me. Leonor’s mercenaries were terrified by the princes’ transformations.

“Well, at least we don’t have to worry about watching our backs,” I remarked.

The vast majority of mercenaries had lost the will to fight and were steadily retreating.

I had planned to hold them off myself if it came to that, yet it looked like we'd be able to focus on the Asura demons and Leonor.

I adjusted my grip on the sword.

"Red!"

"It's okay."

I smiled to reassure Yarandrala. There was blood trickling down my arm. It was a light scratch, but it had been close.

"To think you were in line to be the next king of Veronia, Gajasura...I never would've guessed it back then."

"Life is filled with surprises. No matter how many thousands of years I live, I never get tired of it. The joy of opportunities thought lost is truly magnificent."

The princes were actually Asura demons who'd consumed Leonor's stillborn children and taken their forms. They were Gajasura and Chugarra, who had once fought at Mistorm's side.

They held greatswords in each of their six arms. Unlike Shisandan, they gave the impression of big, powerful warriors.

I fought using my knowledge and experience to estimate an opponent's blessing and level. Because I understood what an opponent was capable of, I could combat them on equal or even superior footing despite having a weak blessing like Guide.

Asura demons were the one race that did not have blessings, though. During our time battling the demon lord's army, my options grew more limited as we encountered Asura demons.

"Gajasura...you are strong. No weaker than Shisandan, even. If you live as a prince, shouldn't you be removed from any big fights?"

Gajasura grinned at that.

"We are different from you humans, who can only grow by killing others."

“...What?”

“My days spent as a royal have been delightfully fruitful. Holding discussions with the martial art masters and theorists of this continent and devoting myself to sports. At times with nobles, drinking fine wine, eating delicacies, sleeping with great beauties. At times mixing among the peasantry, tilling fields, eating simple steamed vegetables, and singing and dancing with a mug of cheap booze in one hand. They are all experiences that are hard to come by in Asura Kshetra.”

“Can you become strong that way?”

“Even meeting you served to nourish my strength. Being able to see firsthand the powerful and determined way of a life of such a strong young man was a rare delight. Learning is joy, and such joy becomes my strength.”

There was an intensity to how he stood there wielding his swords. To think it was possible to grow that much stronger, even removed from combat.

“The nature of Asura demons really is strange.”

“If you ask us, all the creatures dominated by their blessings are the bizarre ones.”

Gajasura was surely making a crucial remark about the world, but I shut it out for now. Exhaling once, I gripped my sword tight.

Faster than the Gajasura I remembered, and sharper, too.

As I readied my weapon, there was a swell of magic power behind me.

“Mmm.”

Chugarra swiftly covered Leonor.

“Crimson storm, embodiment of mine wrath! Firestorm!”

A violent blaze consumed all three of them. But Chugarra’s blades cut through Mistorm’s spell, and the flames did not reach Leonor.

“What is this, Leonor?!“ Mistorm demanded. “Why are the princes Gajasura and Chugarra?!“

Seeing that the pair were actually Asura demons, Mistorm realized why

Leonor had been able to have children despite being affected by Stealth Extinction.

The two Asura demons exchanged a look amid the flames.

“It’s been a long time, Lady Misphia. Our voyage with you was a good one.”

“Dearest Lady Misphia. It was a joy to accompany you on your country stealing.”

Their two frightening faces flashed toothy, carefree smiles.

“Why...?”

“We are with Lady Leonor now.”

Offering only that brief explanation, the two of them bowed slightly and did not speak further, as if instructing Mistorm to talk with Leonor.

There was no sense of malice at all from them, just the grins of those meeting an old friend after a long while. This was in spite of deceiving their sworn friend Geizeric and destroying Mistorm’s standing and life.

It made me realize again just how different Asura demons’ values were from humans.

“What are you mad about, Sister?”

A smirk dripping in malice crossed Leonor’s angelic, youthful face.

“Leonor, I can understand you hating me, and I can even comprehend why you’d despise Geizeric and Lilinrala... But you are a daughter of the Veronian royal family, aren’t you?! You’ve ended our family’s line by your own two hands!”

“Yes, I have. What of it?”

“Wh...?”

“And on top of that, once King Geizeric has passed, I fully intend to give the Kingdom of Veronia to these two Asura, or, in other words, to the demon lord.”

“Why?” Mistorm questioned.

“Why?” Leonor repeated.

“You were obsessed with becoming queen. Wasn’t it to have your son take the throne...?”

“Heh... You really believe that after all this? What a simple person you are, Sister.”

There was a soft blowing sound.

With my bronze sword, I swatted down the tiny dart that had flown from Leonor’s left sleeve. It was not a powerful shot, but the little projectile was undoubtedly drenched in poison.

“Gideon, do you prefer that withered old woman to me?”

“Leonor.”

Her smile faded as I called her name.

“You are a writhing mass of lust for power. Yet it seems you lack a goal beyond the hoarding.”

“Of course. I am the queen. Someone else can handle the affairs of state.”

“And yet it exceeds mere selfish desire. I can’t begin to imagine how much all the magic and alchemy required to maintain your appearance must have cost, but it had to be quite painful. I’m confident it demanded extraordinary effort as well. And all to maintain the favor of Geizeric, a man you didn’t even love. Everything was in service of maintaining your power. That level of obsession is chilling.”

“Heh-heh.”

“Even if it was for a wicked goal, your drive is something an ordinary person could never begin to match. I can only commend your tenacity.”

“I am delighted to be praised by you, Gideon.”

“But what next? What have you achieved through all of your effort, struggles, and pain? It was not so that someone else might inherit your power, nor was it to gather wealth or indulge in gluttony. Nor was it for the maintenance of a royal line.”

“Correct, it was none of those reasons.”

"It's not the impulse of a blessing. Your blessing is Warrior. The role your blessing seeks of you is no different from so many others."

"Of course, this is of my own volition. I would never ascribe my actions to my blessing."

"Then what have you gained? What will remain of the life that you have razed?"

Leonor looked at me, and then to the sky as she laughed. With every other smile and giggle, no matter how malicious, some level of elegance was preserved. Such was not the case this time. She opened her mouth wide and laughed uproariously.

"HA-ha-ha-ha... Hahhh. Is that all you've got to ask?"

"..."

"What did I gain? What will remain? I have no need of anything of the sort. I alone am my reason for living. Whatever might persist after I die is meaningless. I forced Sister out of Veronia for no other reason than because I wanted to. And I am giving the country to the Asuras because I desire it also. Do you require a reason to eat an apple over a grape first for breakfast? Of course not. The people can suffer, and the country can collapse for all I care. My existence is the result of doing what I please and nothing more."

This was Leonor's true nature.

She did not value anything other than herself. Her life was spent on what she wanted, and whatever death or destruction might result, it did not bother her, and she did not care to reflect on it.

"Leonor!!!" Mistorm screamed as she glared at Leonor and raised her staff.

"Are you upset, Sister? Yes, I suppose so. You would be quite cross. The only reason you allowed yourself to leave was that you still thought of me as a member of the royal family, even if I was terrible to you. You trusted that I'd never be mad enough to destroy the country that has supported our lineage."

"Yes, that's what I believed. I lost to you and had everything taken from me in the process. However, I hoped Geizeric and the kingdom would remain."

"It never meant anything to me, and I must admit, it was quite pleasant seeing you cling to the very person who brought about your destruction."

"What an empty life you've lived!"

"I am the only one who decides my value. Should all the world despise me, my life will still be a good one because I've decided that is so. And after killing you here, I will receive my happy ending!"

Mistorm formed a seal, while Leonor simply ordered the Asura demons to attack.

"Gideon, Lady Leonor truly is beautiful."

"Is that why you betrayed Geizeric and Mistorm?"

"Hah. Let's fight, Gideon!"

Gajasura unleashed a roiling series of attacks using all six arms. Back during our first encounter, I would've been helpless, but I'd learned how to fight Asura demons during my journey with Ruti.

The key was not to get overwhelmed by the momentum and get trapped in a one-sided defense. Facing six swords with one made parrying every attack a losing strategy.

Instead, I struck.

Gajasura pulled his body back while deflecting my counterblow. Because of his shifted stance, none of his right arms could be used immediately. Even though I knew my slash wouldn't land, the situation was better for me if he was forced to respond with half of his arms for every one of my swipes.

"Marvelous! You've gained so much experience!" Gajasura shouted. However, I only replied with a cut from below. His swords were knocked upward.

Now!

"You're mine!"

With a shout, my outthrust sword pierced Gajasura's body.

"Ugh... This burning pain and disappointment...are both good experiences... Ahhh...it was an invigorating fight, exactly as I expected."

I slowly withdrew my blade from Gajasura, and his body went slack. My sword had pierced his heart, delivering a fatal wound.

“Gajasura, unlike you, I don’t have the composure to enjoy fighting. You lack a blessing, yet ultimately, you still loved fighting to the death, didn’t you?”

The collapsed Asura demon could not answer my whispered question.

Meanwhile, Chugarra was fighting Yarandrala and Tisse.

“Hrah!”

He was a powerful warrior, too, made clear by his ability to fight the two of them simultaneously. It was not just bragging when he said he would kill all the elite mercenaries on the ship.

I needed to help my friends, but before I could move, Mistorm completed her magic.

“Blackened blood, words of destruction, paradise splitting spear of the overlord! The time of destruction has come! Ultimate magic, Demon’s Flare!”

A black flame erupted from Mistorm’s staff. It was her trump card, the magic she’d used in the fight against the gem beast.

“An advanced demon sorcery spell!”

Chugarra crossed his blades, forming a magical barrier.

“I didn’t pirate around the dark continent for nothing!”

The dark fire swallowed Leonor and Chugarra, creating a swirling black inferno. Even the Asura demon had to focus himself on his defensive wall completely. His movements stopped.

“As expected, Lady Misphia! But I am an Asura warrior who has slain countless demons! I’ve learned how to withstand demon magic!”

Chugarra unleashed a lightning bolt from his sword. The two spells collided, and countless cracks ran along the deck.

“We can’t get close like this!” Tisse shouted while evading the overflowing flames and lightning.

The clash of highest-tier magics was so mighty that we couldn’t move in. Just

then, a pillar of water exploded from behind us.

“Wh-what?!”

The mercenaries on the galleon near the abrupt geyser panicked. A few of them dared to look down into the water to find the source.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

However, they only had a moment. The giant galleon was split in two. While the mercenaries were screaming, I heard a familiar voice.

“Mm. Now it’s easier to run.”

A small figure was headed toward the *Vendidad* at a tremendous speed, leaping between scattered fragments of broken vessels.

“What?! Who’s that madman?!” Chugarra shouted in surprise as the person jumped onto the deck.

“Eep?!”

The elite mercenaries who had gathered at the stern to escape the Asura demons lost their minds at this latest arrival.

She was just a normal-looking girl, which is what made it so much more astonishing.

Left with nowhere to run, the mercenaries’ only hope was to jump into the water. They cast off expensive magic gear as they leaped from the boat, desperate to save themselves.

Meanwhile, the girl—Ruti—did not even look at them, turning her attention to the bow, where we were.

“If he can’t move, then all the better.”

She ran straight forward along the deck. There was no one to stand in her way—no one could hope to. Not a person alive could hold off humanity’s greatest champion.

Ruti leaped into the middle of the Demon’s Flare without hesitation.

“I-impossible! In this storm of magic?!”

Cutting through the intense flames that would've incinerated an average person, Ruti's expression looked unchanged as she attacked. It was over in the blink of an eye.

"...So this is the Hero. What incredible strength."

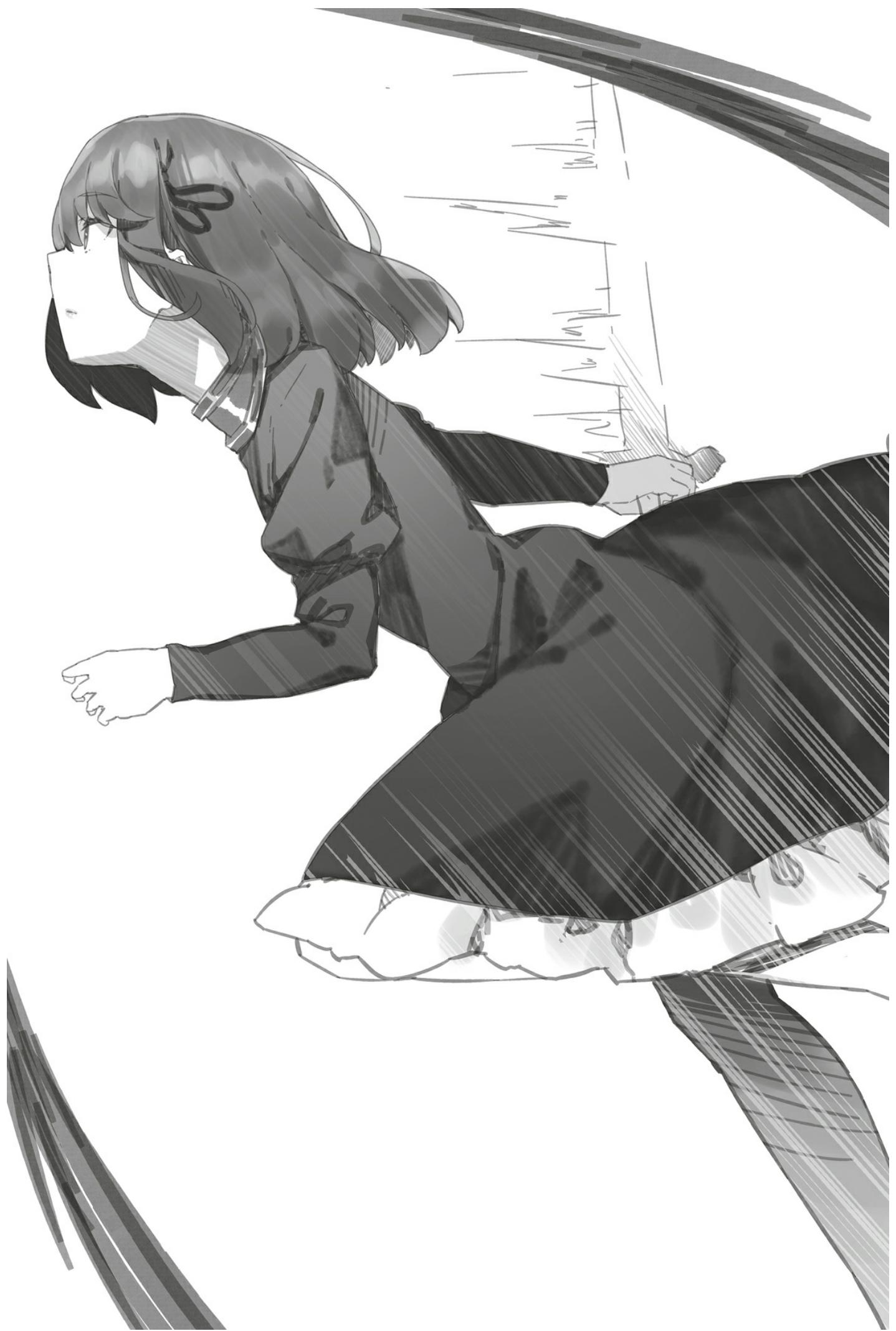
Ruti's sword split Chugarra in half.

"What of Leonor?!"

It was an inferno even an Asura demon struggled to endure. A Warrior like Leonor was undoubtedly doomed, yet she grinned undaunted.

In her left hand was a crimson jewel that absorbed all of Mistorm's spell.

"This is a hidden treasure passed down through the Veronian royal family: Sage Lilith's heartstone. This stone can absorb any magic and send it back!"



“Sage Lilith?! A legacy of the sage from the old Hero’s party?!”

Leonor pointed the jewel at us.

“Allow me to return your gift! You can regret being born an Archmage while you burn to death!”

With supreme satisfaction, Leonor loosed Mistorm’s ultimate spell back at us, yet...

“Gyah?!”

...she was the one who screamed.

“So then...is she Leonor?”

Ruti’s sword had pierced Sage Lilith’s heartstone and Leonor’s hand along with it. Veronia’s treasure crumbled and fell to the deck in pieces.

“Gh, the Hero...!”

Having lost the demon lord’s ship, her mercenaries, the Asura demons, and even Sage Lilith’s heartstone, Leonor seemed to have finally exhausted the tricks up her sleeve.

She drew the slender dress sword from her hip and struck at Ruti.

It was an elegant, textbook attack. Of course, it was nothing compared to the Asura demons’ maneuvers.

“Eh?”

But somehow, Ruti failed to parry that slow attack.

Leonor’s blade scratched her skin, but the power of the Hero blessing kept it from leaving even a light scratch.

Ruti leaped back, watching Leonor in disbelief.

“Heh... What is it, Ruti the Hero? You look so surprised.”

“B-Big Brother! Leonor’s blessing level!”

Ruti was overwhelmed.

Having seemingly recognized the problem, Tisse and Yarandrala both froze in

surprise.

I moved in front of Ruti and confirmed her worry.

“Yes, that’s right. She’s exactly the same as when I last met her. Her Divine Blessing is Warrior, and her level is one. Even with all she’d done, Leonor has never killed anyone herself.”

This was a world filled with struggle. Everyone fought and slew to live and develop their blessings.

Leonor was evil. She had strayed from the laws of humanity, royalty, and even Demis, but her hands and blessing were still unblemished and pure.

Ruti’s astonishment came from how far removed Leonor’s existence was from the world’s systems.

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Divine Blessings were the center of gravity that moved the world.

The greatest heroes and villains who left their marks on history had all raised their blessings to higher levels and used that power to accomplish great feats.

There was a Chef who rebelled against his blessing’s impulses and became a famed swordsman, and a man with the Sword Saint blessing who lived a peaceful life as a shepherd.

But the grace of their blessings was still crucial to the existences they chose.

The Chef used the knife-handling skill and the skill to know how best to butcher animals, wielding seven enormous blades of different shapes, choosing which to employ depending on the opponent he faced.

The Sword Saint was said to have been born blind, but he used his Mind’s Eye skill to follow the livestock and recognize any health issues they had better than a veterinarian. Stories claimed him to be mild-mannered and one who abhorred fighting, yet he always dove straight in if monsters or other predators targeted his flock.

Neither of these people followed the standard route their blessings intended. However, they both relied on their blessings and leveled them up. Thus, the Chef became a famed swordsman, while the Sword Saint became a trusted

shepherd.

“And thus, the righteous and just adventurers have cornered the evil queen,” Leonor sang.

“Why?”

The queen cocked her head at Ruti’s question. “Is there something strange about my level?”

“It’s impossible to avoid fighting and survive in this world. The daughter of a baker and the son of a weaver still have to fight once they connect with their Divine Blessings. That’s how God made things.”

“That is certainly what Demis has said, but I alone am the master of my fate. I have always relied only on myself. Never on some god. My life needs no Divine Blessing.”

There was no doubt in her words.

Leonor rejected her blessing without hesitation. It was not a denial of the route her blessing’s impulses tried to set her on, but a refusal of the blessing itself.

The Hero had horribly twisted Ruti’s life, yet she still took advantage of what it offered. Her superhuman feats in this battle were only possible because of the Hero.

If Ruti wished to, she could kill Leonor immediately, yet she held back. Standing before her was the great villain who had ruined the lives of the Emperor Geizeric and the Archmage Mistorm. Leonor aimed to push humanity itself to the brink by joining hands with the demon lord. And she had done all of that while rejecting her Divine Blessing, the very thing that had tortured poor Ruti.

Leonor’s strength was paralyzing. This was not the power granted by a Divine Blessing, but something different, a force of will.

“Ruti, switch with me.”

“Big Brother.”

“You don’t have to kill anyone you don’t want to.”

I stood between her and Leonor with my sword raised.

“Gideon, will you be the one to face me, then?”

I took a step toward the unblemished evil who had caused so much unhappiness.

“If you are to be my opponent, I am sure I shall be killed before I know what is happening.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Heh-heh. Can you really slay such a weak opponent?”

The church taught that it was wrong to kill those with much lower levels than your own because your blessing hardly gained anything from slaying weak opponents.

And she was level 1. Considering blessing alone, she was completely harmless to me.

“No, you are powerful, Leonor.”

“...I am?”

“Yes, you are. More so than any of the monsters I’ve ever fought. Not in blessing, but in real strength. If I let you escape, I’d have to deal with the fear of knowing you’d return to destroy us. No matter what befalls you, even if it reached a point where I might give up and die, you would crawl back so long as you lived.”

I locked eyes with her as I readied my sword.

She smiled just like the time we first met.

“You once said that my eyes were alluring. I loved your eyes then as well—that strong will hiding beneath the surface. When we met again, it appeared the gleam had left you...and I was disappointed. But it’s still there. Those are the eyes that I fell in love with. Ahh, life truly is a wonderful thing.”

There was no more need for words. I stepped forward to cut her down.

“Wait.”

Someone grabbed my arm.

“Mistorm?”

“This is my fight now.”

Mistorm had used up her magic casting Demon’s Flare, and the exhaustion was obvious on her face. It looked like she could barely keep standing by clinging to her staff.

Leonor’s blessing was level +1, but Mistorm would have a tough time fighting her, drained as she was.

“I have my own reason for battling Leonor, too,” I said.

“So it seems. I don’t know what happened, but it looks like fate is a tricky thing.”

“Please leave this to me, Mistorm.”

“Sorry, but I outrank you, Red. As both Veronia’s Queen Misphia and Zoltan’s Mayor Mistorm.”

“But...”

“Red, Ruti, Tisse, Yarandrala. Thank you for getting me this far. I need to settle this myself.”

The hand on my arm felt weak and ephemeral, but the resolve of a hero yet shone in Mistorm’s eyes.

“Understood.”

I took a step back. Yarandrala and Tisse both gave Mistorm worried looks, but she smiled and rolled up her sleeves.

“We adventured together before, so you know how strong I am, right?”

“You really are stubborn... Take this.” Tisse passed Mistorm her short sword. “It would surely be difficult with just a staff.”

“Mm, it doesn’t stand out, but this is a good blade... Thank you, I’ll take it.”

A small creature leaped out of Tisse’s bag.

“Oh, are you here to support me, too, Mister Crawly Wawly?”

He raised his front leg as if to say “Obviously” and crawled a little circle

around Mistorm's right hand.

"Tying the sword down with thread for me? Thanks. Now I won't drop it even if my grip wanes."

Mister Crawly Wawly tapped Mistorm's shoulder and then returned to his bag.

"What a troublesome person."

Yarandrala smiled with evident bitterness, yet it couldn't mask her concern.

"This is nothing compared to fighting you, Yarandrala."

"You'd better win."

Mistorm grinned and nodded.

And last was Ruti.

"If I fought, no one would get hurt. I would win for sure."

She stared at Mistorm while she spoke. The old woman only caressed my sister's hair gently.

"That's not true. You'd be hurt."

Ruti looked surprised and glanced down.

"Thank you. I'm glad a nice girl like you came to Zoltan."

Mistorm gave Ruti a hug and then faced me.

"I'll leave the rest to you."

At my nod, Mistorm's eyes narrowed as though in relief, and she approached Leonor.

"I kept you waiting."

"You really did. Have you said all the farewells you need?"

"I should ask the same of you. Any last words for anyone? Geizeric?"

"None. I have no interest in what others think of me after I die."

"I see. What a lonely life."

The two readied their swords.

Leonor wielded an expensive dress sword.

Mistorm held a simple short sword.

Despite appearances, Mistorm's weapon was far superior in quality.

"Leonor, I have just one last thing to say to you."

"What is it?"

"I lost. You took so many things from me: my love, my country, and my child... so very much."

"Do you intend to get revenge? Heh, very well. My death won't restore what you lost, though. That match was settled ages ago, Sister, and it was my victory!"

"No, Leonor, I'm not fighting for revenge."

"Then why are you fighting?"

Mistorm took a deep breath. "I was happy!" she shouted in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way in Zoltan. There was a radiant grin on her face. "I had a long, winding journey with the man I loved! I've known so many friends! I loved my homeland of Veronia! And I got to see that crumbling nation reborn into a powerful country again! I loved this Zoltan! I was able to spend my life for the smiles and laughter of the no-good, lazy, peace-loving people of Zoltan! I was able to pass all that on to Tornado! The unreliable little kid I met grew into a better and braver mayor than me! There's nothing that could be more gratifying! I've had a wonderful life! I was happy!!!"

Faint cheers sounded. The people of Zoltan were cheering Mistorm on.

Leonor looked dumbfounded as she watched.

"You do not face Veronia's Misphia, but Zoltan's Mistorm! Leonor, as far as I'm concerned, you're nothing more than a common threat to the local peace!"

"Truly...even to the very end, you are the most unpleasant person, Sister."

"It's time. You can beg God for mercy!"

"No thank you. I pray to no god."

They both leaped forward at the same time. Mistorm deflected Leonor's

elegant thrust.

The two blades clashed with a shower of sparks.

“Mistorm!” Ruti shouted. Emotion was audible in her cry.

Because of the exhaustion, Mistorm’s legs gave out. Her knees buckled slightly, and her stance collapsed.

Seizing that opportunity, Leonor thrust her blade straight at Mistorm’s chest.

The old Archmage used her staff to parry, and despite her weak posture, she swung her sword at her sister’s legs.

Leonor dodged just in the nick of time. The slit hem of her dress fluttered in the wind.

“Your legs are wobbly, Sister.”

“And you’re breathing pretty raggedly.”

The two clashed again. Their swords rang out once, then twice.

Leonor was a twisted sort, but her moves were earnest, straightforward, and unflinching. She did not use any special tricks. Her every motion was intended to push her opponent into a corner.

However, with each step, her breath grew more labored.

“Is she sick?”

By observing Leonor’s movements, I realized that her body was already giving out.

After only a minute of fighting, she was struggling to continue.

“...Let us settle things once and for all!”

With a sharp cry, Leonor took a deep step and plunged her blade forward. It was an attack based on her judging that her lungs would not permit her to continue.

Instead of dodging or parrying it, Mistorm jumped forward, as though expecting this.

Leonor’s blade bit shallowly into Mistorm’s shoulder, producing a spurt of

blood. It was not a mortal wound, however. Pushing in close herself, Mistorm thrust her sword into Leonor's defenseless body.

Everyone believed that had settled the duel.

"Sister, allow me to convey my feelings... I don't need you anymore."

Leonor grabbed Mistorm's arm.

"Ah...!" I shouted, and the next moment, Leonor swept Mistorm's legs out from under her, toppling her.

"Kh, ahhh!"

Mistorm's back slammed down onto the hard deck.

Leonor must have studied martial arts in addition to swordplay.

Not good! Mistorm didn't manage to catch her fall!

"That should have been a lethal blow!"

The blood staining Leonor's dress and flowing from the corners of her mouth were proof enough that she should be unable to go on. Undoubtedly, she had imbibed powerful painkilling serums to endure the agony of her sickness, enough for her to persist while she bled out.

"Mistorm!"

This is bad!

When Leonor raised her sword, I reflexively leaped forward to help.

Leonor smiled.

"Gideon."

She called my name through the blood in her mouth, not looking at Mistorm as she brandished her sword at me.

My bronze sword flashed dully.

Leonor's weapon soared through the air and stuck itself in the deck.

"Heh, heh-heh..."

My sword had cut deep into her body.

“...I don’t have any more regrets.”

“You hoped I would kill you?”

“I have finally taken you for myself. At this moment, all your thoughts are centered on me.”

Blood poured from Leonor’s chest. With my sword still sticking out of her, she staggered backward and grabbed the boat’s edge.

“And having claimed you, I will die.”

Leonor leaned against the rail and gazed at the sky.

“I got everything, and everything went as I wanted. I was...able to be myself to the fullest extent. I did not become anyone else. There is no greater way to quit while I’m ahead.”

“...Is this end really what you sought?”

“Heh-heh... Yes, I’m satisfied. And now the witch departs the stage. A round of applause. My evil and sins are all mine. I offer no justification. I am proud of my evil, and now I shall disappear. Farewell, Gideon...may your life be free as well.”

Leonor’s body floated through the air. The queen’s dress fluttered as she fell into the sea.

I ran to the railing and looked over the edge.

There was a splash, and Leonor’s body sank to the bottom of the river.

“...”

I averted my eyes.

Perhaps it was only natural that her body would weaken after such heavy magical alteration, or maybe it was the wrath of God. Regardless...Leonor’s beauty did not remain in death.

Her figure became like a cracked jewel as she hit the bottom of the river. Yet there was a powerful light in her eyes until the moment they finally broke, too. I was loath to concede it, but I could not help but think them lovely.

After a sigh, I faced the others. “She’s dead.”

"I see. So it's over now." Mistorm was standing, leaning on Yarandrala for support. "I really blundered there... Talk about pathetic."



“You’re the one who lived.”

Mistorm shook her head at Yarandrala’s remark.

“This is what you call winning the battle but losing the war.”

Mistorm did not offer any further explanation and silently closed her eyes.

I looked around the battlefield.

“It looks like the war is over.”

Rit was raising a victorious shout to convince the rest of the Veronian forces that Leonor had fallen.

They had lost Leonor and the *Vendidad*, but Veronia still had enough of a force to continue the fight. However...

“Back to the ships! The enemy won’t follow us to sea!”

“They got the commander! Screw the reward—we’ll be fine as long as we’ve got this galleon!”

“The queen’s dead, so there’s no goin’ back to Veronia! Let’s beat it already!”

Their morale was utterly broken. None considered exacting revenge for Leonor. Some were fleeing in their ships, others had gotten to land and were running, and those incapable of either were casting down their weapons and surrendering.

“That’s my Rit.”

It was the Zoltan army’s first war, but the casualties looked to have been minor.

The inexperienced soldiers had done well to protect Zoltan.

“I’m sorry, Brother.”

“You did well, Ruti. Leonor was a formidable enemy. It’s understandable that it was so difficult.”

“Mhm... She was strong.”

Ruti hugged me and exhaled.

Chapter 6

And So, the World Became a Little More Peaceful

It was the first war in the entire history of the Republic of Zoltan.

From Lord William's declaration of war to the end of hostilities, it lasted less than half a day—four hours and seventeen minutes, to be exact.

From the perspective of all the countries embroiled in the intense struggle against the demon lord's army, such a conflict might not even register as significant.

Still, it was a dazzling victory to those who fought it, and it would surely be a day of celebration in Zoltan forever.

Naturally, there would be a festival to celebrate the victory, even though we'd just had a big celebration for the winter solstice not that long ago.

Although the incident with Veronia was finally concluded, Mayor Tornado was busy arranging the celebration.

The winter festival was the second-largest event of the year, and came immediately after a diplomatic incident and war. And now there was a celebration to commemorate the victory. It was a nonstop flurry of activity.

Everyone, including those in Zoltan, knew that Zoltan was a small, little backwater. None could have imagined such a busy couple of months.

Three days after the fighting, Rit and I were sitting at the counter in the shop, back to our regular lives.

"Thinking back on it, the crisis really was brief."

"Compared to the stuff with Bighawk, Lilinrala and Queen Leonor didn't have much time here."

The question of Veronian succession, a problem that stood at the center of the continent's history, had intruded on our peaceful days. Zoltan had only

been caught up in it by happenstance and remained a bit player in Avalon's history. The crux of the conflict was the struggle between Queen Leonor and Mistorm.

But that was fine for Zoltan if you asked me.

“The cleanup after the fighting was handled quickly, too. The captured mercenaries were released basically without any clauses, right?”

"Holding them prisoner would do us no good. There's ransoming the mercenaries, of course. However, everyone agreed they didn't want to sell them to slavers. I didn't want to, either."

“Even with all the surplus from the reparations from Prince Salius, the people here really are easygoing and good-natured.”

“That’s fine, though.”

The fallout after the war had resolved itself in an uncommonly amicable way.

“Excuse me.”

The bell on the door rang, and a customer entered.

““Welcome!””

Rit and I both greeted the visitor.

It was another reminder that things really had returned to normal.

At noon, I loaded the food I'd prepared into a box.

“There we go.”

I looked in satisfaction at the presentation of it. While I did, I sensed someone sneaking up behind me.

“It looks delicious.”

Rit put her head on my shoulder and hugged me from behind.

“I’m sure Ruti will be happy to eat your food again.”

I'd made a packed lunch to take over to my sister. It had sausage, a hot dog with lettuce, an omelet, and a salad.

There was a smiling face drawn in ketchup on the omelet.

I was confident in today's cooking and grinned as I imagined the look in Ruti's eyes when she saw it.

"You know, Ruti has been really busy lately."

"Yeah..."

Ruti was the leader of Zoltan's only B-rank party.

With her natural charisma, she had become someone that the Zoltan bigwigs turned to during the recent trouble, and she'd be working hard with the assembly until Prince Salius and his ship finally departed.

There'd been requests for Rit to return to adventuring after all she'd done, but they didn't come with the same unrelentingness now that Ruti and Tisse were around.

Apparently, people were more interested in requesting that Rit join the assembly rather than act as an adventurer. She was adamant in rejecting them again, though.

"I absolutely refuse! I'm not interested in being anything other than the Rit of Red & Rit's Apothecary!"

With Rit, Ruti, and Tisse, everything I'd done remained unnoticed, although I felt a little guilty about that.

"Ruti had only just started taking it easy now that she's free of her blessing, and then this big uproar had to mess it up."

How did she feel about all this? I was worried.

"All right. I'll be back soon," I called.

"Okay. Be careful."

Rit saw me off as I walked to the assembly where my sister waited.

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Zoltan's streets were filled with life.

Although it was only midday, a thief and a guard were drinking and singing together. A merchant was selling weapons and armor that had been taken from

the Veronian enemies. There was an adventurer standing on a corner with a spear in hand while telling stories about his feats, too.

He looked like he was enjoying himself as the small crowd cheered.

“Oy! I heard some drake knights and some of Prince Salius’s marines are drinking together down the way!”

“Really?! Let’s go see!”

With that, the audience dispersed in the blink of an eye.

The adventurer’s shoulders slumped, and the merchant burst out laughing. The thief and the guard ran over to the adventurer and passed him a bottle of what they were having. After downing a gulp, the adventurer roared happily.

“Today’s a good day!”

I had to agree. I couldn’t help but smile watching the three of them drink and sing together.

There were crowds everywhere in the streets. And at the center of every throng were the heroes who’d fought to protect Zoltan. Their blessings and levels were irrelevant because they all chose not to run and to safeguard those they loved, even in the face of an enemy far, far stronger. Each was a hero worthy of praise.

Thus, it made sense for there to be guys surrounded by women.

“Wait, Danan?!”

One man walking while encircled by ladies was the Martial Artist Danan, who was supposed to be recovering.

“Hey, Red!”

He jogged over to me, looking as intense as ever.

“What’s with all of the followers, Danan?”

“When someone’s injured, it’s only normal for a nurse to accompany them.”

Oh, so they’re nurses. Still...

“You seem to be getting along pretty well.”

The nurses were clinging on to Danan a bit more than was probably necessary.

“Yeah, they’re war buddies.”

“War buddies? ...You didn’t go out to fight again after all we said, did you?”

“No, no, not like that.” Danan shook his head. “I made a promise, and I’m a man of my word.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“He’s amazing!”

The nurse hugging Danan’s right arm responded with gleaming eyes.

“Amazing...?”

“He’s an outstanding medic! Enough to shock even a veteran nurse!”

What?

“A medic? Danan?”

“Yeah. I made a promise, so I couldn’t fight, but sitting around doing nothing got annoying, so I helped tend to the wounded.”

“Annoying doing nothing...”

At the most basic level, Danan was fundamentally incapable of taking it easy. At my wry smile, Danan laughed. One of the nurses hanging on Dana’s arm continued the story.

“No matter how big the injured person was or how much armor they were wearing, he carried them without a problem. He administered first aid for most wounds and broken bones without any issues, never seemed to get tired, and even when we felt ready to collapse, he kept on smiling despite surely feeling exhausted, too.”

That grin was likely relief at being able to move around again for the first time in a while...

“He took care to encourage those with grievous injuries that it would be okay. Not once did he ever look away.”

...That was definitely the sort of man Danan was. The members of the Hero's party were odd, but Danan had always been straightforward and earnest.

"There are a lot of people who owe their lives to Danan. Even if he couldn't fight, he was a hero in the field hospital."

"You've got that part wrong." A serious look crossed Danan's face.

"Danan?"

"All of you were pushing yourselves to the absolute limit, nurses and doctors alike. So it isn't right to praise me alone. It was all of use. Everyone there was a hero."

"Danan!"

There was no ulterior motive to his statement. He merely expressed what he believed. Still, the nurses' eyes gleamed happily when they heard someone who radiated a heroic aura compliment them.

Honestly, Danan was amazing for being totally unmoved despite being surrounded by so many women.

"Red." Danan nodded as he rubbed his jaw. "It was my first time facing this kind of battle, but it was interesting."

"Taking care of the wounded?"

"Yeah, there's a depth to keeping people alive that's different from killing them."

Danan smiled as if deeply, genuinely happy.

"There really is no end to refining my skills. I'm glad I was born a Martial Artist."

He truly was well suited to his blessing.

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At the assembly, Ruti was handling tasks one after the other with her usual expression.

Zoltan's bureaucrats hurried around busily, but all regarded her professional demeanor with clear respect.

“Form a security force out of the freed mercenaries in order to deal with all the Veronians who escaped. Offer their gear back as a reward, and they should be willing to help.”

“The reparations will be split as discussed. If anyone has complaints, they can take them up with Lord William.”

That's my Ruti. Her command of internal affairs was perfect.

“There haven’t been any issues with the way you’ve handled it. It was right to entrust matters to you. Please continue as you have.”

Unlike Mistorm, Ruti delegated what could be handled by others rather than attempting to shoulder everything alone. It could seem a simple thing, but it required the resolution to catch the ball if someone else dropped it.

I’d handled most noncombat issues when we fought the demon lord’s army, but now that Ruti was freed of her blessing, that special charisma that overpowered everyone around her had been harnessed to craft a trusted leader.

If she wished it, she would surely become a skilled politician.

“Big Brother.”

As the last man left, I entered the room, and her mouth quirked up in a way that only I would notice, breaking into a small, happy smile.

“Working hard, I see. I brought lunch again.”

“Thank you. I love your food.”

Ruti stretched, having grown stiff from sitting in the same position for so long. Even something as simple as that had been lost on her before. I was happy about that change and moved beside her.

“I think directing complaints about the reparation distribution to Lord William was a good idea. There won’t be many people who can say ‘Give me more’ to his face considering he fought on the front lines.”

“Mhm, I thought you’d think that.”

“Y-you don’t say.”

Apparently, Ruti still discussed things with an imagined version of me. It was a little embarrassing, but I couldn't help feeling glad that she still relied on me some.

"Heh."

"What is it?"

"You looked happy, so it made me happy, too." Ruti's face was absolutely adorable as she said that.

Just then, there was a rustle outside.

"Rain?"

Through the window, I saw that the weather had abruptly turned.

"A passing shower, I guess?"

Ruti peered outside, too. There were people walking around, but they quickly hurried under the eaves of nearby buildings. The sky had filled with dark clouds out of nowhere.

"I wonder if the plantation is okay..." Ruti muttered as she listened to the heavy rain.

No matter how much political talent she possessed, it looked like what she really wanted to do was tend to her herb plantation.

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"I'm back."

"Welcome home."

Rit greeted me at the door when I came back to the shop.

I took off my wet cloak.

"Here you go."

Rit took my mantle and gave me a fluffy towel. It felt great to dry my face.

"Thank you. The rain came out of nowhere."

"Yeah, I was in a big rush to bring in the laundry that was out drying," Rit replied with a smile.

When Rit first moved in, we'd been embarrassed to wash our underwear together, but now we handled all our laundry collectively.

Of course, we still got flustered seeing each other in our underwear in bed, but the laundry was just part of our everyday life now.

"All right, it's a little late, but I'll start making lunch."

"Hmm..." Rit peered into my eyes for a few moments. "Red?"

"Yes?"

"Can we eat outside? I want to have one of your packed lunches, too."

Outside? In the rain?

"Yeah."

"But it's raining."

"It's a lot lighter now. This is just a normal shower; by the time the food is ready, it will probably be only a light drizzle. It might even stop altogether. We could eat under a blue sky."

"Hmm... Well, if that's what you want, then we can do a little picnic for lunch today."

Rit smiled with clear excitement.

"Let's walk together under an umbrella again!"

I flushed a little, remembering how we'd taken a stroll shoulder to shoulder under an umbrella.

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After a twenty-minute stroll, the rain had all but stopped, just like Rit predicted.

We didn't really need an umbrella, but we kept it up the whole way rather than lose the excuse for being so close together.

"We're here."

Rit's excited voice rang out among the rain-soaked trees.

We were sitting on top of a little hill.

It wasn't quite a panorama of all of Zoltan, but it offered a nice view just the same. A townscape shrouded by a cloudy sky offered a unique quality.

"Wow, I don't think I've ever come here before," I said while looking around.

There was a mysterious warmth to the leafy trees, and it was a tranquil spot.

I spread out the lunch I had packed.

The rain had ceased, but I set the umbrella over the basket in case a splash fell from the trees, or it suddenly started pouring again.

"Thanks for the meal!"

Rit broke into a big smile as she started munching on one of the sandwiches I had made.

"Delicious!"

"Ah-ha-ha, glad you like it."

Seeing her enjoy it, I broke into a grin.

"Then I'll help myself, too."

I picked up another one of the sandwiches. It had a slice of juicy red tomato, crunchy lettuce, and scrambled eggs. The feel as I bit into it was good, and I was quite pleased with the taste, personally.

There was bacon-and-mushroom stew in the tin container. I was confident warm soups tasted even better when enjoyed outside in winter.

"See, it's nice to eat somewhere like this every once in a while, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it makes the lunch taste better."

"Your cooking is always great, though."

Rit partook of the stew with gusto.

"Yeah! This is the best."

We had a lovely meal.

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"Ahhhh. So good."

Rit sighed deeply beside the empty lunch box.

“I’m so happy.”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

If she was happy, then so was I.

I cleaned up the containers and looked down at the town. Observing the familiar sights from a fresh perspective was enjoyable.

“This is a good spot,” Rit remarked, eyes focused on Zoltan below.

“Yeah, it really is.”

I hadn’t known there was such a nice place so close.

“I’ve investigated all sorts of locations I want to go with you.” Rit puffed out her chest. It was so cute that I smiled again.

“Well then, I guess there’ll be more spots like this one.”

“Mhm, there are a bunch.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’ll make the lunches, and we can go see them together. It’s always a joy to go out with you.”

“Hooray!”

The two of us looked at each other and laughed.

It felt like we’d been grinning and giggling the whole time we were out on our little picnic adventure.

““Ah!””

We both gasped at the same time.

The rain clouds were breaking, and blue peeked through.

Light pierced the gloom, making the rain-soaked Zoltan glitter.

The sky steadily grew, as if pushing away the clouds.

It was the sort of scene you could find in any town, a perfectly normal thing. But this particular beautiful vista was part of our home.

I had come to love this scene. It didn’t lose out to the great continental

fissure, the castle in the sky, or any of the other breathtaking scenes I'd beheld on my adventures.

"This..." Rit broke into a gentle smile. "...is what you and Ruti protected. I think this is why Ruti doesn't mind the things you are worried about."

"Ha-ha-ha... You noticed?"

"Heh-heh, of course. I think about you every day."

She was right. I had been fretting over Ruti.

"Ruti only just came to Zoltan and gave up on being the Hero, and so much has happened already. It was almost like it was following after her... The recent trouble would've been the standard sort of royal intrigue in Central, but it was an unprecedented disaster for Zoltan."

"I never would have imagined I'd end up taking command of Zoltan's army."

"You looked really cool leading all of them."

There was a brilliance to the way Rit fought. It wasn't just simple strength. There was a splendor to how she wielded her swords that gave her comrades courage.

If it weren't for the fact that, for some reason, her plans never seemed to work out, she would surely be a top-tier commander.

"Mrh, I feel like you just had a strange thought."

Noticing the slight change in my expression, Rit puffed out her cheeks as she wrapped me in a hug and pushed her forehead against mine.

Oww! It hurt a little bit, so I squeezed back and shifted my head to her shoulder. With our cheeks touching, we sat there for a while.

"Getting back to that conversation," Rit whispered sweetly in my ear. "Why don't you invite Ruti to have a picnic here."

"Ruti?"

"Yeah, just the two of you. Brother and sister. That will probably take care of all of your concerns."

"You think?"

“Mhm. It’s okay. I’m sure Ruti will like the view.”

“...Yeah, she would.”

Letting go, we looked at each other. Rit’s eyes were the same beautiful blue as the sky breaking through the clouds.

“Thank you, Rit.”

“Heh-heh. My pleasure.”

Right now, the smile on her face wasn’t that of the hero princess who gave Zoltan courage. It was an expression reserved just for me.

“Ha-ha... I don’t know what I’d do without you anymore.”

“Then that makes two of us... I don’t know what I’d do without you, either!”

Our laughter echoed into the sky.

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Night fell. After I took stock of the medicines, I returned to the living room.

“Good work today.”

Rit greeted me and handed me a steaming mug of hot milk.

“Thanks.”

There was honey mixed into the drink.

“I tried to copy how you do it. How did I do?”

“Mmm, it’s delicious.”

I wanted to say something more intelligent, but when I imagined her making the honey milk for me, the happiness that welled inside me was too strong to offer much more.

“Hooray!”

Seeing how excited she was made me happier.

I took another sip to hide my grin.

There came a knock at the door.

“Hm? Customers?”

“It’s way past business hours by now.”

Rit went to check.

Who could it be? I wondered.

“Yarandrala, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly!”

They must have wanted to stop by.

“And Prince Salius and Lilinrala.”

“What?”

I hurried over to the entrance.

“We came to visit.”

“Good evening. Sorry for the late hour.”

Yarandrala and Tisse both greeted us. And behind them...

“Evening, Red. There’s a nice moon out tonight.”

“We’re coming too. So you really do run an apothecary.”

...Prince Salius and Lilinrala were both standing there.

“What are you two doing here?”

“Nothing too special. I just got the urge to have your cooking one more time before we left,” Prince Salius explained with a wink.

“Leave, as in...?”

“It should only be two or three more days. We’ll set sail once we finish the last of the resupplying.”

“What do you intend to do with the demon lord’s ship?”

“There’s not much we can do with it. I just turned it over to Zoltan. There are plenty of resources in it, and the armored hull can be used for scrap metal if nothing else, I’m sure.” Prince Salius shrugged.

The ironclad ship that was the symbol of Geizeric’s power had finished serving its role.

“It’s fine. That was Father’s ship. I’ll set out on my own journey with my own

vessel."

"I see."

"That's enough of that. We can save the chatting for later."

Lilinrala held up a bag, showing me what was inside it.

"You sure brought a nice spread."

There were all sorts of ingredients in it, vegetables, beans, meat, and fish.

"Use whatever you like."

"Cockatrice meat, queen onions... Oh, there's rice, too."

Rice was rare in Zoltan.

Zoltan had plenty of water, and I was pretty sure the climate suited growing rice well enough. However, the area had been settled by residents of Avalonia, so there wasn't anyone with the know-how to raise the crop properly.

This rice was most likely imported.

"Hmm, I can do a dish I always wanted to try with these."

"Ohh, that sounds good."

Lilinrala broke into a grin.

Ugh, I saw the rare ingredients and just...

"But I'm no chef. I don't have the skill to be cooking for a prince and admiral of a great country."

That said, they'd gone out of their way to visit for a last memory of Zoltan.

And when I considered the sad state of Lilinrala's cook, my efforts didn't seem so bad...

"It's fiiine. You're cooking has my seal of approval after all." Rit puffed out her chest confidently.

"Okay, if you say so, then I guess I can't refuse."

"You really do make a good couple."

There was a warmth in Prince Salius's eyes as Rit blushed.

Maybe it was because I was in my home, but I'd reflexively responded like I always did around Rit. It felt like I had been slipping up like that for a while now.

I really had let my guard down once the fighting was finished.

Unlike us, Prince Salius and Lillinrala were smiling and relaxed, but there was still a certain line that they did let down.

But that was fine for us. Being like this was part of the happiness I had achieved here in Zoltan, after all.

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First up was the rice. I knew how to cook it, but...the instructions claimed it was better to use fresh water. Was it worth it to fetch water from the well?

As I started to head outside, Mister Crawly Wawly leaped up.

“Oh, what is it?”

He was waving his legs as if to stop me.

“I went to get some water.”

“Tisse.”

She entered the kitchen after Mister Crawly Wawly, carrying a bucket in each hand and one more on the top of her head.

“When it comes to rice, you can leave it to me.”

She looked deadly serious as she set the buckets down.

Where did that come from?

Seeing my confusion, Mister Crawly Wawly shook his head.

“Ah, that’s right. I should explain things in the proper order.”

“Please do.”

“I love *oden*.”

“I know that much.”

“There’s a type of *oden* called *mochi kinchaku*.”

“I’ve heard of it before, but I’ve never had it.”

“It is a common *oden* in the south seas. Anyway, the point is, as an *oden* lover, I am also knowledgeable regarding *mochi kinchaku*.”

“I see.”

“And the *mochi* of that *mochi kinchaku* is a rice cake. So you may call me Rice Master Tisse.”

“I see...”

For some reason, Tisse was particularly high-strung today.

“We won’t be able to use all of this rice in just one meal. Rice swells up quite a bit from cooking, so it will be fine. We can take the leftovers to Oparara for use as *mochi*.”

“Uh, Tisse...I’m not super familiar with it, but I don’t think *mochi* is made with normal rice.”

“...Hmmm...”

Tisse stared into my eyes.

“Darn.”

“Eh?”

She said it with such a serious look that I couldn’t help chuckling. Mister Crawly Wawly swayed with mirth, too.

“Just kidding.”

Her expression was unchanged throughout, but she washed her hands and moved next to me.

“So what are you planning to make?”

“I was thinking of trying an *oyako* bowl. I was taught how to make it a long time ago.”

“Going for a novel dish in a situation like this? You’re quite aggressive.”

“I can do a flavor check, and if it looks like it won’t work, I can always fry the meat instead.”

“As expected of you. Then let’s try this *oyako* bowl. How would you like me to

assist?"

"You want to help? You can just wait in the living room if you want."

"The truth is, I leveled up during this last battle, and I put one point into the Cooking skill."

Her level was lower than Ruti's or Danan's, but higher than Rit's. She was one of the highest-level people in the world.

Most likely, she would never level up again as long as she stayed in Zoltan.

"Should you really have spent such a precious point on Cooking?"

"Your cooking is absolutely delicious. I want to make delicious food like you do."

Mister Crawly Wawly waved his arms in agreement.

"Mister Crawly Wawly leveled up recently as well, and he also took the Cooking skill."

"Really?"

Looking at the spider, he waved his right leg at me to confirm Tisse's statement.

Cooking was a common skill that anyone could take, so naturally, it was available to a spider with the Warrior blessing.

Still, even with how intelligent he was, I wouldn't have expected Mister Crawly Wawly to put his point in Cooking. He was likely the first spider to have ever taken that skill.

"I was thinking of writing a cookbook for spider food with Mister Crawly Wawly someday."

"A book..."

Tisse hummed happily beside me.

"So, what should I do?"

"Hmm, can I ask you to take care of preparing the ingredients, then? I'll work on cooking the rice while you do that. You can start by cutting the cockatrice

meat into bite-size chunks.”

“Sure thing. Slicing things is a specialty of mine.”

Tisse looked quite confident.

The two of us focused on the food for a while in silence.

“I would never have imagined I’d be doing this,” Tisse admitted, eyes on her hands.

“Hmm.”

“I have a strong affinity with my Assassin blessing, and I have a talent for it. I’m quite proud of that fact.”

“Yeah, I would agree. I’ve never encountered an assassin as strong as you.”

“Yet right now...I’m cooking a meal for a foreign prince.”

“I’m sure there are assassins who have disguised themselves as chefs, but there probably aren’t many who have actually cooked.”

Royal culinarians probably had much higher Cooking skills than the average person, and they surely possessed the Chef blessing, too.

No matter how masterful someone was at disguise, there was no copying blessings.

“Life is a strange thing.” Tisse smiled as she set out the neatly cut meat. “But it’s fun as well.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

The two of us shared a smile and then focused on our task.

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This world was filled with conflict.

While we were gathered around the table eating, one of the galleons stolen by mercenaries was attacked by a kraken, and every last person aboard was devoured.

On a distant battlefield in the west, the allied army lead by the Bahamut Knights was on the verge of winning a terrible three-day-long fight against the

forces led by the heavenly king of the water, Altra.

We had no way of knowing about that story while sitting in the shop's living room, however.

It was not until much later that I heard of the struggles in the world outside.

““Thanks for the food.””

Rit and I both said our usual pre-meal line.

“Thank you, Demis, for this day's sustenance.”

“Thank you for the food.”

Lilinrala sped through a quick prayer while Prince Salius mimicked Rit and me.

“I've had rice before, but this is an unusual dish.”

“It's called an *okayo* bowl. If I remember, it means *parent and child*. I had it once long ago, and I think I replicated the flavor. Admittedly, the meat was chicken instead of cockatrice.”

“I see. Egg and chicken meat, so that explains the name.” Prince Salius nodded to himself.

“But if it's cockatrice meat, then it isn't parent and child anymore,” Lilinrala objected with a grin.

“Wasn't the first cockatrice supposedly born to a chicken? So it still works,” Rit chimed in.

“That's right. According to the biologist Jikhan's bestiary, 'Beware, the cockatrice is born of a rooster's egg. The rooster lays the egg at age seven, after which the egg is warmed for nine years by a toad. Thus roosters and toads must be kept well apart,'” Tisse added.

Prince Salius twisted his head.

“As soon as you have roosters laying eggs, it's clearly wrong. And a toad warming an egg for nine years? Isn't that obviously impossible?”

“Probably,” I said with a grin. “Apparently, cockatrices are made by casting special magic on chickens. The reason it's easier to get their meat than that of other monsters is that people raise them. Although, it's a dangerous job. At

least a few people die every year.”

Cockatrices couldn’t really be tamed. Supposedly, as far as they were concerned, their owners were just food who brought them other food.

“So, in this case, the egg is the parent, and the meat is the child, huh?”

Lilinrala stared at the bowl in amusement, then lifted a big spoonful of egg and meat and took a bite.

“It’s good.”

I was glad to know that even a long-lived high elf approved.

“It’s a little different from the bowl I tried years ago, but it’s not bad.”

“You’ve had it before?”

“Some six decades back or so? I’d honestly forgotten the flavor, but it came back to me when I had a bite.”

“You know, with the right trigger, humans can also recall things from surprisingly long ago.”

“Sixty years is already exceptionally lengthy for a human as it is... I’m sure I’ll recall this taste long after you all are gone.” Lilinrala suddenly stopped eating.
“Red, Rit, Tisse, and I guess I should add you, too, Yarandrala.”

“What is it?”

Lilinrala lowered her head deeply, and her silver hair swayed. “I really owe you all. I’ll never forget this debt. Once the issue of succession is settled, allow me to thank you properly.”

I see... So that’s why she came here. Awfully upright for a pirate.

“Why was I added as an afterthought?” Yarandrala questioned.

“Because it’s only natural for a high elf to help her friend,” Lilinrala replied.

“That’s rich. Playing the friend card only when it’s convenient.” Yarandrala laughed wryly and then waved her hand. “It’s true, though. I’d help no matter what trouble you were in, so you don’t need to thank me.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that. So, Red, what can I do to repay all of you?”

Lilinrala looked at me.

“It’s a long way from Veronia to Zoltan, and with the fighting against the demon lord’s army still going on, an admiral can’t slip away from the front lines for that long.”

“It’s the Elven Corsairs’ code to repay our debts.”

“If Prince Salius takes the throne, Veronia will join the allied forces, right? As fellow residents of the continent, that’s enough for us,” I said.

“We do intend to repeal the nonaggression pact with the demon lord. And I’m sure we can get some support for Salius’s claim from the Kingdom of Avalonia if we swear to support their side. Calling it even if we join the allied army is a cheap price to pay.”

Prince Salius nodded in agreement. “This is all thanks to you. Your fight has provided a large boon to the continent. It’s certainly the sort of achievement worthy of a proper reward.”

“We were just fighting to protect the small little place where we live. It’s not anything worth crossing the world to repay,” I replied.

“But...”

“Besides, I’ve already got everything I want.”

I glanced to the side. Rit was there eating her *oyako* bowl with a look of bliss. She’d stopped when Lilinrala thanked us, but when she realized that the conversation was going to keep going, she couldn’t help but start in again.

Noticing my gaze, Rit smirked. “I mean, it would be a waste if it got cold.”

Maybe it was because she was a princess, but she did not seem to restrain herself at all around Prince Salius.

“True. If you want to thank me, then let’s focus on the meal I made.”

“I see. That was rude of us. We can leave the conversation be for now. If I let the moment when this food was most delicious slip away, I won’t be able to return to Veronia.”

And so, for a little while, we all focused on food.

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Two days had come and gone since that shared meal.

Zoltan was surrounded by a towering mountain range to the north and east.

The sky over the sea was clear and blue. It was a warm day for winter, and there was a strong wind.

“Mm, that’s a good wind,” Lilinrala said.

“Queen Leonor and the two Asura demons are gone. We have more than enough of a chance at winning the throne... But the nobles who supported Leonor will not roll over for us. They’ll try to restore the old king’s lineage through some distant member of the royal family married a foreign royal.”

“So the battle has only just begun?”

“Perhaps, but there’s a tailwind to set sail with. There’s no better omen for a sailor.”

Lilinrala seemed delighted.

Today was the day that she and Prince Salius would be setting off from Zoltan.

They’d finished their resupplying, and the last sailors were headed to the galley floating on the sea as people from Zoltan bid them reluctant good-byes.

They were apparently not used to those sorts of cheers from people of other countries, because several of the pirate-like sailors were blushing and getting teary-eyed or clutching the handkerchiefs they had been given like precious treasures.

Lilinrala grimaced a bit while watching them, but there was a definite gentleness to her expression.

“This is a good town. I won’t forget it. Be well.”

Seeing that Prince Salius had finally boarded a boat after exchanging a few last words with the mayor and the other diplomats, Lilinrala bid her farewell to us and left.

We wouldn’t be meeting them again for a long time. At the very least, not until the war with the demon lord was over. Even then, we might never reunite.

Zoltan was a small, distant little backwater after all.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes, this is fine.”

I turned and saw that Mistorm had a gentle smile as she leaned on both her staff and Yarandrala.

“If you don’t go to Veronia now, you probably won’t be able to see Geizeric again.”

“I know, and that’s all right. We met, spent many years together, and went our separate ways. That story ended long ago. This wasn’t about clearing the ledger of my history with Leonor. It was a fight for Prince Salius and Zoltan’s future.”

“That’s probably true. What about you, Yarandrala? Are you sure you didn’t have something you wanted to say to Lilinrala?” I inquired.

“Of course not. We’ll surely meet again. Remember, high elves live longer than humans.”

“I see...”

The ship sailed into the distance. They were far enough that even if we shouted, the words wouldn’t reach.

Mistorm let out a little sigh.

“It just hit home again that my tale is finally over.” There was a bit of happiness and sadness in her voice. “All that’s left is to be the old granny who gently nudges fledgling adventurers taking their first steps down the right path. I think I’ll officially disband our party now, and maybe I should relinquish my B-rank and register as a D-rank adventurer.”

“The hero who saved the country becoming a D-rank adventurer?”

“It’d make for nasty comments if a B-rank adventurer tried to get involved with rookies, wouldn’t it?”

“True.”

“You know, I thought I heard Leonor and the princes mention that they knew

you, Red..."

"...Yeah..."

Mistorm smiled. "But at my age, it can be hard to hear sometimes, so I didn't really catch most of it."

"I see... Thank you."

"There's nothing to be grateful for. If anything..."

Mistorm glanced down for a moment. When she raised her head, she stared me straight in the eyes.

"Thank you, Red. You and your friends saved Zoltan."

"We didn't want to lose the town where we lived and the friends we could reach. It was all completely selfish."

"Zoltan's only a small dot on the map, so a reason like that is more than sufficient..."

When Mistorm smiled, her face looked a bit older than when I'd first met her.

"Look after things."

On the day Prince Salius and Lilinrala left Zoltan, Mistorm made good on her word and delivered the official notice of disbandment to the Adventurers Guild.

The D-rank adventurer known as Retired Mistorm.

She was no longer involved in major incidents. Instead, she kept rookies from underestimating goblins and lent them a hand on their first quests.

Her quiet final years seemed happy, and I didn't think that was so bad.

Some things had changed, but I could return to the normal life I had fought to protect together with Rit and Ruti.

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The *Gray Vulture* was a merchant vessel in the service of the army of the Kingdom of Avalonia.

A piercing thunderclap split the heavy rain, and the crew hurried to their battle stations.

“Prepare the ballista!”

The ship that had been accompanying it to provide protection was already surrounded and could not move.

It was just a matter of time before they were captured.

The *Gray Vulture* was the only vessel left that could fight, but it was weighed down with supplies, leaving it no match for the approaching pirate boat.

“Damn you, Veronian dogs!”

The captain, Lord Jamie, a member of the Bahamut Knights, cursed the enemy ship. This sort of pillaging had been going on for a while. It took advantage of the fact that Avalonia couldn’t afford to declare war against Veronia and fight on two fronts.

Slowly, the piracy was leeching supplies to the front lines, and word of pirate trouble had started to reach the leaders of the allied forces.

“Are they trying to start a war with us?”

Many nobles in Veronia believed their nation should join the fight against the demon lord. However, if the alliance were to attack Veronia, then even they would have no recourse but to join the demon lord’s side.

“All the more reason we can’t fail here! We must escape no matter what it takes.”

A steel bolt fired from the ballista. Unfortunately, the enemy was a group of skilled raiders led by a naval combat elite. Were Lilinrala not around, this pirate captain might have been leading Veronia’s navy.

Avalonia’s marines fired the ballista over and over, but the approaching corsair deftly maneuvered, avoiding any effective hits.

“Curses...! Draw swords! If it’s a fight they want, it’s a fight they’ll get!”

The Veronian ships were already upon them. If it descended into hand-to-hand combat, the *Gray Vulture*’s defeat was assured.

Just then...

“Captain! Another boat from behind!”

“What?!”

Lord Jamie hurriedly looked to stern. Through the rain, he spied a large shadow approaching.

“That’s...a Veronian galley?! It slipped behind us somehow!”

Their retreat was cut off.

Lord Jamie’s hand trembled, and he gnashed his teeth.

With all options sealed, he resolved himself to fight to the end.

Surprisingly, the galley did not slow, passing alongside the *Gray Vulture*.

“We are part of the Veronian navy! We’ll take care of these pirates!” the one-eyed high elf standing at the bow shouted.

With its stout ram, the galley slammed into the side of the Veronian corsair. There was a loud crackling, and the pirate ship shuddered.

“Wh-what are you doin’ attacking your allies?!”

The pirates fell into a shocked panic.

The galley that had rammed them was flying the colors of the Kingdom of Veronia. Its marines were led by Lilinrala, Fleet Admiral of Veronia’s navy. Caught without ever understanding what was going on around them, the pirates swiftly surrendered.

“What is going on here?”

Lord Jamie was just as confused as his foes were.

A man and a few guards from the galley leaped down to the deck of the *Gray Vulture*.

The tanned man flashed a big white smile.

“Thank goodness you’re safe. I am Prince Salius of Veronia.”

“A Veronian prince?! A-apologies for my rudeness, Your Highness. I am Bacchus Jamie of Avalonia’s Bahamut Knights. I never expected I’d have the honor of meeting Your Highness in a place like this. Please forgive my indecorous outburst.”

“Sir Jamie, it’s a pleasure to have been able to fight alongside a warrior of the great Bahamut Knights on this wide sea.”

“Y-Your Highness...” Lord Jamie’s bewilderment had not subsided yet.

Veronian pirates had attacked them, and yet it was the Veronian navy and a prince that had come to the rescue.

Lord Jamie and the rest of the Avalonian soldiers were at a loss, and they were all on guard for some sort of trickery.

Seeing that, the prince addressed their confusion.

“It is true that there is no alliance between Veronia and Avalonia. But right now, humanity is fighting against its greatest threat, the demon lord. This ship is carrying supplies for the soldiers who are fighting for all of the continent, is it not?”

“Y-yes, Your Highness...”

“Then it is only right that we come to your aid.”

“...Is that Your Highness’s personal judgment?”

“It will someday become the official stance of the Kingdom of Veronia. Lord Jamie, should you find your way back to Avalonia, I should like if you would convey a message for me. On my honor, I swear that when I take the throne, the Kingdom of Veronia shall join the allied efforts.”

Lord Jamie could not believe what he was hearing. However, Prince Salius’s confidence left no room for doubt.

Hope surged in Lord Jamie’s heart.

That day was a turning point for the fate of humanity.

The Kingdom of Veronia had been set to join forces with the demon lord, yet Prince Salius swore to have his country join the allies instead. Humanity would finally be united in its battle against the invasion from the dark continent.

With that, the demon lord’s army would soon be routed, forced to fall back and establish a new front line.

Several occupied lands would surely be liberated in the process.

Lord Jamie's ship safely made it to the allied army's base.

The delivery of supplies kept countless wounded and starving soldiers alive.

And it was not just Lord Jamie's vessel, either. Shipping boats rounding the south of the continent were no longer troubled by Veronian attacks. The war with the demon lord's army shifted to a new front.

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““Welcome!””

Red & Rit's Apothecary lies in the working-class part of Zoltan.

Guests were greeted by their cheerful voices at the door.

Inside was a nice, organized shelf with medicines lined up on display, and a small but lovely watercolor landscape painting on the wall.

If you brought a drug to the counter, Red would happily give you a detailed explanation of what it did. And should there be anything specific you were after, Rit could find it for you in no time.

After your purchase, if you peeked back into the window, you'd spy the two of them celebrating together happily.

Regardless of the events changing the world, Red and Rit still managed to enjoy their slow and happy lives.

Epilogue

Set Forth on the Hero's Journey

Last Wall fortress, a mountain transformed into a bastion city. It was a symbol of conviction in the face of evil.

Here, Ruti the Hero first encountered Theodora the Crusader. This was the church's headquarters, the leaders of the sole religion.

In one corner of the city, hiding in a room decked out in expensive fabrics, there was a painting depicting the scene of a previous Hero fighting the demon lord on the wall. Two people occupied this chamber.

"That is the last of my report," Bishop Shien of Zoltan concluded.

He spoke to a large man, easily over two meters tall, who sat behind a desk.

Cardinal Ljubo wore a mild-mannered smile on his large face as he set the report down on the table and looked at Bishop Shien.

"Very well. It is a blessing that things were resolved without issue. The College of Cardinals will withdraw our proposed declaration of war on the Kingdom of Veronia."

"Thank you very much, Your Grace!"

Bishop Shien patted his chest in relief. A war between fellow humans had been avoided. He'd succeeded in a mission that was far too great for the cleric of a small little backwater like Zoltan.

"You look quite haggard. I suppose it is understandable considering the duty you have undertaken. It would surely be difficult for you to travel all the way to Zoltan in your present state. Perhaps it would be better for you to recuperate here at Last Wall fortress first?"

"I am grateful for your consideration, Your Grace. However, I would like to return to Zoltan as swiftly as possible to provide succor to those of my flock

who are troubled from the recent conflict.”

“You are a model bishop. It is almost a waste for one of your talents to be out on the frontier. Very well. You may set out tomorrow. I shall have whatever you require for your journey prepared for you.”

“My deepest gratitude for your kind consideration for one such as I.”

Bishop Shien bowed deeply and left the room.

“Tch!”

The smile quickly disappeared from the cardinal’s face. He yanked open a drawer, pulled out a Veronian cigar, and lit it.

“Hahhh.”

Cardinal Ljubo was a huge man. So large that it was rumored one of his ancestors was a giant.

The cardinal exhaled lungfuls of smoke, clouding the room.

“Just one step away.”

A war with Veronia had been averted.

Even Cardinal Ljubo, with all the power he’d accumulated, could not afford to push a conflict without a proper justification. He smoked his cigar with a bitter look on his face. Then came a knock on his door.

“Your Grace.”

“Ah, Van. I was waiting for you. Come in.”

A boy in his mid-teens entered.

He was wearing blue armor with the red crest of the Hero engraved in it.

The sword at his hip was a replica of the Hero’s sword, the Holy Demon Slayer. Although only a re-creation, it had been forged using the greatest swords preserved by the church. It was the newest holy sword made by man, and bore a powerful resemblance to the blade held by the Hero in the painting on the wall.

“The war with Veronia has been avoided. The beginning of your Hero’s

journey has been delayed," the cardinal explained as he snuffed the cigar in an ashtray.



“I see!”

“You seem quite happy about it.”

The boy hurriedly explained himself. “Apologies. But I just thought it was good that the situation could be resolved without people having to fight each other.”

Ljubo smiled bitterly at the young man’s simple earnestness. That was how he had to be. The Hero could not be permitted to be corrupted.

“But of course. It is an inconvenience that the plan to have you set out on the Hero’s journey was wasted, but you are correct that it is a joyous result for humanity.”

“Yes, sir!” The boy nodded. “People warring with each other while the demon lord spreads evil is sloth.”

“War is sloth, you say?”

“Yes, sloth, sir. And sloth is a sin. People’s lives should only be spent for the sake of fighting the demon lord. Any other death or way of living is not only slothful, but meaningless and without value. Such is the will of our Lord Demis!”

There was not a trace of doubt in his eyes as he declared that.

The cardinal nodded in satisfaction.

“You are truly the Hero.”

Van was the second Hero Cardinal Ljubo had discovered.

As a devout, he never doubted the teachings of the church, and he would risk his life and others for the sake of Almighty Demis’s teachings without hesitation.

At the sight of the boy’s radiant eyes, the cardinal broke into a heartfelt smile over the wonderful tool he’d found.

“Umm, Your Grace?”

“What is it?”

“If there is not to be a war with Veronia, then should I not make my way to

the front lines of the battle with the demon lord's army and fulfill the role of the Hero?"

"You mustn't get ahead of yourself. You must train, that you might gain a strength befitting the Hero first."

"...Yes, sir..."

"I had thought that the Veronian soldiers would be perfect for raising your level, but that's no longer an option."

The cardinal's plan was to have Van accompany the church's holy knights into battle so that he might increase his blessing's level and garner fame as the Hero.

"But this, too, is merely the will of Demis."

The cardinal smiled when he saw the look of unease on Van's face.

"Still, you are ready to move beyond fighting monsters to raise your blessing level. I have a new mission for you."

"You do?!"

"All of the fuss with Veronia has provided an unexpected opportunity. This, too, is surely the divine guidance of Demis."

"The will of Demis... What should we do?"

The cardinal pulled a map out of a drawer and spread it on the table.

"This is the location."

"...Zoltan?"

"Yes, the Republic of Zoltan. The small little country that fought Veronia."

"But it's on the other side of the continent from the front lines."

"The demon lord's ship that the King of Veronia stole from the dark continent decades ago is currently grounded there."

"The demon lord's vessel?! The boat powered by coal that you told me of?!"

The boy's eyes shone at the thought of the unknown technology.

"That's correct. Claim it for yourself. A steel warship will surely raise our

soldiers' morale."

"But if it is grounded..."

"To deal with that, you will first need to defeat the behemoth that inhabits the jungles of the south and acquire the Behemoth Ring. And to navigate the jungle, you must search for a fey to guide you through the jungle. So the journey's first step will be to head for the trade city Saint Enrique to gather information."

Van's face lit up, and his heart raced at the thought of adventures in lands he'd never seen as the cardinal outlined the route.

"Amazing! I can't wait!"

"I'm pleased you are excited. However, my subordinates who have accompanied you thus far will not be able to follow you on this adventure."

"Is this my farewell from everyone, then...?"

To help Van increase his level, Ljubo had provided his most powerful subordinates, Holy Knights and High Priests, all. However, three of them had already been lost in all the fighting.

Van's opponents had been a series of high-level monsters fought over an incredibly short period. Unfortunately, even a cardinal as influential as Ljubo could not afford to lose more of the church's fighting power without weakening his own standing.

That was why he'd chosen to hire a mercenary instead. He rang a bell, and a woman entered the room.

She had long, flowing black hair, but her face was hidden behind a mask.

"Van the Hero, my name is Escarlata, a wandering knight who will accompany you on your journey. Please call me Esta."

Van was shocked when he heard her name.

"Lady Esta! As in the masked knight who defeated Altra of the Water?!"

Escarlata had suddenly joined the fray against the demon lord's forces. She was a mercenary of unknown origin, yet on a battlefield with heroes from all

around the continent gathered, she had produced the most outstanding results of all. She'd heavily wounded Altra, general in command of the demon lord's army, forcing him to retreat.

It was said that lords from various nations had tried to recruit her, but she refused them all, choosing to fight as a lone mercenary.

"I have no need for honorifics. I am but a simple knight errant... Out of curiosity, Sir Van, are you perhaps the Kingdom of Flamberge's...?"

"You know of me?! Yes, I am the eighth prince, Van of Flamberge."

The Kingdom of Flamberge was located on the western coast of the continent, and was one of the first countries destroyed by the demon lord's invasion. Van was the last surviving member of the royal family. He'd escaped the tragedy because he'd been studying in a monastery away from Flamberge at the time.

"The prince of a fallen country becoming Hero. It is surely all the Lord's will. The Lord's love is a thing of marvel, even to a man of the cloth such as I." Cardinal Ljubo stood. "Now, let us begin the preparations for this journey. Hero, knight, and priest...the same party the previous generation's Hero set out with."

"Priest?"

"Of course, I will be joining you as well," the cardinal said with a smile.

"You are?!"

"Ha-ha, I fought many evils as an inquisitor long ago. I am sure I will be of some use."

"It is truly reassuring to have you accompanying us!"

Van the Hero took Cardinal Ljubo's and Knight Esta's hands and beamed.

The Hero of a lost country who did not doubt Demis's righteous justice for a moment. A cardinal who burned with ambition. A knight who concealed her face in the presence of others.

Dear me, this has become problematic.

Beneath her mask, Esta was secretly very troubled.



Esta made it up the steep alley and returned alone to her lodge.

The structure was built at a slant, and at a glance, it looked small and dingy, but it was actually a place that catered to inquisitors and had powerful counter-magic measures.

It was not a well-known location, but Esta was quite familiar with it, having grown up in Last Wall fortress.

Esta exchanged a simple greeting with the gruff keeper and returned to her room.

“Welcome back, Esta. How was the cardinal?”

A swordsman with a prosthetic hand was waiting in the room—Albert the Champion.

“The information turned out to be true. He’s grooming a Hero and intends to set out for Zoltan.”

“Then...”

Esta crossed her arms and furrowed her brow.

“If Sir Van were to encounter Lady Ruti, then this will only be the beginning. I’d rather avoid that, if possible. For both their sakes.”

“Yes.”

“Sorry, Albert, but could you head to Zoltan ahead of us? I’d like you to inform Sir Red of the situation. With the pretense of accompanying Bishop Shien as a guard on his return, there won’t be any suspicions if we move separately. I will accompany Sir Van, as we discussed.”

“Understood.” Albert nodded. “Does Van really have the Hero blessing?”

“I don’t know. Unlike Sir Ares, I don’t have the Appraisal skill, nor do I have Sir Red’s incredible insight and knowledge.”

Red could guess someone’s blessing and level just by watching their movements, but that sort of trick was impossible for anyone else.

“But...he is strong.”

“Even from your perspective?”

“Cardinal Ljubo of all people is backing the claim that he’s the Hero. I sparred a little bit with Van...and I could absolutely believe he truly did slay a full-grown dragon.”

“Then he’s well into the domain of heroes, isn’t he? Why has he never fought against the demon lord’s army before?”

“It seems the cardinal has been having him fight monsters to raise his level. I suppose there’s no telling who or what you might end up fighting on the battlefield.”

“...That seems different from the sort of Hero I imagined.”

“Cardinal Ljubo’s goal isn’t to help the Hero save the world. It’s to be one of the people who helped the Hero save the world. His aim is the route that most optimally leads to the Hero successfully defeating the demon lord rather than the path that saves the most people along the way. It’s just another way of approaching the issue.”

“Building the Hero’s story instead of letting it play out, then?”

“It hasn’t even been half a year since Van was recognized as the Hero. His training period has been short, yet in terms of development speed, he’s grown faster than Lady Ruti.”

There was no easy comparison between Ruti, who’d raised her blessing level by fighting the demon lord’s army, and Van, who’d been provided the optimal sorts of adventures to grow. Still, there was no denying the boy had developed swiftly.

“Lady Ruti’s strength was fully formed before I met her. As strong as Van is, his mentality and his technique are still developing. It is frightening to consider what awaits him.”

If they fought now, Esta would still win, but...

“He will surpass me eventually. That was the feeling I had when I sparred with him.”

“Then he really is the Hero?” Albert questioned.

“Perhaps. Yet in terms of mentality, he is completely different from Lady Ruti.

There was a part of her that was always isolated from people. However, Van is a fanatical devotee of Demis. There is something about that difference that worries me.”

Even having traveled with Ruti for so long, Esta still knew nothing about the Hero blessing.

“There are no records or legends of two Hero blessings existing at the same time. I wonder what would happen if they encountered each other.”

Esta prayed that Ruti would be able to live peacefully. Regretfully...

“Demis surely wouldn’t lend his strength to such a prayer. So the only choice is to take action.”

“Indeed. Though I am ill-suited for the role, I will do all I can.”

“Thank you, Albert. Having you is a great help.”

It would be some time before Van the Hero arrived in Zoltan, but that day would surely come.

Because this world filled with fighting still required the Hero.

Afterword

To everyone who has picked up this book, thank you very much! I'm the author, Zappon.

This story that we've read together has finally reached its seventh volume. Seven volumes.

That's quite a lot. Many series with that many volumes are quite distinguished. It's an honor to have my story join that sort of eminent company.

The first volume was the beginning of Red and Rit's slow life together, the second through fourth were the story of saving the Hero, the fifth was a reunion with friends who had parted ways, and the sixth and seventh are the story after the Hero retired from trying to save the world.

Ruti was forced to spend all her life saving others because of her Hero blessing, but with her free of that compulsion, the world was without a Hero.

As far as Ruti was concerned, she'd never wanted to be the Hero. Still, her quitting left a lot of problems unsolved. The incident with the Kingdom of Veronia was one of those. Originally, the Hero would have ridden into the Veronian court and settled the intrigue and machinations herself.

Is it a sin for Ruti to quit being the Hero? Will thousands of people meet unfortunate ends because she chose a slow life in Zoltan?

Even if the Hero alone bears the fate of the world, there are still plenty of other people who are responsible for the fates of families, towns, cities, and even countries. If all those people do their best, it should be possible to save the world without forcing the Hero to sacrifice herself.

This story is the result of a one-day war that happened in the middle of nowhere, a place called Zoltan.

At last, the battle with Leonor is over, and in addition to starting a new arc

with the eighth volume, I also have an announcement to make!

Because of everyone's support, this series has been greenlit for a spin-off!

The tentative title is *I'm Not a True Comrade, But I Decided to Get Stronger for My Sister, the Hero.*

The main series is about Red and his friends living their happy lives now that their adventures are done, but the spin-off will show how Red and Ruti's journey began.

A tale of the first stage of a Hero's journey—when the strong-at-the-start-but-drops-off-midway party member is at his peak.

Ruti is the strongest now, but when she started, she was only level 1.

She was an ordinary girl who loved her big brother, Gideon, and was overjoyed to be with him after having been apart for a few years. There were lots of difficulties and painful memories during the Hero's journey, but it was also a time when Ruti could have Gideon dote on her as much as she wanted. Gideon protected her, and she did her best not for the world, but to stay with her big brother.

While not about a slow life, the current plan is for the spin-off to be a wholesome sibling story.

Although it's an offshoot of the original series, it takes place well before the first volume, so it will be accessible to people who haven't read the main story. It takes a certain amount of determination to get into a long-term series from the start, but it is much easier to pick up a spin-off and try it.

Manga, drama CDs, audiobooks, and a spin-off novel—I hope you'll continue to join me as the tale continues to expand!

Next in the main story is the eighth volume.

The conflict with Veronia has ended, and Zoltan is peaceful again.

The season has passed from winter to spring, the time when the Zoltan people actually work for real, so they can take it easy in the summer. However, for Red and his friends, who worked hard during the winter, it is a season for camping out in the woods and trips out into the countryside to really enjoy their

easy days.

I'll do my best to make the next volume fun!

As always, this book could not have been completed without the help of many people.

All the illustrations are great, but the cover, with the conflict passed and the rain breaking, is truly incredible. I love that feeling of freedom and spaciousness. Thank you, Yasumo!

To the designers, proofreaders, printers, and everyone involved in the actual production of this book, it is thanks to all of you that this book exists. Thank you very much.

To this series's editor, Miyakawa, we've finally reached the seventh volume!

Double-digits are just around the corner. We created this book together, and I'm so happy that many people have chosen to read it. Thank you so much!

Let's continue giving it our best going forward, too!

And finally, to you, who picked up this book and read it. I'm grateful this story has reached you. If it was enjoyable, then I am truly satisfied as an author.

Zappon

On a quiet, rainy day, 2020

**This is Yasumo.
The illustrations were
a joy to do! I hope to
see you again!**



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