

BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,

I Decided to Live a Quiet Life
in the Countryside

11

ZAPPON

Illustration by
Yasumo



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**"It's perfect
weather
for a trip."**



**"Look! A dolphin
jumped out
of the water!!!"**

**“Come on, Red!
The water’s
perfect!”**





C O N T E N T S

Prologue **The Affairs of Heroes**

Chapter 1 **Summer in Zoltan, the Season for Taking It Easy**

Chapter 2 **Summer Vacation at the Beach**

Chapter 3 **Boyhood's End**

Interlude **The World Seen by the Saint**

Chapter 4 **Cooking Fun**

Chapter 5 **The Saint's Temptation**

Chapter 6 **Summer Memories**

Epilogue **Growth**

Afterword




Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha

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New York

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Countryside, Vol. 11

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Translation by Dale DeLucia Cover art by Yasumo



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SHIN NO NAKAMA JYANAI TO YUUSHA NO PARTY WO OIDASARETANODE,
HENKYOU DE SLOW-LIFE SURUKOTO NI SHIMASHITA Vol. 11

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue The Affairs of Heroes](#)

[Chapter 1 Summer in Zoltan, the Season for Taking It Easy](#)

[Chapter 2 Summer Vacation at the Beach](#)

[Chapter 3 Boyhood’s End](#)

[Interlude The World Seen by the Saint](#)

[Chapter 4 Cooking Fun](#)

[Chapter 5 The Saint’s Temptation](#)

[Chapter 6 Summer Memories](#)

[Epilogue Growth](#)



[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



Illustration: Yasumo

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CHARACTERS



Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

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



Rit
(Rizlet of Loggervia)

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



Ruti Ragnason

A girl who possesses two Divine Blessings. The Hero blessing was bequeathed to her by God, while New Truth was born within her heart. She's enjoying summer to its fullest as a normal girl for the first time in her life.



Tisse Garland

A young girl with the Divine Blessing of the Assassin. An elite from the Assassins Guild, she is excited to enjoy summer this year.



Yarandrala

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



Tanta Stow

A half-elf boy who has grown close to Red. Dreams of becoming a carpenter, but he unfortunately possesses the Divine Blessing of the Cardinal.

Eremite

A tall woman with a name that means "hermit." An ascetic of the church obsessed with Tanta's blessing. She has been blinded as part of her ascetic practices.

Gonz

Red's friend. A carpenter and architect. Dotes on his nephew Tanta as if the boy were his own son. He supports Tanta's dream of becoming a carpenter.

...



Prologue

The Affairs of Heroes

“So,” Salius, Veronia’s new king, began.

This was the front line of the battle against the demon lord’s armies: a meeting room in a stone fortress erected in a single night by the dwarf king’s magic.

King Salius, Van the Hero, the commander of the Bahamut Knights, the Knight King of the Cataphract Kingdom, the high elf elders, the dwarf king, Frost Witch Rogneda, the masked knight Escarlata, Faerie Eye Arnim, and many other powerful figures had come together to fight the demon lord’s forces. All of them were gathered around the table.

The reason so many who’d been fighting all around the continent were able to leave their respective battlefields to assemble, even for a short time, was thanks to Ruti the Hero’s efforts. Her exploits had granted them all the opportunity to prepare a counterattack. King Salius’s and Van the Hero’s recent commitments to the fight against the demon lord had also aided in making this meeting happen.

“Regrettably, we have no choice but to conclude we won’t be able to get any help from most S-rank adventurers going forward,” King Salius stated.

The powerful figures groaned unhappily.

“Why are your comrades not joining us, Sir Arnim?” Esta inquired.

Arnim, a member of the S-rank adventurer party Returner Six, glared at her with his iridescent left eye. It was an aberrant shape, rumored to be an artificial organ that contained a sealed evil fay.

“And your master, Lady Rogneda, the Winter Witch Baba Yaga,” Esta added.

The S-rank party called the Overseer Alliance, of which Baba Yaga was a

member, was also sitting out the war. Instead, the S-rank adventurers' disciples, made up of witches and cursed swordsmen, were the only ones participating.

Adventurers capable of saving a country, like Loggervia's Rit, were considered A rank. An A-rank adventurer party might resolve threats that even a well-trained army couldn't.

However, S-rank adventurer groups existed beyond that. They were formed of champions who fought back threats no one else could. Such parties were called upon only when the world was in dire peril. That was what it meant to be the best in the eyes of the Adventurers Guild.

Yet only a handful of S-rank adventurers were participating in the battle against the demon lord's armies.

"Everyone is fulfilling their own roles," Arnim answered calmly.

Rogneda nodded with a faint smile.

"I see. Then it cannot be helped, I suppose," Esta said.

"But Lady Escarlata, for humanity's greatest powers to ignore the call to aid when all our peoples are in danger...", the dwarf king protested.

Esta shook her head.

"They answer to no organization but the Adventurers Guild. They are their own masters. We cannot force them to fight."

"Lady Esta is correct. Nothing is gained by wishing for that which isn't. We should focus on fighting with what we have," Salius added, shifting the topic.

He dismissed the problem of the missing S-rank warriors, hoping to conclude the meeting quickly. Unlike during the start of the invasion, there was no longer a need to go searching for great heroes with no desire to join the war and drag them into the conflict. Esta and Salius knew that it would be people's determination that saved humanity.

"Then, let us move onto the next topic, the plan to liberate Flamberge Kingdom..."

The fight had transitioned from mere defense to liberation efforts. Although the united forces couldn't afford careless action, the war with the demon lord's

forces had shifted, perhaps progressing toward its final stages.

“...”

Esta felt the Frost Witch Rogneda’s gaze focused on her while listening to the discussion.

“Once this war is over, I’d like to ask the Winter Witch what she was doing,” Esta remarked. She wasn’t probing for anything in particular. Her comment was born of simple curiosity.

“Knowing you, there may well come a time when you will understand,” Rogneda answered.

Theodora would probably have left it at that, but when faced with Rogneda’s knowing expression, Esta felt like prodding her a bit.

“‘May well come a time’? Even if God desires this battle, *my* fight is for those who suffer.”

“That’s—”

“That will never change.”

Rogneda’s smile faded. Visible unease took root in her eyes as she realized that Esta, much like her master, understood something of the great heights that she didn’t yet grasp.

Esta smiled behind her mask as though she’d expected that reaction. Those who stood at the apex of the world had also reached an answer regarding Demis and Divine Blessings, just as she had.

I can’t say whether they know the Hero and Demon Lord blessings are meant to recreate the first hero’s spirit, but...

Esta didn’t feel the need to become a hermit and cut herself off from others simply because she knew the truth of the world, as it seemed some of the S rankers did.

Admittedly, I only feel that way because Red and Albert were there for me.

If the Theodora who’d traveled with Ruti had learned the truth of the world... she might’ve abandoned the fight against the demon lord’s army like the absent

S-rank adventurers.

What would I have done if things had played out that way?

Had Esta learned that God cared nothing for the demon lord's defeat while she was still utterly devoted to the divine...

Esta suddenly felt very uneasy and decided to abandon that trail of thought.

Chapter 1

Summer in Zoltan, the Season for Taking It Easy

It was summer, the season when the people of Zoltan displayed their true characters.

“No one’s coming,” Ruti said from a seat in the corner.

“Sure seems like it,” I answered between bites of the leftover medicinal cookies I’d made yesterday.

A pail of water rested on the floor before Ruti. She was cooling her feet in it.

“Zoltan summers are hot,” she added. “Honestly, having no motivation to do anything is kind of refreshing.”

With the power of New Truth suppressing the Hero blessing, Ruti was enjoying the summer in Zoltan. This slothful appearance would’ve been impossible to reconcile for anyone who’d known her as the Hero. However, this laziness was just another aspect of her humanity that my sister had recovered.

Summer was the harshest season in this corner of the world.

Zoltan was subtropical, so the temperature was high. The surrounding wetlands made the air quite humid, too. And to top it off, evening showers were common, and massive storms were also a regular feature.

It left the people of Zoltan with little alternative but to laze around, something they’d been doing in the hot months for generations.

“Yup. Everyone lies around the house, and no one does any work this time of year,” I said.

Anything that could be dealt with tomorrow was a problem for tomorrow. And when tomorrow arrived, Zoltanis reasoned that most everything could probably wait at least another day.

Everyone knew things moved slowly during the summer, so those seeking to

get something accomplished would meet in a cool place to discuss their goals. Ultimately, they'd chat lazily for a while, then laugh after nothing was decided and shrug it off, deciding there was nothing to be done about the work delay.

Such was summer in Zoltan.

There were more than a few people who collapsed each year from the heat, so perhaps slacking off this time of year was a healthy and natural response.

"There isn't much at the market. What should I do for dinner tonight?" I wondered aloud.

Naturally, Zoltan's merchants weren't exempt from the lethargy.

Even the construction and transportation workers were slacking off.

Food was more likely to go bad in this heat, and travel frequently met with delays, creating a shortage of fresh ingredients in town.

There were lots of fruits and vegetables that ripened during this season, but Zoltan's farmers preferred to raise crops that didn't require much work in the summer.

"Since we've got no customers, maybe I should go check the harbor district and see what's available," I suggested.

Ruti nodded. "That sounds like a good idea."

We'd made hand warmers in the winter to get by, but there was no quick fix for Zoltan's heat. It was too much to handle.

"Brother."

"Oh, do you want to come along, Ruti?"

"Mhm."

"It's hot out there, you know."

"I'll bring water."

Ruti held up a bottle of water with both hands.



It wasn't the magic item she'd used during her journey, but a ceramic canteen she had bought in Zoltan.

The bottle had been painted an insulating color and sported the image of a round spider for decoration. The image was modeled after Tisse's partner, Mister Crawly Wawly.

"I like this canteen."

Since acquiring it, Ruti kept it on her at all times. She took great care of the bottle, making it obvious how much it meant to her.

"All right, we'll leave the store to Rit and go out shopping," I declared.

"Mhm." Ruti nodded happily.



The sky was clear today, save for a few big white clouds bobbing lazily overhead.

It made the heat oppressive. Even a dragon would be panting and complaining.

"It sure is hot."

"Definitely."

Ruti and I wiped our foreheads with towels.

She never would've done something like this while traveling as the Hero.

Even the heat of molten lava pouring from a volcano hadn't affected her. It was the Hero's duty to keep fighting even in skin-melting conditions. Heat had meant nothing to Ruti the Hero.

And with that life behind her, even Zoltan's awful summer was a pleasant experience.

"Man, it's hot."

"Sure is."

Fresh sweat appeared as soon as we wiped the old away.

This wasn't quite the temperature of a scorching desert that made you think

you might die, but it was enough to worry you might be in danger if you collapsed and no one was around.

Put simply, it was hot. So much so that it made a person want to keep mentioning it.

“So hot,” I groaned.

“I don’t think you have any heat resistance, Big Brother, yet I don’t remember you complaining while we were traveling,” Ruti remarked.

“Well, that’s partly because I got protection from Ares’s magic when the temperature turned life-threatening. But also...I couldn’t whine while everyone else endured with the powers of their blessings. So I just sucked it up.”

Back then, my duty was to support the Hero.

I knew my limit would come someday, but I was still careful not to let my comrades see my weakness.

“Keeping quiet about my troubles might’ve contributed to the party’s eventual collapse,” I admitted.

“It wasn’t your fault. Ares pushing you out.”

“Thank you... But I think the primary culprit was a lack of trust between members.”

We’d come together and fought to defeat the demon lord, but we’d lacked the presence of mind to sympathize with each other’s problems.

Ruti, Yarandrala, Theodora, Ares, and I... We’d all had our troubles and reasons for wanting to defeat the demon lord.

I never would’ve imagined Theodora siding with Ares and fighting Ruti. Or that Ares would’ve encountered so much hardship after I left.

“There are times I wonder, if I had talked with Ares more, maybe things could’ve ended differently.”

Ares’s funeral had been during a cold winter day, one entirely unlike today.

“I knew his noble family was bankrupt, but Ares wasn’t the sort of man to be pushed to the brink just because his goal of restoring his family had failed.

There was probably something between us, something fundamentally at odds with his view of the world...”

“Big Brother, Ares is gone now.”

“...You’re right.”

Ares had died.

Demis guided the souls of the departed to their next lives. He’d told me as much when I encountered him through Van.

Ares didn’t exist anywhere anymore. Even the wood elves’ legendary Resurrection required the soul to be sealed into a physical form before it was reborn. No matter how powerful the miracle, there was no recovering a soul that had been remade.

“Maybe the heat’s thawing out old memories,” I mused.

“Mmh,” Ruti answered.

Perhaps I’ll visit his grave tomorrow.

Supposedly, even if the dead were gone, prayers would reach them in their current life. I didn’t trust Demis would be so considerate, but prayers were for the living as much as they were for the dead.

I needed to dwell a bit on my memories with Ares because I still needed to come to terms with the meaning of Divine Blessings. Tanta would need my help in the future, after all.



Zoltan’s harbor district.

Situated on the western side of the town, the river harbor was the gateway to Zoltan—technically anyway.

There were few merchant ships, and since it was a river harbor, larger vessels couldn’t dock there. However, there wasn’t enough commercial interest in Zoltan to warrant those larger boats anyway.

“It’s nothing compared to bigger cities, but this is where trade goods gather,” I explained to Ruti. “Stuff from villages upriver all ends up here.”

“If that’s true, then maybe we’ll find something good.”

“Maybe.”

Crews were holed up in their lodges, since the road along the river was deserted.

Not even any roadside stalls, huh?

Ruti and I entered a small shop.

“Heyo,” came a lifeless greeting as we stepped inside.

The young man behind the counter was topless and fanning himself. He didn’t show much interest in working, a perfect match for his tone.

The owner of this shop was a middle-aged woman, so this clerk was presumably her son.

“See?” said Ruti.

“You were right. There’s plenty here,” I replied.

The heat had kept away the usual crowd of merchants that would’ve bought up the stock at a place like this.

“With this much, there’s a lot I can make,” I said.

As Ruti and I picked out one thing after the other, I began to get a little excited.

“You throwing a party or something?” the young man asked as he bagged the food for us.

“No. I just feel like making a proper meal from time to time.”

“Even during summer?”

“Spaghetti salad gets old after a while, even during summer.”

“Huh? Change up the ingredients a bit and I could eat it forever.”

Spaghetti salad was the legendary standard summer food in Zoltan.

You’d cook the noodles, cool them in water, add whatever ingredients you had on hand, throw whatever spices you liked on top, and toss it all together. Truly, it was a dish overflowing with Zoltan spirit.

Anything that needed to be cooked went into the water with the noodles. It was also called Zoltan *soba*, although actual *soba* was hard to make in Zoltan due to the climate, so you hardly ever saw it in these parts. Someone who moved to Zoltan likely ascribed the term *soba* to spaghetti salad.

Hardly anyone in Zoltan had ever tasted the real stuff, so the local specialty sharing the moniker was a bit funny.

Some people likely assumed the Zoltan version was real *soba*. Not that there was any harm to the misunderstanding; I just found it amusing.

Oddities like that were part of what made Zoltan's culture unique.

"So, what are you making?" the young man asked.

"We got some nice-looking peanuts and tomatoes, so I was thinking a peanut stew."

The young clerk looked shocked. "Putting peanuts in a stew?!"

"Yeah, make a peanut paste to put into it. It goes well with the tomato's acidity."

"Huh, what do you know. You must be good at cooking, mister."

"I just enjoy it is all."

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere near a stove in the summer." The young man shrugged. "Zoltan *soba* is fine by me."

*

*

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Ruti and I walked back carrying the bags of groceries.

A shimmering haze hung over the road, and summer insects chirped shrilly, their forms lit in the colors of dusk.

Ordinarily, we would've heard the voices of children playing, but even they had admitted defeat to the unrelenting sun.

"I know some of the kids are inside playing board games," Ruti said.

She often played with the local kids. Her mastery of the wyvern race game had won her the respect of the kids in our section of town, as well as that of those living in the central district and out in Southmarsh.

That's why she knew so much.

Other kids had avoided her in our home village because of the Hero blessing. In Zoltan, however, she was looked up to as an older sister-type who was good at games.

I couldn't have been happier for her.

"It'd be dangerous for kids out in this heat," I remarked.

Even though neither of us had any resistance skills active, our blessings still bolstered our resilience. Every adult had a Divine Blessing, and even if it wasn't raised to a high level, it still afforded some extra hardiness against the temperature.

Children who'd not yet awakened to their blessings were a different story. They collapsed more easily. A parent looking away for a few moments only to turn back and see that their child had passed out was a fairly common story.

It was safer for children to play where adults could supervise during the peak of summer.

"We were exceptions," Ruti noted.

We had connected with our blessings the moment we were self-aware.

Presumably, that was because the Hero and Guide were blessings with special roles.

Demis created the Hero to recreate the first hero's soul. To have the bearer behave in a fitting way from birth, it was necessary for their blessing's impulses to restrict the direction of their entire life.

The Guide existed to watch over and safeguard the Hero until they had grown enough, so it was also necessary for it to be active from birth.

Thus, both of us had never known life without a Divine Blessing.

"Because we weren't normal children," I said.

Ruti nodded. "Mother and Father left us alone."

"Can't really blame them, I guess."

We didn't need parents. That had strained our relationship with our mother

and father terribly. They were just ordinary villagers, and we were too different.

The Hero and Guide were designed not to be affected by things like parents, though.

No matter what sort of parents they had, the Hero would develop healthily. It was that way by intent.

Our situation was precisely as Demis had envisioned.

“But you were there for me, Big Brother. Then and now.” Ruti took my free hand with hers. “No matter what Demis planned. I was never a normal child, but I was happy. Because you were there for me.”

“And I had a happy childhood because you were there for me, too,” I replied.

“But you went to the capital in order to become a knight.”

“Th-that’s because I knew that someday you would set out on a journey...”

“I know. You always worked hard for me.” Ruti peered into the distance while we walked. “Still, I always hoped to spend summer together when you were away.”

“...We would’ve had a great time.”

“Mhm.”

While peering beyond the heat shimmer, I pictured our younger selves holding hands and walking.

When a child connected with their blessing, they were considered an adult.

Ruti and I were born linked to our Divine Blessings, so we’d never had childhoods.

“Divine Blessings, huh?”

I broke off a blade of grass growing on the side of the road and put it in my mouth. I blew on it, and a high-pitched sound issued from between my lips.

Ruti’s eyes widened in surprise. “I didn’t know you could whistle like that.”

“A knight taught me how when I was in training. He told me you’d love it if I showed you.”

“Oh. So why did you never show me?”

“...I was afraid it might be a little childish.”

“But I was a kid back then.”

“That’s true, but...I was, too.”

I’d been immature. I’d learned to make grass whistles to help Ruti smile, yet I’d never shown her because I was afraid she wouldn’t enjoy something so ordinary. Thinking back on it, I realized she would’ve enjoyed it just fine. However, I was only a boy at the time. One who’d left a small village to live alone in a big city far from home.

“So you never showed me because you were afraid,” Ruti said.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, a little bashful.

“You were a child. Just like I was.”

“Yeah. I was.”

I whistled on the grass again.

“Let me try.”

I passed her the blade of grass. She blew, producing a sharp sound on her first attempt.

“Wow, you’re good,” I praised.

Ruti beamed. “Only because I copied you.”

Seeing her smile made me grin, too.

It had been some time since she started suppressing the Hero using New Truth, but lately, she’d been smiling more clearly.

We laughed and grinned while comparing grass whistles. It was the sort of thing two much younger siblings might have done.



Once I was back in the kitchen, it was time to make dinner.

Not a single customer had come by the shop while Ruti and I were out getting ingredients.

Deliveries to clinics and merchants would have to be our source of income for the season.

“I need to reconsider our stock,” I muttered.

If I made medicine at my usual pace, we’d have too much.

Herbs grew plentifully in the mountains during summer, though, so I thought to gather what I could there and dry the plants or make them into pastes so they would keep until needed.

“Red,” Rit called out from behind me. Turning around, I saw she had an apron on. Her hair was tied back, and she looked fired up. “I’ll help out, too!”

“Thanks. Could you take care of the prep work?”

“Got it!”

Rit picked up a kitchen knife and started cutting and trimming the rainbow trout.

I handled most of the cooking, but recently, Rit was pitching in more.

When I asked her why, she claimed it was because cooking together was fun. Obviously, the work went faster with more hands, but I didn’t mind the time required. I liked making food for Rit and Ruti.

So for Rit to help simply because she enjoyed it, too, not to make it more efficient, felt like bliss.

Today’s menu was a southern-style peanut stew, marinated trout, gnocchi cooked in cheese, a tomato and paprika salad, caramel pancakes, and mead.

The stew would have to simmer for a while, and the trout needed time to soak in the marinade. I was making the gnocchi from scratch, and cooking down the caramel would take a bit.

This is extravagant.

Such a dinner would’ve been impossible on a normal work day. The lazy Zoltan summer, when no one was working, made this possible.

“Warm the milk and butter, add the flour little by little, then lower the heat and stir while adding salt and ground herbs,” I muttered.

“What are you making, Red?” Rit asked.

“Gnocchi. I’ve been using pasta made at the mill a lot lately, so I wanted to make one from scratch like this, too.”

“Mmm, it smells nice!”

“Because I made sure to work some herbs into the dough. It’ll be delicious.”

“I can’t wait!”

“Rit, when you’re done there, would you mix the dough here for me?”

“Got it, I’m almost finished. Just chopping the onions.”

“Okay. I’ll make the marinade, so you work the dough until it’s smooth.”

“And after that?”

“Take it off the fire, add some egg yolks and cheese, and keep mixing. Once that’s done, it’s just a matter of getting the dough into the right shape, but I should handle that part since I have the Cooking skill.”

“Roger!”

We were preparing a meal that required fire in the dead of a harsh summer. When I glanced at the side of Rit’s face, I spied a bead of sweat running down her bare nape. It was a bit exciting.

“Hm?” Noticing my gaze, Rit looked back at me. Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she smiled.

I pulled my eyes away, a little embarrassed. My gaze went to her beautiful, pale hand stirring the pot, then to the blue sapphire ring on her finger.

The engagement ring I’d given her.

“Heh.” I laughed.

Rit cocked an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing. Just thinking how happy I am.”

Rit’s smile blossomed into something beautiful and bright.

“Me too!”

Neither of us spoke for a while.

While the cylindrical gnocchi cooled, I got to work on the peanut stew.

First, there was the matter of crushing the peanuts into a paste. Preparing medicines had made me accustomed to the method. Meanwhile, Rit chopped the other ingredients and put them into a pot.

The kitchen knife slipped into the fresh red tomatoes with satisfying ease. Apparently, the fruits had been gathered in one of the mountain villages upriver.

Summers were supposed to be cooler there. The trout hailed from the same region, as it happened.

The tomatoes weren't anything special, but they were fresh and ripe. They hadn't been raised at one of the famous places farther north, yet they were perfectly suitable for a simple, happy dinner table.

"That's it for the prep work!"



All that remained was the chili pepper and water. Then I'd add the peanut paste and let the whole thing simmer.

Basically, most of our work was done.

""Good work!"" Rit and I said to each other.

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Rit, Ruti, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly, and I took our seats around the dinner table.

"You went all out today!" Tisse looked shocked. Well, as much as her subtle demeanor would allow anyway.

"Lately I've been keeping meals simple because of the heat, so I decided to put in a little effort for a change."

"You aren't kidding," Tisse replied. "I can say this with confidence now that I've taken the Cooking skill, these dishes take quite a lot of time." She picked up the bowl of peanut stew. "This smells great."

"It's a dish from a town called Mzali. The locals serve it over dumplings made of corn flour. However, I adjusted the flavor to complement a stew-style dish," I said.

"I've been to many places for my work as an assassin, but I only ever paid attention to their baths and *oden* communities."

"I never really noticed any *oden* communities... Is *oden* really so widespread?"

"Should you look closely, you can usually find at least one person manning a cart in a town."

"I didn't know that."

Tisse tried a spoonful of the stew. "Delicious."

I nodded, saying "Good," then had a spoonful for myself.

The chicken meat had absorbed the peanut and tomato flavors and tasted excellent.

Seems like it came out well, if I do say so myself.

“Herby gnocchi in hot cheese...I love it!”

“Tasty. It goes well with the acidity and feels good in the mouth. As always, I’m glad to have your cooking.”

Rit had started with the gnocchi, while Ruti was enjoying the trout.

I enjoyed my time spent cooking, but I loved when we all got to partake together of my work most of all.

It was a tranquil moment.



Night.

Rit and I were lying in bed together, enjoying the relaxed night.

Moonlight filtered through the window, gently lighting the otherwise dark room.

“Zoltan’s been peaceful since we returned from the ruins,” Rit said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Everyone can finally take it easy.”

“It really is hot, though... I miss Loggervia’s refreshing summers.”

“It was never this warm back in my hometown.”

A peaceful, restful, lazy season.

When I first came to Zoltan, I’d intentionally forgone practicing swordsmanship to make a statement about living a more relaxed life. That hadn’t changed, but it was less about any particular philosophy and more because the heat had sapped my will to do anything. If a younger me saw this, he’d be speechless.

I did my best to keep myself mentally disciplined, though, if nothing else.

When I told Rit about this, she answered, “I hold my shotels every day!”

“You really love your weapons, huh?”

“Mhm. Always have. I’d skip out on practicing the sorts of things expected of a princess to train instead.”

“Haha, I can picture that so clearly,” I said.

“But when I started sneaking out of the castle to go adventuring, I still made sure to practice with musical instruments and study the arts. If I didn’t keep up a facade, people were bound to get suspicious.”

A princess was expected to know of such things to be considered marriageable.

There were many well-to-do houses that instructed their daughters in writing, arithmetic, manners, poetry, dancing, music, and the like.

“You’re well-rounded,” I remarked.

“Well, most of my studies were pretty half-hearted,” Rit confessed. “There’s nothing to really brag about. Dancing was fun, though, so I did a fair bit of that.”

“I’m not surprised you didn’t get too into it. You weren’t interested in preparing for marriage.”

Rit wasn’t the sort of princess to wait around patiently to be wed for some political reason. Of course she’d hated all those lessons. They didn’t match her goals.

Perhaps her frustration over that had found an outlet in her love of sword fighting and adventure.

“You know, when we learned that I had the Spirit Scout blessing, I think Father understood that I wouldn’t behave like a proper princess. That’s why he had a sword made for me when I was young and tasked Gaius with instructing me, even though he was already busy as guard captain.”

Rit’s father, the Duke of Loggervia, had judged that it would be better for her to learn a practical fighting style from Gaius, a man who’d survived countless fights, than study the textbook self-defense and physical exercise of a normal princess.

I thought it was fair to say his choice was correct. Spirit Scout was a blessing meant for a reconnaissance to safeguard forest villages. Its impulses compelled the bearer to protect their community, but to do so independently, outside the local soldier retinue.

Rit’s personality undoubtedly played a part, too, yet her blessing’s role in her

sneaking out of the castle and acting as an adventurer couldn't be denied. She'd elected to aid people with her swords rather than exist as a princess tucked away in safety.

Her blessing had impacted her life significantly.

"He was right, but I think you're the sort who would've slipped out of the castle regardless of your blessing," I said.

"Of course!" Rit agreed. "When I heard stories of Father's past, I thought he was a huge hypocrite for scolding me." Rit furrowed her brow in frustration.

When the duke was a young prince, he and his close friend Gaius had apparently embarked on a quest to defeat evil lords and mountain bandits and bring justice to the world.

Rit's personality was a spitting image of the duke's.

Demis handed out Divine Blessings. They weren't inherited from parents or influenced by an individual's upbringing. However, Rit's father was the Duke of Loggervia. Blessings aside, she had definitely inherited many qualities from him. Any who knew the man would recognize Rit as his daughter immediately.

People were more than just their God-given qualities. A blessing didn't define everything about one's life. That Rit rested happily in my arms now was proof enough of that. It had nothing to do with Divine Blessings.

"So hot..."

Rit shifted, moving away from me a bit.

The summer heat threatened to be more troublesome than blessings.



The following day brought no new customers, so I set out to make two deliveries, both to clinics. Once that was done, I bought some flowers and headed to the cemetery.

The plot stood a short walk from the residential sections of Zoltan and was unsurprisingly deserted.

Not many would brave the heat to visit a grave.

That didn't mean the place was quiet, though. Summer insects chirped and buzzed loudly. I walked the weedy path, and when I turned a corner, I saw a boy with a hat that didn't quite conceal his pointed ears.

"Big Bro!"

It was Tanta. His face lit up upon noticing me.

"Hi, Tanta. Why are you out here alone on such a hot day?"

"I came to tend a grave."

"Even in this heat? That's nice of you."

"Hehe." Tanta grinned with undisguised embarrassment.

"Who's grave is that?"

"My aunt's."

Gonz's wife.

"She grew sick and died before I was born, so I don't know what she was like..."

"I imagine Gonz doesn't like to talk about it much."

"Uncle Gonz gets sad when he mentions her."

Gonz was a master carpenter—the best in Zoltan. Should he wish to marry again, he'd have plenty of options, but he remained single out of his devotion to his wife.

When Tanta had contracted white-eye, Gonz panicked more than Tanta's parents, Nao and Mido. He'd thought he was going to lose a second person he loved to disease.

I'm really glad we were able to save Tanta.

I looked around. "Gonz isn't with you?"

"No. He comes on special days, but that's it."

"I see..."

"That's why I take care of the grave. The priests say that graves are places for the living to pray, so it's fine if there are weeds, so long as people can still pray,

but... Um, I don't know how to put it..."

"You want a place of memories to be pretty," I finished.

"Right! That's what I was trying to say." Tanta nodded.

Those who died were reborn, so functionally, there was no one in a grave. That's how the church saw it anyway.

"Uncle Gonz gets sad when he visits the grave, so he doesn't come very much, but if it were a mess when he did, I think he'd be even sadder."

"Yeah."

"That's why I want to keep it neat. I never met my aunt, but Uncle Gonz loved her, so I'm sure I would have, too," Tanta said with a big smile. He looked glad to have conveyed his feelings. His grin befit a child, and his posture had that young, straightforward earnestness to it.

"Do you mind if I help clean the grave?" I asked.

Tanta looked shocked. "You'd be willing to help?!"

"Sure. Your aunt was dear to Gonz, and I'd like to think I would've liked her as well."

"Thanks, Big Bro!"

I drew my bronze sword and started clearing the weeds on the opposite side of the grave from Tanta.

"Do you need to get back to your store?" the boy asked.

"It should be fine. Rit's watching the place today. And just between us, there aren't any customers in the summer."

"Haha. Everyone in Zoltan knows that."

We smiled and cheerfully chatted as we worked.

Gonz didn't have any children. And if he stuck to his choice not to remarry, he'd likely never have any. As a result, he really doted on his nephew Tanta. Gonz was over the moon when Tanta said he wanted to be a carpenter.

Tanta had inherited plenty from his parents, of course, but he'd gained

something from his uncle, too. Gonz and his wife were a part of who that boy was.

Divine Blessings were given by God, and blood came from the parents, but there were other things someone could pass on to a child through love.

I would never know Tanta's aunt. Her soul no longer existed, having been remade as part of Demis's plan. However, she survived as a part of Tanta.

I was certain of it.



"I'll help you out, too!" Tanta said.

After we'd cleaned Tanta's aunt's grave, we went to a nearby well to rest and get some water.

My body felt liable to wither beneath the sun, and the cool well water proved a refreshing treat.

"You came to visit a grave, right? So let me help!" he added.

"I appreciate the thought, but are you sure?" I asked. "Don't you have plans to play with your friends?"

"Not really. Everyone stays inside during the summer. I like being outside more, so I'm usually on my own."

"The heat doesn't bother you?"

"Nope. Hot and cold never bother me! Pretty neat, right?"

"It is, but don't push yourself. Intense summers can be dangerous for kids."

"Okay, okay. But don't forget, I know more about Zoltan than you do!"

"True enough."

Tanta was a half-elf born and raised in Zoltan. He knew the dangers of the hot months better than me.

"Have there been any developments with your Divine Blessing coming?" I questioned. "You're at the age when most kids connect with theirs."

"I'm not sure. It sort of feels like something flickers in my heart before I go to

sleep and stuff.”

“That might be a sign that your blessing is emerging.”

“Yeah...”

“Telling you it’ll all be fine feels a bit too flippant. You’re a good friend, Tanta, and I promise that I’ll help you do whatever you want in life.”

“Thanks, Big Bro... I really am worried. I want to be a carpenter, but what if I get a bad blessing?”

Tanta still hadn’t linked with his Divine Blessing, yet he possessed an unusual resistance to heat.

What if...

“No, it can’t be...,” I whispered to myself.

No matter how powerful the blessing, its abilities only took effect when the bearer linked with it.

Even if Tanta was a Cardinal, his resilience in Zoltan summers could be a natural inclination.

“Young Tanta has been given the same role as me: Cardinal.”

That was what Van’s comrade, Cardinal Ljubo, had told me.

Cardinals held special positions within the church. They stood at the top of the hierarchy as a collective dubbed the College of Cardinals. It was the decision-making body that selected the head of the church.

Only those with the Divine Blessing of the Cardinal were permitted to join. As such, anyone discovered to possess a Cardinal blessing was expected to be sent to the church to be reared properly.

Such a thing was not without benefits, though. Cardinals of the church wielded tremendous influence, and with it they could acquire whatever wealth and fame they desired.

A grand life as a powerful figure wasn’t out of the question for anyone who became a cardinal of the church. However, Tanta dreamed of being a carpenter like Gonz.

“Big Bro?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry, I was lost in thought for a moment.”

“Are you okay? Is the heat getting to you?”

“Ahaha. I’m fine, I’m fine.” I smiled and stood. “Shall we?”

“Yeah!”

I held Tanta’s hand. It still had the softness of youth, but I noticed a bit of roughness. He’d been practicing with carpentry tools lately. That was probably why.

We headed to Ares’s grave. Weeds grew fast in summer, and the area around the Sage’s resting place was covered in shrubs that rose to my knees.

“I come by every month,” I said with a sigh. “These weeds are relentless.”

“This grave looks better than the ones around it, though,” Tanta replied.

We split up and got to work.

Like Tanta said, a lot of the surrounding graves were worse off than Ares’s, utterly buried in wild grass.

That was partly due to the laziness of Zoltan’s populace, but it was also the fate of all graves. They were places of memories. And as those memories were forgotten, so were the places associated with them.

The local church that managed the cemetery would take down an abandoned grave that fell into disrepair. All that would remain was a small name engraved on a stone slab at the back of the plot.

The memories would be lost forever, and the names of the deceased would be ones of many in a list.

“Hey, Tanta.”

“What?”

“After I die, would you take care of this grave for me? Once a year, no, once every three years or so is enough.”

“Huh? Are you sick or something?!” Tanta looked like he might cry.

“N-no! Not at all! I’m talking about after I get old!”

I hurriedly corrected myself.

Tanta looked a little shocked, and then started laughing. “You aren’t that old, Big Bro! Don’t scare me by saying weird stuff.”

“S-sorry... Maybe the heat’s got me a little sentimental.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I’m feeling overly emotional.”

“Oh, I understand! You’ve been drinking, right?”

“Er, not exactly...”

“But Uncle Gonz cries a lot when he drinks, so that has to be it.”

I see...

I laughed out loud, and Tanta joined me.

“This Ares... Was he your friend?”

“Hmm... No. I wouldn’t say so.”

“What?! Was he your brother?!”

I snorted at the thought.

Having Ares as a brother...would’ve been challenging.

“No, he wasn’t family, either.”

“Then why are you visiting his grave?”

Why?

It was hard to put the feeling into words.

“Because of memories, I guess.”

“Hmmm...”

We continued in silence for a while.

Eventually, we started chatting again. Apparently, Mido had intended to raise his level a bit, but when he took out his old sword, he found it was rusted. Nao

gave him an earful over it. By the time Tanta finished with that story, our work was done.

I placed the flowers I had bought and stood.

“Shall we go?” I asked.

“Sure!”

No sooner had Tanta answered me than he whirled and looked back.

“What is it?”

“It felt like someone was watching us...”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Someone tall, wearing white clothes... A really pale, white woman was looking at me...”

I followed Tanta’s gaze, but couldn’t sense anyone.

Even if peace had dulled my instincts, there shouldn’t have been anyone in Zoltan who could get close to me without my noticing other than Ruti and Tisse.

“I don’t think anyone’s there,” I said.

Tanta’s expression clouded. “Huh. I guess I imagined it. That’s a little scary.” He seemed a little scared. This was a cemetery, after all.

“Don’t worry. We can handle any enemy,” I assured him.

“Really?”

“Really. Should a dragon show up, I’ll drive it away.”

“Hahaha. Even for you, that’s a little too reckless.”

“Not at all. For you, I’d do it without breaking a sweat.”

“Hehe, thanks... If you’re ever in trouble I’ll help you out, too.”

“I’ll be counting on you.”

Tanta smiled bashfully.

“Hey, since things are so calm at the shop and you don’t mind the heat, why don’t we visit the beach sometime?” I suggested.

Tanta's eyes lit up. "The beach? Wow!"

"Yeah, we could bring some tents and camp out. Maybe borrow a boat and go fishing on the water, too."

"Sleeping in a tent?! Fishing out on a boat?! Ooooooh!" Tanta fidgeted excitedly. "You mean it, right?! No take backs!"

I nodded. "As long as your parents are okay with it."

"They'll be fine with it since you're going!"

I'd tossed out the idea on a whim.

Truthfully, I'd just meant to suggest something fun to get Tanta's mind off whatever had frightened him. And with signs of his blessing emerging, I couldn't deny I harbored a faint hope that I might be there for him when it awoke to talk with him about it.

"I'll hold you to that, Big Bro!"

The beach trip was just a spur of the moment idea, but after seeing Tanta so excited, I was glad I'd brought it up.

I'd have to invite Rit and the others when I got back.



It was evening, and I had returned to Red & Rit's Apothecary.

Rit leaned in excitedly when she heard my proposal. "We should make it a trip out to the island!"

There were meringue cookies made from yesterday's leftover egg whites, and a pitcher of water with lemon in it on the table.

"The island?" I asked, surprised.

I hadn't expected that response.

"Yeah! There's one to the south of Zoltan that's perfect for swimming. Apparently, there's lots of food to be had there, too. Wouldn't that be great for a summer vacation?"

"What about possible storms?" I said.

“Mmm. Well, it might be dangerous on the coast, but there’s a village farther inland that has places that can withstand bad weather,” Rit answered.

“Sounds like it should be okay, then. We can have fun camping, fishing, and playing in the sea.”

I grew excited as I imagined it. I took a mental note to bring supplies for a barbecue.

“We should invite Nao, Mido, Gonz, Ruti, Tisse, and Yarandrala, and make it a big group trip,” Rit suggested.

“Good idea. It’s not like Gonz is working anyway,” I agreed.

If he was going to skip out on work, why not do so in the best way possible?

Rit smiled upon noticing my growing enthusiasm.

This summer promised to be quite memorable.

Chapter 2

Summer Vacation at the Beach

Our vacation began with an hourlong boat trip south out of Zoltan.

We paid a merchant who'd intended to travel to the island to peddle various odds and ends for transit on his vessel.

The small ship had a single mast with a triangle sail. It was the sort of boat that could go anywhere, even upwind, so long as there was a breeze and two people to crew it. Such little ships were common in the southern seas east of Avalonia. They couldn't bear much cargo, but they were adaptable and had uses in various endeavors, from fishing to trade.

The captain was a sailor who'd moved to Zoltan and bought the ship. The hull was made of well-aged teak.

The cruise to the island was quite pleasant.

"Look, Dad! A dolphin jumped out of the water!!!"

"Really? I must have missed it."

"Argh! Look closer, Dad!"

Tanta and Mido were leaning out over the edge excitedly. Nao smiled at them, but held back the two to ensure they didn't fall overboard in their excitement.

They all seemed to be having fun.

The merchant looked on with amusement. He seemed an amiable sort.

Gonz came up beside me. "Thanks for inviting us on such a fun trip, Red."

"We aren't even at the island yet," I said.

"But they're already having a great time. Tanta's never left Zoltan before. I'm sure he'll remember this for the rest of his life." Gonz's eyes narrowed as he

grinned at his nephew.

“The ancient dragon forecast is predicting no storms for a while, so it’s perfect weather for a trip!” Rit said. She was holding a plate with pear slices lining it. Behind her, Ruti, Tisse, and Mister Crawly Wawly were already enjoying some of the fruit.

Yarandrala was busy aiding the merchant in managing the ship. The merchant’s hireling was at the rudder, steering.

“I’m glad everyone was able to make it,” I said.

Rit bobbed her head. “Yeah. That’s Zoltan for you.”

“Got that right. Anyone who’d stay behind after hearing the words ‘family trip’ isn’t a real Zoltani!” Gonz puffed out his chest in pride.

“Look, Tanta!” Mido shouted. “A dolphin!” The man was usually so calm. Seeing him so worked up was rare and made me glad I’d suggested this.

“This is our first family trip,” Gonz admitted.

“Really?” I asked.

“There are monsters beyond Zoltan’s walls, after all. Heading out on my own is one thing, but bringing Tanta is another. I’d be too frightened something might happen to him. It’s a relief to have Rit with us.”

She thumped her chest. “Leave it to me. Be it dragons, giants, or anything else, I’ll handle anything that comes our way!”

The merchant laughed. “Hahaha! There aren’t any monsters like that on the island. Speaking of... Look! It’s coming into view!”

The man pointed, and everyone followed his finger to a small shape in the distance. That was our destination—Regret Isle.

“Eerie name for an island,” I remarked.

“Supposedly, there was a strange current around the island when it was first discovered,” the merchant explained.

“A strange current?”

“It pulled ships to the eastern reef. Word is it sank a lot of fishing ships.”

“That sounds pretty dangerous!”

“There’s since been a seismic shift, or maybe the old stories were just exaggerated. Regardless, there’s no current like that nowadays. It’s smooth sailing as long as you don’t get too close to the eastern reef. The people living there call it Pasta Fork Island for its shape instead of Regret Isle.”

“Pasta Fork Island!” Tanta grinned.

“While there’s no dangerous current, the waves will rock the boat a bit as we get close, so you should all have a seat and wait!” the merchant cautioned.

The ship approached the island while the water gleamed beneath the summer sun.



“White sand, blue sea, palm trees swaying in the breeze, crabs scuttling in the surf... It’s perfect!” Rit shouted as she threw up her arms ecstatically.

Beside her, Ruti, Tisse, and Mister Crawly Wawly raised their arms, too. It was definitely an exciting, beautiful scene.

“Okay! Let’s go swimming!”

“Wait, wait. We need to unload our gear first. And we have to introduce ourselves in the village,” I said.

“Awww.” Rit pouted. Still, she understood that locals would be wary of sudden arrivals.

In a place where visitors were rare, it was common sense for a traveler to greet the villagers before anything else. Rit knew that just as well as I did. Perhaps the beauty of the island had distracted her.

“Give me a hand unloading the ship,” I called to her.

“Fiiine.”

We split up our luggage and lugged it off the ship.

Despite Rit’s griping, it hardly took any time.



The village stood on the western end of the island.

The pier we docked at was on the northern side, so it was a bit of a walk to the southwest to reach the settlement. Fortunately, the path was well kept and easy to follow. Honestly, it was better maintained than Zoltan's roads.

"Over there." The merchant, who walked at the vanguard, pointed.

The village was tucked in a tranquil grove surrounded by palm trees.

It was the perfect place for a windbreak and likely pretty safe during storms, too. Judging by the number of buildings, there couldn't have been more than twenty people living there.

"It's rare we get travelers out here," the village chief greeted as he rubbed his heavy eyes.

Leadership of this village was hereditary. This man had inherited the position along with his family's fishing boat.

"We don't have much, but please, be at ease. We simply ask you not to disrupt our nets."

"Of course," I replied.

"We can share a bit of food. In this season, well-fattened south salmon visit our waters. They're quite delicious."

"That sounds nice. We've brought enough food to last into tomorrow, so we can try some salmon after that," I said.

The villagers were friendly and carried themselves with a laid-back air. Guests with money were probably uncommon. The merchant intended to return to Zoltan shortly and then come back for us in four days. The villagers looked quite eager to buy whatever they could from him, using the money we'd paid them to secure a stay here.

Everyone got along well enough, so I didn't expect any trouble during the trip.
Looks like it will be a nice vacation.

"Ah...," the village leader breathed.

"Yes?" I asked.

"You should know that the southeastern section of the island is dangerous.

It's best not to get too close. There isn't anything nice out there anyway."

What a curious way to phrase it, I thought.

"Ahh, I understand."

With all introductions finished, the merchant set out back for Zoltan.

Now the real vacation starts!



""The sea!!!""

Tanta and I shouted together.

We'd had plenty of time to marvel at it already, of course, but seeing it from an island beach was different.

We'd donned swimsuits, which could only mean one thing.

Our group had set up on a dune east of the pier. It was far enough from the villagers' fishing spot that we wouldn't disturb anything. We could play to our hearts' content.

"It's my first time swimming on an island," Mido remarked.

"Hey, do some stretches before you get in the water," Gonz chided.

They were in swimsuits, too. Mido had apparently bought a new one for today. I wondered if he had been looking forward to this even more than his son.

"Warming up is important."

"Wah?!" Tanta jumped at the sudden comment from behind him.

"Hey, Tisse. Mister Crawly Wawly," I greeted.

Tisse wore a one-piece swimsuit, and Mister Crawly Wawly had a little swim cap on his head, though I doubted the purpose of such a thing.

"You can swim, Mister Crawly Wawly?" I asked.

He puffed out his chest at that. I guessed that was a point of pride for him.

Are spiders good with water?

Mister Crawly Wawly signaled something to me.

“Oh? And you can fly through the air with the right wind?”

Apparently, he could make a windsail using his thread to glide around in strong breezes.

Even I, a man who’d fought Demis himself, couldn’t fly. I was a little jealous.

“You got changed quickly, Tisse,” Tanta said.

“She’s a professional at swapping clothes. She always manages to do it in the blink of an eye,” I replied.

Rit, Ruti, Yarandralla, and Nao joined us not too long after Tisse.

Rit wore the red and white striped halter-neck bikini from when we’d gone swimming before. Ruti had on a bikini that matched the color of the ribbon in her hair, and a thin shirt on top.

Yarandralla’s bikini had a ribbon loosely tied at the center of her chest.

“I brought a buoy, so you can swim until you run out of strength without having to worry!” Nao wore a shirt over her white swimsuit.

Mido frowned. “That’s a little much, Nao...”

“Are you not swimming?” I asked.

“Well... The truth is, I’m still a little seasick from the ride over, so I’m going to rest a bit on the beach.”

“You got seasick, Mom?”

Nao looked embarrassed. “It was my first time riding a boat.”

She was more reserved than Mido and Tanta, so it was surprising to hear her admit to feeling ill.

Some people got so seasick that they threw up, and even less intense symptoms could last for quite a while. Nao was clearly suffering from the latter.

“Are you okay?” Mido asked anxiously. “I can stay with you.”

“It’s fine.” Nao waved him off. “I just feel a little nauseous, is all. You go play with Tanta.”

“But...”

“It’s fine, just go play already!”

Mido hesitated, but he ultimately nodded and motioned for Tanta to climb onto his back.

“All right, let’s go, Tanta!”

“Okay!”

The two of them ran across the sand and jumped into the water.

“Go on now, all of you go, too, shoo,” Nao urged.

“Sorry. Had I known, I would’ve brought medicine for seasickness,” I said.

Nao shook her head. “I didn’t know, either. Don’t worry, this will make a nice memory in its own way.”

Her first time on a boat, and her first time getting seasick.

Nao looked a little pale beneath the shade of a palm tree, but she seemed to be enjoying herself nonetheless.



The white sand darkened slightly every time a wave washed over it.

White clouds bobbed listlessly in the blue sky.

“It feels great!”

There was a splash as Rit’s head popped up from underwater.

Her swaying breasts drew my eye, but with everyone around I had to control myself.

“Come on, Red! The water’s perfect!”

“I’ll join you in a moment!”

I stood about knee-deep in the ocean, watching everyone play.

Yarandrala swam with perfect form. Her slender, toned body was beautiful.

Tisse’s face emerged from the water, swaying with the waves.

Mister Crawly Wawly floated on threads attached to his legs. Evidently, he

enjoyed riding on the waves. What an incredible spider.

“Big Brother.”

“Oh, hey, Ruti.”

Ruti stood at the edge of the water, right where the waves ebbed back into the sea. She held her hands behind her back. When I turned to face her, her cheeks reddened a little and she smiled.

“My swimsuit...”

“You bought it for this trip, right?”

“Mhm.” She nodded. “I wanted to get a custom one, but there wasn’t time.”

“It’s cute. It suits you.”

“Okay... Good.”

Her swimsuit complemented her well. The wet shirt made her red top really stand out. At first, I was surprised that she’d swim with a shirt on, but I guess it was meant for it. The way her body stood out through the translucent shirt was lovely. Her bikini bottom was a low rise tied with string that looked adorable on her.

Ruti had always been lovely, so anything she wore looked great, but she’d picked out an especially good swimsuit.

Zoltan was hot and stood by a river, so swimwear was important. Several local shops specialized in it. I wondered where Ruti had found her outfit.

Maybe I should go and thank them after we get back?

“Big Brother?”

“Sorry. It looks really nice on you.”

That was important, so it was worth repeating. When conveying your thoughts, it was important to be clear.

“Hehe.” Ruti smiled. She nearly looked bashful. However, her expression swiftly turned serious.

Noticing the shift, I asked, “What is it?”

“I have a request.”

“For you, I’ll do whatever I can.”

Ruti took a deep breath and released it slowly. “I’m going to put the Hero completely to sleep with New Truth for a bit.”

Put the Hero blessing to sleep? Why?

“And then I want to play with you,” she added.

“Oh. Okay.”

Her expression was completely grave, yet her request was so innocuous.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, of course not.”

With a nervous hand, she splashed some water at me.

“Now you’ve done it!” Cheerfully overacting a bit, I returned fire. The seawater hit her head on, making her blink.

“My eyes sting a little,” she said.

“It’s salt water, so of course it does. Without the Hero’s power, you have to look away or close your eyes.”

“I understand.”

Ruti reached down and splashed at me more forcefully.

I quickly turned away as the water hit me.

We chased each other around while splashing for a while before collapsing into the water. With her blessing sealed, Ruti could do as she pleased without fear of hurting anyone. And then...

“Hahaha.”

...Ruti laughed out loud.

Her eyes narrowed in a happy sort of way, her expression softened, her teeth showed, and she laughed in a voice that everyone heard.

“Hahaha! This is so much fun, Big Brother!”

Ruti was able to laugh out loud.

The Hero was gone. All anyone saw was a normal girl enjoying summer.

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When evening arrived, we set up two tents—one for Tanta’s family and another for the rest of us. Then we got to work on the next important task.

“I did it, Big Bro!”

“Nice, good job, Tanta.”

Tanta proudly pointed to the coals glowing red in the barbecue.

There was a technique to starting a fire using flint, and Tanta managed to get a fire started in hardly any time at all.

“Here, a treat.” I passed a plate of baguette slices topped with cheese and tomato to Tanta.

“When did you make these?!”

“While prepping the food for the barbecue. Pass those around to everyone for me.”

“Oh, they aren’t all for me?” Tanta smirked and headed off to distribute the bread.

“Okay, time to start cooking.” I cut the pork we’d brought into thick chunks and stuck those on skewers. Then I basted the vegetables with olive oil and grilled them.

The bacon and sausages were already good to go.

We’d brought cheese and pickles, which would pair well with the cooked meat on bread.

“I see. So that’s your method, Red.”

“Tisse, Ruti, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

The three watched me work with clear interest.

Mister Crawly Wawly jumped from Tisse’s head, catching a fly that had been drawn by the smell of meat.

“Barbecue has many regional variations, much like *oden*,” Tisse noted.

“True. I picked up my style from my old job,” I replied.

I’d been taught how to grill during my tenure with the Bahamut Knights. Honestly, they’d all but beaten it into me.

I didn’t know why, but for some reason the knights in the capital felt strongly about barbecue. The squires of every company prepared barbecue three times a year—during the knight division parade, the capital jousting tournament, and the anniversary of Avalonia’s founding. The senior knights were strict, saying that the knights’ pride depended on the quality of the cookout.

The Bahamut Knights preferred pork skewered and grilled, and appetizers were to be served while people waited. That was their style. When I was a squire, I had thought it was a pointlessly over-the-top obsession, but thinking back, I realized it was a good team-building exercise and fair experience for making plans to deal with the unpredictability of battle. Maybe that was stretching it, though.

“At my old job, we sliced the meat thinner to let it cook faster,” Tisse said.

I perked up slightly. “Oh? That sounds nice.”

Evidently, the Assassins Guild had its own standards for barbecuing.

There really wasn’t much to grilling meat outside; it didn’t involve any elaborate process or tools. Perhaps that’s why there were so many regional variations. Anyone could try it. That made it interesting, in a way.

“Do you want to handle the cooking tomorrow, Tisse?” I offered.

“Can we get meat on the island?”

“There have to be field birds at least, and we could probably catch a few fish.”

There weren’t many places in Avalonia that had seafood barbecues. I’d always wanted to try one.

Maybe this is a good chance. We came all this way, after all.

I had no experience with grilling fish outdoors, but I didn’t expect it to be too different.

“Maybe this is how those regional differences develop,” I mused.

“Mhm, mhm. Just like with *oden*.” Tisse nodded, thoroughly convinced. “Which means, barbecue *chikuwa* should be possible, too.”

Tisse started muttering to herself, absorbed in abrupt inspiration.

After taking the Cooking skill, Tisse had started preparing various dishes featuring *chikuwa*.

Her present success rate was roughly 60 percent.

“Big Brother.”

Ruti sidled up next to me.

“I want to help.”

“It’s better if only one person watches the flames,” I said.

“Oh...”

“Although that also varies from place to place. There are regions where everyone keeps track of their own skewers to make sure they’re cooked to their preferences.”

I flipped the meat over.

Juices dripped onto the charcoal, eliciting an appetizing sizzle.

Looking good.

“I want to have one more cookout while we’re here. How about you handle the food during that one?” I proposed.

“Okay. I want to try.”

“Great. Then watch what I’m doing carefully.”

Ruti observed and listened intently as I explained what I was doing.

She seemed to be having a good time, making all that time spent learning to barbecue as a squire worthwhile.



The red sun approached the horizon, and a white moon hung in the purple sky.

“Big Bro, this is really great!”

“You like the sausage, Tanta?”

“Yeah. This is even better than what we have at home! What’s your secret?”

“It’s just normal sausage that I bought at the market yesterday. I grilled it and added some salt and pepper.”

“But this one definitely tastes better!”

“Well,” I said coyly. “Just between us, there is one secret to it.”

Tanta’s eyes widened. “Really?!”

“Food tastes different depending on where you eat it.”

“Food tastes better when you eat it on an island?!” the boy shouted.

I put a finger to my lips and shushed him, and he covered his mouth with both hands and nodded.

The experience of the moment affected the flavor. The same dish could taste different depending on the state of your mind. A barbecue on an island beach with the ocean separating you from home... Location was the ultimate seasoning.

“You’re right, the food in a wonderful place like this is even more delicious than usual.”

“Well put, Rit,” I said.

She looked blissful as she enjoyed her plate. “The meatiness of this is just sublime!”

I nodded. “Simple seasoning really highlights the natural flavor perfectly.”

“I want some more!” Tanta grew excited from Rit’s wholehearted gusto. I smiled and gave him a second helping.

“Here you go.”

“Hooray! Thanks, Big Bro!”

“I made plenty, so if want thirds, just say so.”

“Okay!”

Tanta's ears twitched happily as he ran over to Nao, who'd thankfully recovered from her seasickness.

"Tanta's a good kid," I said.

A soft smile bloomed on Rit's face. "Yeah, he has a bit of a mischievous side, but he's always polite when it counts."

He wasn't a perfect angel who always did what adults asked and never pulled any pranks. He got into trouble and made people angry occasionally, and he pouted and cried, too. Still, I thought he was a good kid.

"I've known him for about a year and a half now," I noted. "He's definitely gotten bigger."

"Children grow up fast," Rit said.

Tanta stood on the tips of his toes to whisper in his mother's ear. I suspected he was sharing the secret of the ultimate seasoning.

"Hehe." Rit wore a gentle expression as she watched. "Hey, Red."

"Hm?"

"What should we name our child?"

"Eh?!"

"We're engaged, so the next step is marriage, and then having a baby, right?"

"Ah, uh, right."

A hazy image of the future took shape in my mind.

Would we be able to raise a kid to be like Tanta?

"What will we do if our child turns out bad?" I asked.

"Love them, of course," Rit answered matter-of-factly.

Children never grew up quite how their parents intended. Ours might come to hate me. "You're right," I said. "No matter what, they'd still be our child, so I'd always love them."

Rit leaned against me. "I'm looking forward to the future."

Next would be marriage, and then a baby. Rit's words buzzed around in my

head.

I'd never dared to entertain such a happy vision of the future during the old days.

"Yeah, me too." I felt Rit's warmth as I replied.

"...!"

Rit and I spun around in unison, sensing an unknown presence. At first, we only saw palm trees and shrubs.

"Who's there?" I called.

A tall shape casually emerged from the long shadows cast by the trees beneath the setting sun.

"I'm sorry, I heard cheerful voices and smelled a delicious scent, so I came to investigate," said a woman in white.

She was extremely tall, just over one hundred and eighty centimeters. However, something stood out more than her height.

"Is there something wrong with your eyes?"

She had a leather belt across them, blinding her.

"A disease. It was quite long ago," she answered with a faint smile. "Don't worry. My ears and nose have grown keen. Enough that I found my way to you." She held out a long, slender arm and reached for me. "I know the people I touch more deeply than I ever could with sight."

She approached slowly, her palm ready to cup my face.

"Red!" Rit shifted, wary.

"Are you with the church?" I questioned.

The woman stopped in her tracks.

"How did you know?"

"There are a few things that give it away. Firstly, I'm an apothecary. All I need is a look to know whether your blindness resulted from an illness."

"...I see."

“You did that to yourself, didn’t you? Such a practice is only done by ascetic hermits.”

Honestly, the self-inflicted blindness alone wasn’t enough for me to be sure. I spoke confidently because she clearly possessed a high-tier blessing like Cleric. I couldn’t narrow it down to any one specifically, however.

She’d taken some irregular skills for the purpose of her asceticism. Discerning the exact Divine Blessing of one who didn’t pick efficient combat skills suited to their God-given role from their gait was challenging.

“Please pardon my rudeness. As one still undergoing ascetic observance, I did not wish to fall prey to the sin of pride by mistakenly leading others to view me as a priest of great virtue who’d completed her trials.”

The woman slowly lowered her arm.

“I am Eremite, an ascetic hermit, as you said. Praise Demis for this day.” She held out her palm again. “A handshake would not be too much to ask, would it?”

She wore a faint smile.

I looked at her hand. It was a pale, slender thing.

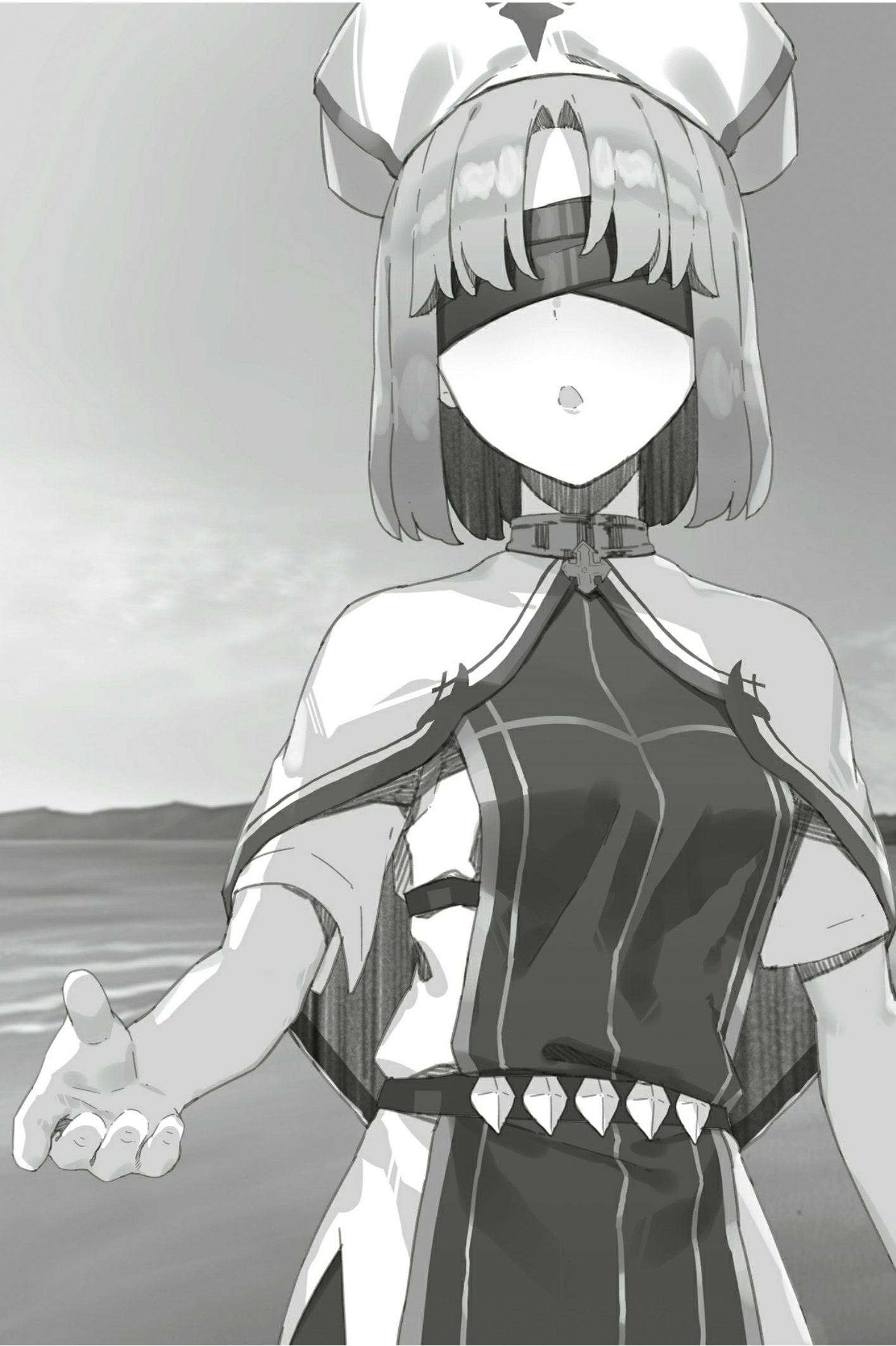
What should I do?

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t hesitate, but Eremite’s words left me cautious.

Was there a skill that triggered through touching palms?

Perhaps she hoped to learn if I was dangerous and lying about being an apothecary, judging me by my reluctance to accept her handshake.

“Nice to meet you.” Rit inserted herself between us, taking Eremite’s hand.



“I’m Rit. I’m a pretty well-known adventurer in Zoltan, so you’ve probably heard of me.”

“Rit, was it?”

“Yes, I’m well-acquainted with Bishop Shien from Zoltan’s church, but I never knew there was an ascetic out on this island.”

“I’m undergoing an observance of solitude, cutting off one of the five senses and living alone in the wilderness away from others. It’s not proper for one submitting to adversity to request support from others of the church.”

Rit conversed with Eremite while I retreated a few steps.

“Who is that, Big Bro?”

“Oh, that’s quite the pretty lady.”

Tanta and Gonz came over.

Eremite smiled at Tanta, but he seemed a little wary of the woman with covered eyes.

“I am Eremite, a monk undertaking an observance of solitude on this island.”

“N-nice to meet you. I’m Tanta.”

“I’m Gonz, a carpenter.”

Gonz flashed a carefree smile.

Their interest in our guest helped me remove myself from the talking. Gonz and Rit became the focus of Eremite’s attention.

Ascetic hermits of the church were common around various holy sites, but there shouldn’t have been any near Zoltan.

Gonz and Tanta were rightfully curious, for this was the first such person they’d ever met.

“What do ascetic hermits do?” Tanta inquired.

“Well, in my case, I live alone out here in the woods on this island.”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

“At first, perhaps. The isolation made me feel as though I were the only person in the world. However, that sensation helped me realize that God’s love is with me. That’s the purpose of the trial.”

Gonz sniffed. “That doesn’t really make sense to me.”

“The observance allows one to realize that we are endowed with God’s love from the moment we are born,” Eremite continued.

Excitement touched her voice. I could clearly sense her steadfast faith.

“We are provided for from the very beginning. Everything attained in this life is hollow, and realizing that makes it possible to perceive the true beauty of existence. Take my eyes. I know that I am sufficient precisely because I lost them. Such is God’s truth.”

Eremite touched the belt across her face. Tanta’s face tensed in fear.

That’s overdoing it.

“Back away. Before I get angry,” Rit said harshly.

“Don’t go scaring the kid,” Gonz warned.

They had spoken up before I could. Eremite, who’d been reaching for Tanta, pulled her arm back.

“My apologies. I’ve become accustomed to solitude...I was too quick to begin preaching,” she said, moving away.

“It seems improper for an ascetic hermit such as yourself to join a barbecue,” Rit stated.

“Indeed.” Eremite smiled. “I merely intended to investigate what was happening when I sensed a presence different from the inhabitants on the island. In my excitement, I’ve overstepped my boundaries. I’ve been here for quite a long while. My apologies for disrupting you.” She lowered her head. “May God’s love be with all of you.”

“Where do you live?” I questioned. “We wouldn’t want to disrupt your observance, so we’ll be careful not to get too close.”

“Thank you for your consideration. I reside in the woods to the southeast, a

place called the Dark Forest.”

Another ominous-sounding name...

That region of the island was actually quite fertile and dense with flora. A thick forest canopy would blot out the light, making it dark even during the day. Perhaps it was given a scary title to keep kids from venturing there.

Eremite bowed. “Please excuse me.”

“I hope your ascetic observance goes well,” I said.

With that, she returned to the woods. She had to be moving through the foliage, yet there wasn’t a single sound.

“Ascetics are weird,” Gonz muttered.

“I can hear you, Uncle Gonz,” Tanta said.

The man shrugged, and I smiled awkwardly at him.

“I agree.”

“You too, Big Bro?!”

We all laughed, and the mood swiftly recovered.

After serving everyone another helping of food, I went over to Rit. “Any issues?” I asked.

“There’s no trace of any magic or a curse, and it doesn’t feel like my blessing or mind were probed by any skill.”

I didn’t detect anything abnormal about Rit, either. Had Eremite done anything, it left no sign.

“Let’s have Ruti check later, just to be sure,” I said. “Her Healing Hands can remove the effects of any skill.”

Rit sighed. “The Hero really can do anything.”

“Because it has some pretty terrible limitations in exchange...”

Fortunately, Ruti’s New Truth had removed those hindrances. For all the suffering the Hero had wrought on Ruti, it would be quite useful to her going forward.



Once the barbecue ended, Ruti used Healing Hands to confirm that Rit had suffered no adverse effects.

Eremite carried a strange feeling with her that had put us on guard, but perhaps we'd been needlessly cautious.

An ascetic hermit undergoing training on an island out on the frontier, far removed from any major country—she was a strange person, but not threatening.

“There's no telling if she used some kind of investigative skill, though,” Ruti reminded.

She was right. No normal person could pull something like that on Rit without her realizing, but it wasn't impossible to skirt detection. Ares could have used Appraisal to view Rit's blessing inconspicuously.

However, I had spent enough time with him to know when he activated Appraisal by his quirks.

“We could try asking about Eremite in the village tomorrow, to be sure,” I proposed, recalling the village leader's comment. The locals had to know about Eremite. Maybe they weren't permitted to say anything about the ascetic without permission. It explained why the leader had made that odd comment.

“Eremite, huh?” I lay down on a cloth spread on the sand and gazed at the starry sky. Not a single cloud marred the view.

“It's an alias for sure,” I said. “The name completely gives it away.” Eremite—a hermit. I was hardly one to judge, having adopted a different name for my new life.

“There are all sorts of people in the world,” came a familiar voice.

“Shouldn't you be asleep?”

“Heh. I'm having too much fun. It's hard to sleep.”

It was Tanta.

I shifted slightly to the side, and Tanta lay down next to me. My elbow touched the sand.

“Were you scared?” I asked.

“...Yeah. Just a little bit.”

“To think we’d run into an ascetic hermit out here on our trip... They’re a strange bunch, but a lot of them are easy enough to get along with. Sometimes, you get strange ones like that woman, though.”

“Really? I thought they might all be scary people... What is an ascetic anyway?”

“An individual who follows various intense acts described in the church’s scripture. The idea is to put your body through extreme conditions to gain grace.”

“And ‘grace’ is a good thing, right? Why do pain and loneliness become something good?”

I wish I could’ve explained it better. Questions like that were tough for me, since I was hardly a follower of Demis.

“I can’t really say, other than that’s what’s written in the church’s scripture,” I replied. “There are a lot of people in the church who follow the writings regardless of what they are.”

Honestly, that was the standard practice. The scripture was the word of God, so it was believed to be fundamentally infallible.

“Should I hurt myself, too?” Tanta sounded a little worried.

I shook my head firmly. “No, what ascetic hermits do is something only for people who want it. No one in Zoltan’s church has done anything like that, right? And Bishop Shien hasn’t ever told you that you need to do anything like that, right?”

“No!”

“If there really is some virtue to enduring hardship, it comes from your own determination to take the more difficult path. That’s how I see it, at least.”

“That’s a vague answer for you, Big Bro.”

“Well, there’s a lot about the church that I don’t know.”

“I didn’t think there was anything you didn’t understand,” Tanta said.

I shrugged. Making sense of ascetic stuff wasn’t my strong suit.

The scripture was fundamentally centered around Divine Blessings. It recommended fighting to raise one’s level. However, asceticism had nothing to do with blessings. In fact, it involved decreasing one’s fighting ability by injuring oneself.

When I’d first read the scripture, I wondered whether the chapters about asceticism were added later by someone other than Demis, since they seemed so at odds with the centrality of Divine Blessings.

“Listen, there’s no reason to suffer more than absolutely necessary,” I said firmly.

“But I have to hurt a little to become a carpenter,” Tanta replied.

“Really?”

“Yeah! A few days ago, I was practicing using a chisel to shave down some wood, and I scraped my finger!”

“That sounds painful.”

“It would’ve been bad if it wasn’t for your medicine.”

Tanta gestured exaggeratedly.

That must be what Gonz came by to pick up.

He’d only purchased some simple stuff to stop the bleeding and clean the wound, but if it had eased Tanta’s pain, then I was grateful to have chosen the life of an apothecary.

“You’re going to need more medicine if you become a carpenter,” I warned.

“No, I won’t! Uncle Gonz said a good carpenter doesn’t make the same mistakes twice!”

“Oh yeah? That’s too bad. I was looking forward to you visiting my shop more often.”

“Hmmm. When I grow up, I’ll go drinking like Uncle Gonz and come in to buy hangover medicine.”

“You probably shouldn’t do that.”

“Help Red, everything’s spinning~”

We shared a laugh at his impression of Gonz, then went silent for a little while to stare at the sky.

“The stars are amazing!” Tanta marveled.

“Yeah, and seeing them reflected on the dark sea is something you can’t experience in Zoltan.”

The glittering pinpoints seemed to go on forever, above and below. The line between sea and air grew thin. It almost seemed like I could reach the stars by wading far enough into the ocean.

“Tanta, do you want to see more stuff like this that you can’t see in Zoltan?”

“I do!”

“Do you think you’d like to travel?”

“Hmm. If that’s what it takes, then maybe not. I like Zoltan.”

He didn’t hesitate much, and there was no doubt in his words.

“I see. Nothing wrong with that.”

I ruffled the boy’s hair. He laughed ticklishly. I couldn’t help but hope that he’d realize his dream one day.

The moon rose high, and we eventually fell asleep.

It had been a good day.

When I next awoke, Tanta was shouting. It was dark. The sun had yet to rise. Dawn was only just beginning to color the horizon.

On that day, Tanta finally connected with his Divine Blessing.

Chapter 3

Boyhood's End

The day someone connected with their blessing could be called the most important day of their life.

A boy who dreamed of becoming a guard protecting the order of their town discovering they were a Brawler, another who hoped to be a pillager riding through fields learning they were a Torturer meant for dark prisons.

A normal village boy becoming the great Hero.

These changes could be for better or worse...but Divine Blessings changed their lives either way.

"It's rare to skip the first hints of awareness of your blessing and connect with it outright," Mido muttered blankly, as if he couldn't quite wrap his head around this reality.

Parents often agonized over what blessing their child possessed. Just a year ago, Gonz, Mido, and I were drinking together while my shop was being built, and they both mentioned being worried about Tanta's blessing.

Craftsman, or something else suited to being a carpenter, would've been ideal for Tanta. However, even with something generic like Mido's Warrior, Tanta could still be a carpenter. The true issue was if he had a Divine Blessing that made his dream impossible.

Divine Blessings were gifts from God. There was no refusing a blessing you didn't want.

"Dad, Uncle Gonz..."

Tanta gripped his chest uneasily.

"Hey Tanta, are you sure?" Gonz asked. He'd already asked that a few times.

I put a hand on Gonz's shoulder. "Tanta's blessing is Cardinal. One of the most

powerful...and most limiting blessings in the world.”

Cardinal Ljubo had been right. God had decided Tanta was a Cardinal.



“Let’s have breakfast.” I passed out some tomato soup to everyone. “It isn’t watered down with added water, just the juices of the tomatoes themselves. It’s good.”

“I’m not really hungry,” Tanta said.

“That’s totally understandable, but your head will get foggy if you starve yourself. And eating can make for a good change of pace to sort things out.”

I took a sip of soup to show Tanta and the others, and while their expressions remained gloomy, they all started eating.

Cardinal, huh?

The church was the largest organization on the continent, and Cardinal was the one and only blessing permitted to ascend to its highest ranks.

Unlike the Hero, which served no role without people to aid, the Cardinal had a powerful influence on the world in times of peace and war alike.

It was a grand blessing that could leave a mark on history, for good or ill.

“Thank you.”

Tanta had finished eating.

Now we had to talk about what to do, although admittedly, I’d already made up my mind. The challenge would be how to guide Tanta.

“Hey, Big Bro... What does Cardinal mean?” His voice was full of trepidation.

“What does it mean? Hmm...”

Among Tanta’s friends who’d connected with their blessing, Al, with his Weapon Master blessing, was the best comparison.

Al had set off on a journey as a shotel-wielding adventurer, making a name for himself in the surrounding regions as an up-and-coming rookie.

He’d thought he would work in the harbor district like his father, but that

changed when his Divine Blessing emerged. Unlike Tanta, Al had never been attached to his idea of the future. You could even say he discovered what he wanted to be during the Devil's Blessing incident.

"What if I'm like Al? What will I do if I want to be a priest more than a carpenter?"

"That's certainly a possibility."

"I don't want that!" Tanta's cry was pained.

"Tanta."

"Ms. Ruti?"

Ruti spoke up before I could say anything. She sat down before the troubled boy, looking him in the eyes. "You aren't your blessing. No matter how powerful the impulses, your blessing cannot become you."

"It can't become me?"

"Yes. Your blessing will pressure you to listen, and it might hurt, but it can't replace you," Ruti explained earnestly. "It can't steal your will from you."

"I don't get it..."

It didn't seem like Tanta understood what she meant. Ruti looked frustrated. However, it was so minor that Tanta likely didn't notice.

"It means you don't have to give up your dream of being a carpenter," I explained. "Just don't forget that. We're all on your side. When you're worrying or having trouble, come talk to us. We'll support you."

"Okay. Thank you."

Tanta still looked uneasy, but I thought he felt a little better.

"All right, let's talk about the skills Cardinal has access to," I said.

"Eh? But..."

"Not to become an actual Cardinal, of course. I mean to pick ones that will help you be a carpenter. You can't change your blessing. It's a part of your life. Instead of rejecting it or becoming subservient to it, you should treat it as another aspect of yourself. Think of it that way, and it will be a tool to help

you.”

“You said something like that to Al, too, I think.”

I nodded. “That’s right. Your situation is different from Al’s, though, and from Ademi’s, too. There are bound to be times when it feels difficult, but Ruti’s right, just talk to us or Gonz or your parents if you’re struggling.”

“Okay...!”

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There are things I knew now that I didn’t when I’d helped Al.

I knew of a medicine that empowered blessings, an evil woman who rejected her blessing and made a fool of the world, and the ruins of an ancient people with the technology to manipulate blessings freely.

Most importantly, I knew that the Hero and Demon Lord Divine Blessings were created to mimic how the first hero lived.

“Brother.”

I was staring out at the sea while holding a recently cleaned dish.

“Sorry. I was just thinking for a bit.”

I put the plate down and turned to Ruti.

She’s grown a bit.

“You surprised me when you spoke to Tanta,” I said.

“I didn’t want him to give up on being himself.” She looked a little bit down.

“I don’t think there’s anything more reassuring than knowing he’s got you in his corner.”

“I’ll do whatever I can. I want him to make his dream come true.”

Ruti’s life had been uprooted by her blessing like no one else’s.

She’d never had any choice but to live as the Hero.

Undoubtedly, she saw some of herself in Tanta, and she didn’t want him to give up on his dream because of his blessing.

She had despaired during our travel, hardly ever showing any interest in the

people she saved. Yet now, she worried desperately for Tanta.

That was why I felt confident Tanta wouldn't have to give up on his dream.

"Huh?" I saw Gonz out of the corner of my eye.

Is he going somewhere?

"I'm going to go check on him real quick," I said.

"I'll come, too."

Ruti and I followed after him. He was headed into the forest.

He came to a stop a short distance from the edge of the woods, in the shadows where it was hard to see him from the beach.

"Gonz."

"...!"

He frantically wiped his face when he heard me. His eyes were red and bloodshot.

"Heh, hehe... I'm pathetic. I'm supposed to be the reliable guy."

"The shock must've been especially hard for you, since you care for Tanta like a son."

"I thought I was ready for this." He shook his head. "I was hoping for Craftsman, but any average blessing would've been fine. A carpenter can get by on common skills if they put in the effort. The rest comes from the person's sense, and Tanta's a clever kid. It should've been fine."

"..."

"I don't know anything about the Cardinal blessing, but if the church finds out, they'll take him away, right?"

"Yeah," I replied. "If a report of someone with a Cardinal blessing reaches the Last Wall fortress, an official will come to get him for sure."

"Dammit. How many other blessings are there? Why did it have to be this one?"

"Once Tanta's calmed down, I'll have to teach him how to hide his blessing."

The church wouldn't accept a Cardinal living as a carpenter easily. At the very least, it would force Tanta to undergo education in a monastery and train as a holy person. Only after all that would he be free, and that was if he was judged unsuited for the high ranks of the church.

Most likely, he'd live sequestered in religious devotion until his late thirties.

It was better than the Hero because there was a chance of being free, but it still promised a lot of lost time and a significant detour before Tanta could be a carpenter.

"Bishop Shien will probably be willing to keep this secret, but that won't extend to everyone in the Zoltan church. To them, someone being a Cardinal is a gift."

"A gift..."

"To devotees who live for God, at least."

Thud!

Gonz punched a tree. He ground his teeth audibly.

"It's fortunate that Tanta connected with his blessing here, removed from Zoltan," Ruti said. "Here, we can worry about it ourselves without fear of anyone finding out."

"Ruti..."

"It's fine to be unsure. But we should talk it through together."

Ruti was encouraging Gonz.

"You're right. We can't change Tanta's blessing now... So we should focus on what comes next."

"That's right." Ruti bobbed her head.

"All right, I'm done grumbling! I'm Tanta's uncle and his senior as a carpenter! And Zoltan's top carpenter at that!" Gonz slapped his cheeks. "If I can't protect the dream of my favorite pupil, then I'm a disgrace to the craft!"

"That's the spirit," Ruti said.

"Thanks Ruti, Red. I'm okay now!"

Despite Gonz's declaration, he and Tanta would undoubtedly face more challenges going forward. That's just how Divine Blessings were.

Raising a child was probably similar. At least that's how it felt to me, but I hadn't actually brought up a child myself yet.

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Seeing that Tanta and his family had calmed down, Yarandrala and I headed to the village.

We'd nearly forgotten it thanks to the abrupt blessing trouble, but we still needed to inquire about Eremite.

"I'm just going to ask a couple questions; I could have gone alone," I said.

"Oh? Do you not like walking with me?"

"That's not what I said."

Yarandrala giggled, but turned serious after a moment. "That Eremite girl bothers me."

"She's certainly an odd one, but when she came over, you kept your distance. That's rare. Usually, you dive in the moment you set your mind on something."

When Tanta connected with his Divine Blessing, Yarandrala had comforted and encouraged him, but she seemed more subdued than the rest of us.

"I was surprised, since I always knew you to be the type to be up front in any situation," I said.

"You and Ruti did a good job being there for Tanta, so my instincts told me I ought to focus my attention elsewhere."

"And that's Eremite?"

"I can't explain it, but she's suspicious."

"Well, that much is certainly true."

"It's more than that... I'll stay wary of her, so you just think about Tanta."

"Thanks. I'm glad you came along on this trip."

Yarandrala was a high elf who'd been an adventurer for far longer than me.

Her instincts must've detected something from Eremite that slipped by me. That instinct was crucial for anyone who quested and sought out danger.

"What a shame this couldn't be a fun little trip. The swimming and barbecue were so nice," Yarandralla lamented.

"I invited Tanta along partly because I thought it would be nice to be nearby when he connected with his blessing. Still, I would've preferred to let him make some more pleasant memories first," I replied.

"There will be more opportunities for that. We need to make the most of this trip, so that his unwanted blessing doesn't spoil it."

"Yeah."

Maybe I'll check if there's anything tasty to buy while we're in the village. Perhaps lunch can include some seafood.

"If the villagers have fresh salmon, I won't even have to cook it. I could just add some seasoning and serve it on pasta. I brought along a bit of olive oil."

"Nice idea!" Yarandralla said.

Tanta liked pasta, so he'd probably enjoy that.

Raw salmon had a different texture than what he usually ate, making it a new experience and, hopefully, a nice memory. While Yarandralla and I chatted about that, some men from the village came out to receive us.

They were all deeply tanned.

The guy walking at the head of the group greeted us. "Oh, you're the visitors from the other day."

These had to be fishers. Most of them would've been away when we arrived.

"Do you need something from our village?"

Our goal was to ask about Eremite, but bringing her up risked sounding conspicuous and unnatural.

"I was curious about the south salmon recommended to me yesterday, so I came to buy a few," I answered.

"Great timing. We caught some fresh ones the other day. You should try

some.”

“Sounds good!”

Fish practically right from the net were bound to be delicious.

Yarandralla and I followed the men into the settlement. I was growing more excited about cooking with each passing moment.

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The villagers gladly sold us some south salmon and several other types of seafood.

We bought at asking price, not bothering to haggle, which left the village leader in a great mood. He gladly shared some of a local alcohol made from fermented palm tree sap. Apparently, it was quite rare, never leaving the island since it didn’t keep well and turned to vinegar quickly.

One sip revealed the drink’s powerful sourness, making it the sort of thing a person would either love or hate.

Both Yarandralla and I thought it was interesting, at the very least.

“Ahh, this is nice. Other than the occasional merchant, we hardly ever get a chance to talk to outsiders.”

I only had a sip of the alcohol, but the village leader polished off an entire helping in a flash.

This seemed as good a chance as any to broach the subject of Eremite.

“By the way,” I began. “Last night, an ascetic hermit who apparently lives on the island came down to meet us on the beach. Do you know her?”

“Ahh, so you met her already.”

“We only spoke a little. It didn’t seem like she was upset. I was just surprised she’d bother to speak with us, since she claimed to be in the middle of an observance of solitude.”

“Indeed. She’s only come to us a handful of times. To keep her from being disturbed, we suggested she keep to a place on the island where no others go.”

The leader went on to explain that Eremite arrived here on a little boat

roughly five years ago. She'd claimed to hail from a church in Central, and that she was here to train. The locals hadn't thought of any reason to refuse her presence.

They'd been wary initially, watching to make sure she wouldn't cause trouble. Eremite lived entirely self-sufficiently in the woods, though, and they stopped paying attention to her over time.

"She's been out there for half a decade. It's really quite something," the village leader said.

Five years, huh?

"Does she know about the war with the demon lord's army?" I asked.

"Now that you mention it, I don't think it's ever come up. We don't hear much about that ourselves. Merchants mention a war here and there, but that's all, really."

Someone from the church being ignorant of the campaign against the demon lord with the fate of the world hanging in the balance was hard to accept. However, even a devout believer could be in the dark with no one to tell them what was happening.

Our chat prompted the village leader to inquire about the war's progress.

He was surprised when I told him about the incident with Prince Salius and how Zoltan had influenced the fighting, albeit indirectly.

"There wasn't any sign of Eremite doing anything on the island, was there?" Yarandralla, who'd been in silent contemplation this whole time, asked abruptly. It was rare for her to ignore the flow of the conversation so completely.

"Uh, well, we don't really see much of her. So I guess it's hard to say what she gets up to," the leader answered.

Yarandralla watched his face closely, checking for a lie.

I gathered that the man didn't know why she peered at him so intently, but he looked uncomfortable regardless.

If she hadn't been such a beautiful high elf, he might've gotten upset about it.

For her to be this wary...

“Ahhh! Someone! Anyone!” came a shout from outside.

We hurried to the person calling for help immediately.

“Chief! It’s bad!”

“What is it?!”

“A boat capsized!!!”

“What?!”

They had to be talking about one of their fishing ships.

“A signal came from the lookout! We have to go help right away!”

“Wait, why did it capsize? Did Boles say how it happened?”

“Ah, s-sorry, I panicked and hurried to tell you...”

“You idiot!”

Evidently, this was a rare occurrence. The entire settlement was in disarray.

“The lookout is up on that platform there, right?” I asked.

“Y-yes.”

Outside the village, a sentry platform was suspended between a few close trees. People watched from there to see if anything went wrong with a fishing boat on the water.

“I have a skill that makes me faster than most people, so I’ll go find out what went wrong,” I said.

“Huh?!” The chief was stunned, but there wasn’t time to explain everything.

“Yarandralla.”

“Leave it to me, I’ll get ready.”

I activated Lightning Speed and dashed over to the lookout in one burst.

“Whaaa?!”

Shocked cries from the villagers quickly faded into the distance.

Upon arriving at the lookout, I leaped up without using the ladder.

“Y-you’re the guy from yesterday!”

“Don’t worry about me. Where is the ship?”

“O-over there!”

One look was enough to discern what was happening.

“Blade sharks!”

The vessel had been split in two and was sinking. A pair of blade sharks circled the wreck.

A blade shark was a demon beast type of monster with sharp fins extending from its back and chest that it used to rip through prey.

They were considered difficult enemies for C-rank adventurers, and when fully grown, their dorsal fins could cleave through a boat’s hull. Adult blade sharks were about three meters long and even menaced vessels large enough to carry up to sixty people.

“Looks like they tore apart the ship already,” I remarked.

Fishers clung to the sinking remains, trying to beat back the circling monsters with their harpoons.

“Not good.”

The blade sharks were clearly preparing to strike.

We have to help now, or it’ll be too late!

“Yarandrala!!!” I shouted.

There was a gust of wind as a massive ball of fluff flew toward the lookout platform.

“What’s that?!”

“A flying plant!” I answered while grabbing onto the gigantic dandedragon seed.

Yarandrala’s Singer of the Trees blessing gave control over plants.

The carnivorous dandedragon grew only in the most remote regions. It was

one of many exotic plants Yarandrala, who'd traveled the world, employed. The seed floated smoothly through the air, even with me hanging on.

"Yarandrala! Find a boat and follow me!"

"Got it!" she answered. I saw her running toward the beach.

I trusted that she'd be fine and tilted the seed to adjust my landing point as I glided toward the sea.

"Now!"

I drew my bronze sword as I plunged down.

There was a splash as a blade shark tried to tear into me with its ventral fin, excited over the fresh prey.

Underwater combat was considered the ultimate struggle for a D-rank adventurer, and plenty of C-rank parties couldn't handle it, either.

The human body wasn't suited for fighting submerged. It couldn't breathe water or move easily in such conditions. Certain Martial Arts and spells required tremendous practice to activate underwater.

The best choice was relying on spells or magic items to move freely underwater. The ability to react to a sudden emergency like this one was what it took to be a true adventurer.

"Bring it!" I gripped my sword by the handle with one hand and by the lower part of the blade with the other. This technique, called half-sword, was originally intended for extremely close-range combat, but it also worked well in the sea.

It was hard to put much strength into a full swing because of the water resistance and the inability to put your full weight into the motion. However, thrusts still worked. You could impale an enemy with raw strength instead of relying on speed or weight.

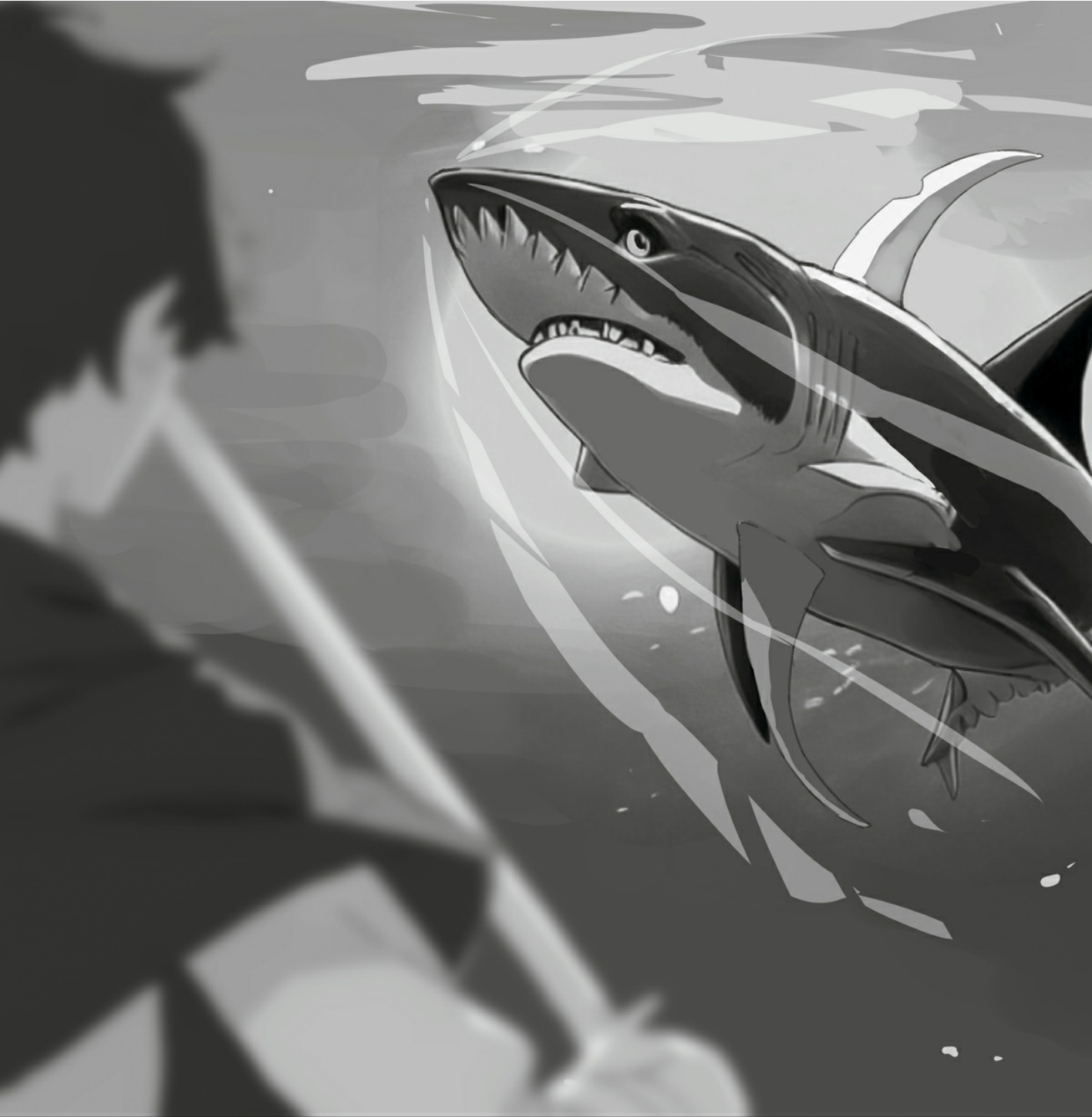
When the blade shark passed, slicing at me with its ventral fin, I thrust my weapon into its stomach.

There was a burbling sound as blood came out of its mouth.

Just one attack isn't enough underwater, huh?

Since I lacked inherent skills, I had no choice but to make up for that with swordsmanship. Underwater, however, I couldn't exert enough force. I had no choice but to wear my opponent down slowly, but the longer this dragged on, the more my breath would become an issue. Popping up to breathe would create a big opening.

Ideally, the blade sharks would attack me more aggressively, yet after their first strike, they backed off, keeping their distance patiently.



They're cautious. That's trouble.

But that cautiousness was also why none of the fishers had died yet. A more forceful blade shark would've already pulled one down into the depths.

I guess I can't call this bad luck, then. Better change tactics, though...

I made a shallow cut into my own thigh. Crimson blood quickly darkened the water.

“...!”

The blade sharks' behavior changed instantly.

Blood frenzy—one of their famous qualities.

A natural condition that made them more ferocious and aggressive when they smelled blood.

The monsters were visibly excited, both attacking in unison.

I calmly dealt with their attacks one by one, thrusting my sword into them.

Finally, the blade sharks ran out of strength and floated to the surface, lifeless.

“Buhaaaa!”

Fresh air filled my lungs. It was quite invigorating.

“Are you okay?!” a fisherman asked frantically.

“Haah, haah...”

It hadn't been a difficult fight, but I was out of breath. Anyone else from the Hero's party wouldn't have had this much trouble. Combat in special environments had always been a weak spot for the Guide blessing.

I caught my breath as I grabbed onto a part of the ship.

“...I'm fine. I took care of the blade sharks. Help should be coming soon, so just wait a little longer.”

My only wound was the cut I made in my own thigh. As the thrill of fighting subsided, the pain of the salt water in the cut really started to sting.

“Who are you?”

“An apothecary from Zoltan.”

The fisherman looked like he wanted to say something, but it wasn't like I was trying to hide anything. That's really who I was. I wasn't anyone other than Red, the apothecary from Zoltan.

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“I look away for one minute, and you go out to fight in the ocean?”

“I should have gone with you.”

Rit and Ruti were both a little miffed when I told them what happened.

“How did this happen?” asked Gonz. He and the others were more surprised than angry.

After I defeated the blade sharks, Yarandrala came to pick up the fishers with an older boat.

When we made it safely back to the beach, the villagers gathered around to celebrate, offering their heartfelt thanks to Yarandrala and me.

“They usually don't give us any trouble, so I figured it'd be fine at first,” one said. They explained that blade sharks rarely got so close to the island, and even when they did, they'd be gone the next day if the fishers left them alone.

It had been thirteen years since the last time the village lost a ship to blade sharks. A few people had died then, so that there were no casualties this time was treated as a miracle.

Ruti hummed. “The village's worst luck in thirteen years on today of all days.”

“It was really fortunate that you were here, Big Bro!” Tanta said.

“I guess so,” I answered. “I'm glad no one was hurt.”

“But *you* were hurt.” Rit rubbed the faint wound where I had stabbed myself in the thigh through my clothes.

“S-stop it, that tickles!”

Yarandrala had already mended it with healing magic. The traces would be gone by tomorrow.

“I did that to myself! It was a necessary sacrifice to ensure I won!” I hurriedly explained while fleeing Rit’s hand.

Mido sighed exasperatedly. “The way you overreact like that is embarrassing to watch, Red.”

“Getting so worked up over having your thigh touched. How pure.” Nao smirked.

Gugh.

“You wouldn’t have been hurt at all if I was there,” Rit chided.

“That’s right. I should have been with you, Big Brother,” Ruti added.

“That’s true, but you two weren’t there, so there’s no helping it.”

Had Rit or Ruti been there, the blade sharks would’ve gone down easily. But that was combat. Comrades weren’t always there to help.

I was confident that I’d made the best choice given the situation.

“That means we just have to stick by you forever, Big Brother.”

“Exactly. A perfect plan, Ruti.”

“Wait a minute...”

It was just a small cut.

“Let’s get back to the subject at hand.” Tisse mercifully pulled the conversation back on track.

Nice job, Tisse.

“You said we were invited to a feast tonight in the village,” she said.

“Yeah, to celebrate the safe return of the fishers,” I replied. “We were invited, too.”

Tisse nodded. “Nice, I’m curious about their local cooking.”

“True.”

The village chief had invited our whole group.

“Being able to join a village banquet here is a pretty special experience. I’m

sure it will make a nice memory for you, Tanta,” Yarandralla said.

“Memory...” His expression darkened. Ordinarily, he would’ve been excited by the mere talk of adventure from someone like Yarandralla.

It’s only natural, I guess. Nothing’s really changed since he connected with his Divine Blessing this morning.

“You’ve got a lot to think about right now, but it’d be a shame to let something upsetting ruin the trip, right?” I said.

“Yeah...”

“So let’s have fun and make some nice memories. It’s your first trip out of Zoltan, after all.”

“Yeah, okay.” Tanta slapped his cheeks. “All right, let’s have the best time ever!”

I couldn’t help smiling. It was heartwarming how similar he was to Gonz.

“You’ll be a great carpenter, Tanta. Since you’re Gonz’s nephew.”

Personal bonds are stronger than Divine Blessings, I’m sure of it.



Evening settled over the village on Regret Island.

Most of the locals never left the island, and those fishers that did only went as far as Zoltan. There wasn’t much in the way of luxury here. A feast was the greatest event these people knew.

“Let’s cut loose and have some fun,” I said.

“Their butts are showing.” Tanta watched wide-eyed as the celebration heated up.

The villagers had welcomed us with open arms.

Plates filled with fresh and delicious seafood and fruit.

At first, the people treated us like guests of honor, offering various foods, but as the revelry intensified, they forgot about us, preferring to sing and dance.

Before long, it grew somewhat indecent. Some did odd, silly struts with their

rear ends showing.

Dances like this weren't uncommon in remote villages, but for Tanta, who'd never left Zoltan, it was clearly a shock.

"Maybe this was a bad idea..."

"If he can't handle this much, he'll never be a top-class Zoltan carpenter."

Mido voiced a concern, but Nao quickly brushed it off with a laugh.

However, when some half-naked women came by and called Tanta cute, Nao changed her tune and shooed them away.

"Hahaha."

Tanta himself got over the shock fairly quickly, laughing and smiling cheerfully.

Although crude, the islanders were joyous that their friends and family members had made it back safely, and it really shone through.

Tanta, Mido, Nao, Gonz, they were all grinning.

"I'm glad we brought them," Rit said from her spot beside me, a smile on her face.

"It's an outrageous banquet...but it will make a nice memory." My expression mirrored hers.

"Are you going to join in, Red?"

"I'll have to politely decline."



While the adults drank and had a wild time, the kids gathered around Tanta, the first outsider child they'd ever seen.

Red and the others watched, charmed by the scene.

Ruti and Tisse sat a little further away from the center of the celebration. Ordinarily, Ruti would've taken the seat right beside Red, but today, she had something else in mind.

"Tisse."

“Yes. It’s quite distant, but I can sense a presence.”

“Someone is observing the settlement using magic. A very subtle magic. Several concealing spells have been woven into it, to make sure it goes undetected.”

“It seems I cannot perceive that magic.”

“Only a master would. It’s a weak spell that only transmits sound, so it can be heavily disguised. The caster isn’t an amateur openly relying on obvious magic.”

“It doesn’t appear Red or Yarandrala have noticed.”

Yarandrala was a masterful caster, but she relied on spirit magic, like Rit. Their powers relied on spirits, meaning they had trouble sensing high-level mystic or cleric arts that could deceive those spirits.

“For Yarandrala not to notice means it isn’t normal,” Ruti said.

“Is it Eremite?” Tisse asked.

“I don’t know, but that’s likely.”

“Should I investigate?”

“...It’s dangerous to go alone, but I’d prefer to avoid making contact with her myself.”

“You and Yarandrala are quite wary of her.”

“...We seem to be the only ones who sense something odd about her.”

“Hmm. I’m suspicious of Eremite as well, but she didn’t leave me with a powerful impression.”

“There has to be a reason why only the two of us picked up on it.”

Like Yarandrala, Ruti detected something was off about Eremite.



The next day.

We all went swimming in the morning and returned to the tents around ten.

“You got sunburned out there,” I commented, looking at Tanta’s face.

“It stings.”

“I gave you some sunscreen. Did you not put it on yesterday?”

“I forgot about it because of the blessing thing.”

“Ahh, fair enough.”

Tanta’s mood had improved significantly. The feast last night had probably done a bit of good.

“Here.” Ruti passed me a drink.

“Thanks.”

“It’s coconut water.”

“Coconuts sure are convenient. If only they grew in all the forests around the world.”

Ruti giggled. “You say the silliest things sometimes, Big Brother.”

Safe water from younger coconuts, food from mature coconuts, and rope from the bark of their trees. You could even make alcohol or vinegar from the tree sap with just natural fermentation, and you could distill it to get more concentrated alcohol, too. Plus, the wood from the trees could fuel campfires.

During the Hero’s party days, there were few trees I was happier to see than coconut ones.

“Okay, things have settled down a bit, so do you want to talk a bit about a plan for developing your Cardinal blessing?” I asked Tanta.

He nodded. “Okay.”

“We talked some about skills a little yesterday. Do you remember all of it?”

“I remember that the Cardinal is focused on clerical arts, but has access to a lot of other skills, too.”

“That’s right. The Cardinal has a pretty broad role.”

The Divine Blessing of the Cardinal enjoyed a lot of options.

Combat, leadership, management, intrigue, searching for truth... Once someone with the Cardinal blessing made it into the upper ranks of the church, they could set their sights on just about whatever campaign they liked.

However...

“In your case, we’ll want to prioritize skills useful for carpentry,” I said.

“Mhm, that’s most important.”

“To be successful, you’ll want to take the common skill Elementary Production up to a minimum of level 5. Cardinal has inherent skills that increase physical abilities, but investing in them would be a waste.”

“Ugh... Is Elementary Production really the only one that will help?”

“Apparently, Demis doesn’t believe a Cardinal should build many things. However, you can use clerical arts to make up for lacking the Construction skill. It requires magic power, though, so you’ll have to pick and choose how you use it.”

“Magic!”

“Also, you can heal anyone who gets hurt on the job. You’ll be able to choose from all but the highest of clerical spells.”

Learning that Cardinal couldn’t match Saint or Hierophant in clerical magic had been a surprise. Apparently, Demis thought a Cardinal’s role didn’t include mastering the pinnacle of holy magic. However, the blessing could manage more powerful spells than a standard Priest.

“You definitely want clerical arts skills. The question is what other skills to pick to match with them.”

While Tanta and I talked, Gonz, Mido, and Nao watched quietly behind him.

Normal people didn’t know much about the Cardinal blessing. If I hadn’t used my status as a vice-captain of the Kingdom of Avalonia’s Bahamut Knights to gather more knowledge on Divine Blessings, I would’ve been in the dark, too.

“I think spending your starter skill points on clerical arts abilities is a good way to begin. At level 5, you should focus on combat skills to help raise your blessing level, then work toward level 9 to start picking up skills for carpentry. That’s when you should rank up Elementary Production. After that, you can work your job normally and aim to get your blessing level up to 15 in around ten years. By then, you’ll be pretty much done.”

With that plan, as long as he didn't run himself out of magic, the strength he got from his blessing would give him carpentry abilities about on par with Gonz and his Craftsman blessing. Should he ever want to raise his blessing level more, he'd have the combat capabilities to do so without much issue.

It was enough to survive in a world filled with endless fighting and overcoming anything that would keep him from his dream.

"..." Tanta fidgeted, as though he wanted to say something.

"If you've got something on your mind, feel free to tell me," I said.

"Would taking Elementary Production from the start...be a bad idea?"

"Well, it will make it harder to raise your blessing level. Getting to level 9 will require around five years, I think."

That time could be considerably shortened if Tanta pushed himself to defeat powerful enemies, but he wasn't interested in becoming strong, so I didn't consider that option.

"But I want to start working as a carpenter sooner... I'd planned to begin with Dad the moment I connected with my blessing..."

"All right. In that case, let's make a plan centered around taking Elementary Production first."

Tanta looked at me, worry plain in his eyes. "Um... Is that okay?"

"Of course! All this strategizing is meant to help you fulfill your dream. The most important thing is that it suits what you want."

"Th-then I want to start working with Dad and the others as an apprentice once we get back to Zoltan!"

"In that case..."

"Wait a moment." Gonz leaned forward, joining the conversation. "Elementary Production isn't necessary. Lots of my apprentices don't have anything but enhanced physical abilities."

"But the things I make won't be as good without the skill, right?" Tanta looked at me.

“That’s right. The skill does make a big difference.”

“See!”

“But there are things you can learn, things you can do, even without it,” I added.

“Red’s right. How to use the tools, making plans, reading blueprints... There’s a lot I can teach you, and there’s plenty for you to learn.”

“But I won’t be able to make things as well as I could with the skill, right?”

“True. No matter how hard you try, you won’t close the gap between having the skill and not.” Gonz crouched to meet Tanta’s eye level. “Doing all of the work at the bottom rung, not getting to feel the excitement of having made something great... It’s rough, but you can do it.”

“...”

Tanta’s face tightened as though he were in pain.

He looked ready to cry, but he was doing his best to think hard on what he ought to do.

“Tanta.”

“Dad.”

“I didn’t start out as a carpenter.”

“Mhm, you were an adventurer.”

“I dreamed of being a powerful guy like Galatine. I wanted to leave my mark on Zoltan’s history with my sword. I never did become strong enough, though, and wound up retiring. Gonz hired me after I quit being an adventurer.”

“Dad...”

“My life took a detour. I have a lot of skills that a carpenter doesn’t need. My Warrior blessing doesn’t have much that would’ve helped regardless. Listen...”

Mido had chased a dream and fallen short. His life hadn’t been a smooth and easy climb.

“I’m happy. It’s been a joyous life. I’ve grown into my job and advanced

enough that Gonz can trust me. I even have a beautiful family. So, Tanta, I think the plan where you take Elementary Production first, and grow while making good things as a carpenter, is fine, too.”

“M-Mido!”

“Gonz, I want to respect what my boy chooses. If it fails, we’ll come together again and figure it out. Failures and detours aren’t the worst things. The only bad choice is to be unhappy.”

Gonz and Mido explained their views to each other without malice. Both were concerned for Tanta, in their own ways.

“Big Bro...what should I do?”

“I’ll support whatever you decide, Tanta,” I said. “Two experienced carpenters who care a lot about you have given their thoughts. You should share yours.”

“Mhm...”

Tanta made up his mind and looked forward.

There were people who asserted that a child became an adult when they connected with their Divine Blessing. Not because they suddenly became stronger, but because that was the day they decided their future for themselves.

Tanta faced Gonz and Mido and, stammering several times along the way, explained how he felt.

Whatever route he chose, he would undoubtedly become a good carpenter.



After lunch, I lay in the shade of a tree, relaxing while listening to the sound of the sea.

We hadn’t settled on a course of action for Tanta’s growth plan yet, but he had a better image of his future as a carpenter now.

Connecting with his blessing had been a life-changing event. It was natural to be uneasy. That’s why it was important to help him find his way and what it would look like.

Without that, his blessing would drag him along and force him down its preferred route.

“It’s ironic. The day someone realizes with the path God bequeathed them is so often when they embark on their personal quest.”

With guidance, it was possible to awaken to your own will. And I’d learned that will was a fascinating thing, and difficult to control.

“Red.”

“Rit? Oh, and Ruti and Tanta, too.”

The three of them had been playing in the sand, but now they were finished.

A fantastic sand castle stood prominently on the beach not too far away.

Did Ruti go overboard?

“That wasn’t me,” she said, as though reading my thoughts. “Tanta took the lead making it.”

“You did, Tanta?”

“Yup! I made the plan, and Big Sis and Ms. Rit helped me build it!”

“Amazing!”

I couldn’t have done that. With my knowledge, it would’ve wound up like a frontline fort. I had no sense for ornamentation.

“The pillars have flower motifs on them. Wow, that’s neat.”

“You have good eyes, Big Bro.”

“This is a masterpiece for sure.”

It was a shame that it would end up crumbling since it was made of sand.

“Once I become a carpenter, I’m going to build a house that can stand for a thousand years!” Tanta declared.

“I can’t wait to see that. When my shop starts showing its age, maybe I should ask you to renovate it.”

Tanta grinned. “Leave it to me! I’ll make you an amazing shop that’s just as good as Uncle Gonz’s work!”

He sounds a lot more cheerful now.

The problem of his blessing's impulses still remained, but he had a strong vision of his dream. He would be fine.

"Hey, Red," Rit said. "We were going to go for a walk over to the wharf. Do you want to come?"

"A walk? That sounds nice."

I stood and brushed off the sand on my back.

It was the third day of our trip. We'd planned for a five-day vacation, so we were in the back half now.

We weren't likely to visit this island again except for an outing like this, so taking in the sights sounded like a good idea.

"We should get some water bottles before we go," I suggested.

"Mhm." Ruti proudly held up her water bottle with Mister Crawly Wawly drawn on it. "It's important to drink enough water."



The island's drinking water came from a spring farther inland. It was concealed by the woods, meaning there was a chance of running into monsters, although not a particularly high one. Just to be safe, we advised Gonz and the others not to fetch water alone. Still, Gonz and Mido would be able to handle any creatures around here.

If either of them was attacked, they likely wouldn't even be hurt so long as they brought a machete for cutting through the dense foliage.

Thus far, there'd been no monster attacks. The creatures of the island seemed to possess enough wisdom to keep away from dangerous visitors.

"Why is the spring water not salty even though we're in the middle of the sea?" Tanta inquired while we filled our bottles.

"The rain that falls here passes underground and wells up here," I answered.

"Oh!"

Tanta's bottle was a hollowed-out calabash. There was a sketch of a smiling

face drawn in black ink on the side, giving it a childish kind of charm.

Water burbled when I dipped it into the spring.

Summer sun came through the trees in shafts, illuminating the verdant forest. A powerful orchestra of insects played while we sweated from the heat.

"This is the epitome of summer," I mused.

Tanta looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"It means I like this season."

"Then I epitome summer, too."

He seemed to enjoy using the new word he'd picked up.

"Red! If you don't teach it properly, he won't know the true meaning!"

Oops, Rit got angry.

"What it means is..."

She quickly instructed Tanta on the proper definition.

"Ohhh."

We're going to end up having this same sort of exchange with our own child someday too, aren't we?

That sounded like it would be fun.

"Big Brother." Ruti nudged me.

Eremite, huh?

"Mm." Ruti gestured "sharp ears" with her fingers. So, Eremite was using magic to listen from a distance.

Ruti had mentioned it being a highly disguised spell, and now I understood just how well it was obfuscated. Even after she told me, I still couldn't sense it.

Rit nodded silently and continued speaking with Tanta.

"Big Brother, we should really get some sunscreen if we're going for a walk. I'll go back to the tent to get it."

"Okay, be careful."

Ruti broke off from the rest of us. I'd heard last night that she wanted to avoid making contact with Eremite.

After she left, we acted like nothing had happened and continued to fill our water bottles. It hardly took any time at all.

"All right, let's go!" Tanta smiled innocently.

No sooner did we make to return to the beach than I noticed a presence move. It had done so unguarded. Nearby fauna rustled.

Tanta stopped. "Is someone there?"

Naturally, Rit and I had to stop, too.

Did she make herself known intentionally so that this would happen? I wondered. I might have been overthinking it, but it was probably best to keep wary.

"Good afternoon. Thanks be to Lord Demis's mercy, known to all beings equally."

There was a smile on Eremite's lips, but the belt covering her eyes concealed any trace of a motive.

"Good afternoon, Eremite." I dodged her comment while maintaining a tone appropriate for general chatting with someone I didn't really know. "Coming all the way here from the Dark Forest for water must have been difficult."

"I tipped over my water jug... It occasionally happens when one cannot see," Eremite answered with a chuckle.

"That must be hard...", Tanta said quietly.

"Thank you for your worry, child. But this sort of adversity is but one part of my study," Eremite replied happily. "And it gave me the chance to meet you all a second time."

Kindness was an effective emotion for getting others to relax around you. It was particularly effective on innocent kids. Tanta was the perfect example.

"Then we'll be going. Have a nice day, Eremite."

There was no reason to stick around, so I made to leave.

If only we'd been able to.

A lesser slime clinging to a tree limb above suddenly fell down.

It was a weak monster, but still enough to command Rit's attention, and she reached for the sword at her hip. At the same moment, Eremite tripped on a tree root as she approached the spring and stumbled.

Tanta reflexively reached out for Eremite. Rit couldn't step in to stop him, so I did instead.

Eremite's hand grabbed my arm. Even as she fell, her face turned toward me.

"Thank you."

"It was nothing..."

A moment after she touched me, Eremite froze for a second, like something unexpected had occurred.

Had she learned something by making physical contact?

"I'm glad you aren't hurt." I put some strength into my arm, pulling her back up.

She stepped back smoothly.

Rit had defeated the slime with a single slash and already sheathed her sword.

"Sorry for disturbing your solitude," I said.

"Not at all. I went against my practice by reflexively reaching out for help in that moment. Please accept my apologies," Eremite replied.

"It's probably best not to stick around here too long. We'll be heading out."

"Yes. I shall pray you have a worthy day. And child..."

Tanta regarded the woman nervously. "Um, yes, ma'am..."

Eremite smiled at him. "Thank you for reaching out to help me."



After leaving the spring, we met back up with Ruti.

Tanta had a stick he'd picked up in the woods while walking. He played with

it, swinging it in imitation of Rit cutting through the lesser slime.

“Sorry, Red.”

“No, that was my mistake.”

Had Eremite been waiting for that slime to fall?

Surely, Rit and I would’ve noticed.

If the lesser slime had been the starting point and Eremite moved in response, then we would’ve been able to react better.

However, she’d tripped at the same time the monster attacked. It could only be described as a coincidence.

“I don’t know which, but she definitely used some sort of skill.”

It couldn’t have had any impact on us, though. Ruti would’ve noticed.

“I’d never miss anything different about you, Big Brother.”

Ruti was confident about that.

“It had to be a probing ability, a high-level one even Rit can’t sense. We already have reason to believe Eremite is a master at disguising her spells,” I said.

Detection magic that Yarandralla couldn’t notice. What is someone that strong doing on an island out here?

“She’s not fighting the demon lord’s army and never helped during the Devil’s Blessing incident, the war with Veronia, or the trouble with Van. Someone so powerful just hiding out here seems absurd.” I couldn’t help feeling a bit bitter.

“I imagine that was how Bighawk and Lilinralla felt, too,” Rit commented.

“I guess so...”

True. They probably thought it was crazy to run into something so absurd, too.

In our case, we just wanted to enjoy life at our own pace in Zoltan.

“What’s Eremite after?” I posited aloud.

“It’d be nice if she really was here to study in solitude,” Rit said.

I agreed, but my instincts told me that wasn't the answer.

If she were after money, or this was a political maneuver, I could understand, but the motives of a pious cleric aren't really as predictable as the average person.

An opponent with an unknown goal... I hated those sorts of fights the most.

"Big Bro!" Tanta shouted.

"What is it?"

"Look! The people are all doing something!"

Villagers had gathered on the beach to do some woodworking near the wharf. It looked like they were making a fishing ship.

"Oh! If it isn't our savior!" one of the fishers from yesterday called.

He was directing the construction, giving instructions to the others.

"Good afternoon," I greeted. "It must be our lucky day if we get to see you building a ship."

"Oh, really? It's just work for us, but I guess it's not something you get to see every day."

He waved us over with an easy smile, allowing us to have a closer look.

"Until we can get this finished, half the fishers will be stuck on land."

"Sounds rough."

"We can make another boat, but there's no bringing back anyone who dies, so it's not too bad." The fisherman wore a cheerful expression as he answered.

The sea separated this island and Zoltan, but the locals' cheerfulness felt quite familiar.

"I've studied a little at a ship-making dock, and made an on-the-spot raft before, but it's my first time seeing a whole vessel's construction," I said.

I'd volunteered to visit the naval shipyards to see what sort of ships they turned out when I was a knight, and I'd built a raft to cross a river on a battlefield once, but this was different. I wanted to see the sort of vessel the

locals would make.

A blueprint had been drawn into the sand. There weren't any precise instructions. Rather, the general notes listed how to combine pieces and the order for creating those parts.

"I guess you always start with the keel, huh?"

The keel divided the ship lengthwise down the center. It was the most crucial piece, and this one had especially sturdy wood.

"It's the ship's backbone, so you gotta. People's bodies are made starting with the spine, too, I bet," said the fisherman.

"That's an interesting thought."

I'd considered a heart to be the first element because a person would die without one. However, the fishers saw the spine as the base upon which to build.

Their work had only begun this morning, and they still had plenty left to do. Many hull pieces would need to be attached to the keel.

"I see..."

Tanta looked on with wholehearted enjoyment. He'd sat next to one of the people connecting boards to the keel.

"Is it that interesting, kiddo?" one of the workers asked.

"Mhm! The nails are different shapes from the ones for making houses!"

"Yeah, they're boat spikes, made to fit the shape of the planks."

"And you're basically only using axes for tools."

"We cut a piece to the rough size with a saw, then use a hatchet to work it down. We'd have to go all the way to Zoltan to get any other tools."

"Wow. You can make something that fits this perfectly even without specialized tools?"

Whittling down the wood with a single ax until it was just right was quite impressive.

"I see. If you nail it like that, it won't leak water," Tanta said.

"You're pretty smart, kiddo."

"Hmm. I see!"

"O-oh?"

Tanta suddenly stood and ran over to the blueprints drawn in the sand. His eyes lit up as he peered down at it, having noticed something. "I'm amazed you can make a ship with just this much of a guide!"

"Because we've basically memorized what we're doing... You interested in fishing or something, kiddo?" asked one of the workers.

"No! I want to be a carpenter!"

"You don't say! So you must have a good idea of what we're doing here."

"It's interesting how different it is from making a house!"

"Want to give it a try?"

"Can I really?!"

Tanta glanced over at me. I smiled and nodded. The boy straightened up and bowed his head politely at the worker. "Please let me help!"

Tanta had been a child only a year ago. Rit looked surprised, but watched happily as Tanta pitched in.

"He's good."

"Yeah."

He learned how to use the hatchet quickly. It was more about employing the weight of the ax instead of pure strength. The angle of the swing mattered most. So long as that was right, the amount shaved away would be, too.

Upon noticing how quickly Tanta took to the job, the villagers were eager to teach him more.

"I can see why Gonz has such high expectations for him. He takes to learning new things so quickly," Rit commented.

"God has such poor judgment, making someone that talented a Cardinal."

“It’s because Demis doesn’t consider the people he assigns blessings to.”

A person’s natural inclinations had nothing to do with their blessing. If they did, there’d never be anyone with a poor affinity for their God-given role.

“Raising a child...”

Rit smiled as she watched Tanta work. It had been a little over a year since she met him, and he’d grown so much in that short time.

How many moments like this had his parents seen?

“I can’t wait,” she added.

“Yeah, we need to consider what to do for our wedding,” I said.

“The standard was getting married three months after getting engaged, right?”

“Apparently.”

That was the norm in Zoltan.

Originally, when parents arranged an engagement, a couple would live together for three months to judge their compatibility. Such was the custom on the southeast section of the continent.

Given that we were marrying for love, and already lived together, it wouldn’t have been a problem to be wed immediately, but...

“Still, this is nice, too, this time between engagement and marriage.”

Going from lovers to husband and wife. That gray, transitional feeling would only exist for a while.

“The present and the future are both so nice. This is bliss,” I said.

“Yeah!” Rit agreed.

The world was filled with fighting.

Even here, on an island we visited on vacation, there was a dangerous person like Eremite.

Undoubtedly, we’d be pulled into plenty of battles in the future. Yet we were still able to live happily. We didn’t live to fight, but to have fun and enjoy living.

Rit and I watched as a fishing ship slowly came together.

Apparently, the villagers used these same hatchets to fight monsters, throwing them to drive the creatures away. Tools of war could be used to make a boat.

In my mind, it was the perfect metaphor for the world.

No matter how much God wanted us to fight...

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The shipbuilding work ended as the sun began to set.

Tanta helped all the way to the end.

The villagers must have felt guilty for keeping him for so long because they told him several times that he could play if he wanted. However, Tanta remained, preferring to pitch in.

Rit, Ruti, and I chatted lazily while watching from the shade. Nothing about our conversation was particularly special, but it was fun to talk in different surroundings.

And just like that, another day was coming to an end. As thanks for helping, the locals gave us some vegetables.

The past few days have been heavy on meat, so maybe tonight should be a vegetable main, I thought.

“I was thinking of going fishing tomorrow. What do you think, Tanta?” I asked.

“Fishing! Of course I want to go!”

“I’d planned to borrow a boat, but after losing one of their boats, I doubt the villagers have any to spare. One section of coastline to the east looked good enough to cast from, though, we can try our luck there.”

There was actually a rocky outcropping farther east that was likely an even better spot, but it would’ve been dangerous for a kid.

“I’ve heard there are some pretty big fish in these parts. They can get to be a meter long. I wonder if it’s true,” I remarked idly.

“A whole meter?!” Tanta held out his hands. “This big?!” His eyes lit up at the

very thought.

Once we reunited with Tanta's family, he raced over to tell them about what had happened today.

It sounded like a fun talk.

Guess I should start on dinner.

"Red."

"Tisse?"

She and Mister Crawly Wawly had gone swimming again today. Presently, she had a casual hoodie over her swimsuit. Mister Crawly Wawly had a tiny pair of sunglasses on his head. I doubted they were was very functional.

Either way, they both looked to be enjoying our vacation.

"Having fun?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. We watched a fishing boat being made today."

"Oh, that's not something you see too often."

"We watched for hours, even though it wasn't our original plan. Honestly, it was a pretty silly way to pass the time."

"Sounds like it."

A former knight and an assassin.

We'd both spent a good portion of our lives doing things as efficiently as possible. The longer one wasted on inaction, the worse their position would be tomorrow. That's the sort of principle we'd lived by.

"Back at my old job, trips were only for training, swimming while fighting monsters, and the like. There was some free time, but I used that to study etiquette and learn politics at the local lord's manor," I said.



“So diligent.”

“I was desperate to know all I could before Ruti set out on her journey.”

I never took days off unless they were necessary to maintain my health. Any spare energy was spent hunting monsters to raise my level.

“Being low level in my line of work is a quick ticket to the grave,” Tisse remarked. “I don’t think I was quite as reckless as you were, though.”

“But you still found time to maintain a bath review book and visit lots of *oden* stalls.”

I hoped to read her book one day. Would I need to visit the Assassins Guild to get a copy?

“Let’s not get too distracted,” Tisse said.

“Ah, right. Did you need me?”

Tisse leaned in close. “I want to show you something.”

“Oh?”

“Over here.”

I followed Tisse to a bucket filled with seawater a short stroll from the tents.

“There’s a bag in here,” I said, noticing the unusual object sitting in the pail.

“Yeah, it’s got some things I caught while swimming.”

I had a look inside. “Ohhh, this is amazing!”

“Hehe. I did what I could.”

The bag held a collection of large clams and scallops.

These would be good steamed or grilled... Hm?

“Pretty nice, right?”

“Yeah, this is a good catch.”

One adductor muscle had something written on it. I peered closely at it in the bag.

Eremita approached camp. Listening now.

Ahhh...

Another one of the shells sported a simple map indicating a spot in the forest, presumably where Eremite was hiding.

“What sort of dish should I make?” I asked.

“Actually, I’ve got an idea I’d like to try, so leave that to me and have fun with Ms. Ruti.”

“Are you sure? Perhaps I should invite her or Yarandrala on a walk, then.”

“Please do. You can leave the food to me. I’ll *definitely* make a delicious meal.”

“Sounds good. You’ve really gotten better at cooking.”

Tisse was telling me to let her guard the campsite.

I told her about the vegetables the villagers gifted us today while we returned to our camp. Ruti was beside one of the tents, peering up at the moon.

“I like the crescent moon,” she said, eyes still fixed on the bright sliver in the sky.

“Yeah, it’s nice. It’s got a different sort of beauty from a full moon,” I replied.

“Mhm.”

I stood beside my little sister. It was a nice moon.

“Ruti, I was thinking of going for a walk with Yarandrala. What do you think?”

“It’d be nice to be with you...”

“Really? All right. Then shall we go for a stroll?”

“Mhm.”

Ruti had her trusty goblin blade over her shoulder, and I had my bronze sword hanging off one hip.

Monsters liked to attack at night, so it was perfectly natural to carry a weapon.

“Want to hold hands?” I asked.

Ruti shook her head. “No. You can walk in front, I’ll follow you.”

“Okay.”

We waved to Gonz and the others and headed into the woods.

All right, now that we’re out of sight.

“Lightning Speed.”

I dashed through the woods.

Lightning Speed was a skill that accelerated straight movement, so it wasn’t the best for dealing with obstacles. It was only a common skill, after all. A combination of spells like Flight and Tailwind was better for mobility.

That was the typical thought.

I’d already used Lightning Speed to save the local fishers from the blade sharks. Eremite likely suspected it was my quickest means of movement. That would lead her to think she was safe in the woods, which were fraught with obstructions.

“But I already know the forest.”

I’d walked through it earlier. Knowing where the troublesome spots were made them easy enough to avoid. When I burst through the gap in the trees, Eremite was already constructing a seal to perform a spell. My sword came up to her neck before she could complete it, however.

“You shouldn’t eavesdrop on people,” I said.

“Splendid.” She was surprised, but she showed no sign of panic.

“Ordinarily, it would be difficult to harm someone from the church, but I doubt anyone would think twice if an ascetic out in the wilderness was attacked by a monster.”

“That would be troublesome. I am reluctant to die before I complete my observance of solitude.” Still, her voice betrayed no worry. Either she was confident I wouldn’t kill her, or she was bluffing to give the impression that she held the superior position.

“Why is a hermit in solitude monitoring us?” I demanded. “What are you

after?”

“I am at all times a humble servant of Demis. That is the purpose of my life.”

“And what does God need to monitor us for?”

“How presumptive of a mortal to try discerning the will of the divine.”

“Typical cleric elitism!”

“Big Brother, above you!”

I reflexively leaped backward at Ruti’s warning.

A shadow thrust a spear into the ground where I had been standing with tremendous force.

A flying demon!

It was a mid-tier demon. A horde of them had once launched a surprise attack on the King of Avalonia’s castle.

“A member of the church sees fit to summon a demon?!” I said in disbelief.

“Evil exists to serve Almighty Demis. There is no reason I should not be able to use it.”

This was an enemy far more powerful than a blade shark. However...

“What?!”

Seeing me ignore the flying demon and charge for Eremite left her stunned. The flying demon tried to run me through from the side, but never got the chance.

“Too slow.”

Ruti’s sword cleaved it in two.

“Holy Strike!”

Eremite loosed a spell at me. A powerful white flash sped from her hands.

“Sacred Magic Shield.”

A conjured shield more powerful than Eremite’s divine attack deflected the bolt, protecting me.

“Impossible...!” Eremite exclaimed.

“Casting magic and handling a flying demon simultaneously is nothing for her.”

Ruti had already defeated plenty of flying demons by the time we left the capital. She was strong enough to take on the four heavenly lords. An ordinary demon wouldn't give her any trouble.

“Kh.”

“You're not getting away!”

My sword pierced Eremite's right hand, and I pinned her down to the ground, thrusting the sword through her hand and into the earth.

“Aaaaargh!!!”

She tried to use magic with her left hand.

“It's over. Don't move,” Ruti said.

“...Yes, so it would seem.”

Ruti peered down at the woman, sword hovering above Eremite's forehead.

Eremite relaxed in a show of surrender.

I quickly tied her up, taking care to bind her fingers so she couldn't move them. That would keep her from forming the seals necessary to cast magic.

“Why did you attack us?” I demanded.

Since I'd come to Zoltan, this was the first fight where I didn't know what my opponent was after. However, I had managed to glean something from the skirmish.

“Eremite, you've got the Divine Blessing of the Saint, right?”

“You're clever to have noticed.”

Of the thousands of blessings in the world, Saint and Sage were the only two with access to Appraisal. Saint stood at the apex of cleric-type blessings.

In other words, she knew I was the Guide. She'd used Appraisal when I touched her. Ordinarily, the skill required you to see someone to activate it, but

Eremite had blinded herself. Her Appraisal skill must have changed to compensate, becoming a different ability despite having the same name. That was why Rit and I hadn't been able to recognize it.

"I know the trick with your Appraisal. I won't fall for it again," I said. "Knowing that you can use sight-dependent skills with a different sense should be enough to deal with them."

"That's easier said than done," Eremite replied. Even now, she sounded so placid. No hostility colored her voice.

We really needed to find out what she was after.

I couldn't be certain, but I suspected it had to do with the Hero. The Divine Blessing of the Saint was powerful, after all. I reasoned that Demis had spoken to Eremite in some fashion, instructing her to draw Ruti back to the Hero's path.

At the time, I didn't fully comprehend how different Demis's thinking was from a human's.

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Back on the beach, Tisse kept a watchful eye on the surroundings while she cooked. Meanwhile, Yarandrala communicated with the plants, all the time aware of Eremite's exact position in the forest.

Two masters on guard.

Not even Red would've been able to slip past them.

"The chubby carpenter's saw was saw-saw-sawing away~"

Tanta was singing a weird tune Gonz sang when drunk as he walked around a few palm trees.

He'd spotted a small monkey near the tents and followed it around. The monkey had climbed a palm, amusing Tanta, who laughed and then started singing.

"And his sawdust-covered wife threw the pot at him~"

"That's a fun song."

"Huh?!"

The tall woman in white had appeared before Tanta quite suddenly. Eremite stood before him, belt covering her eyes. Tanta hadn't even blinked, yet she had somehow approached unseen in an instant.

Red and the others would have been wary of that sort of abnormality, but Tanta had never been on an adventure yet, so he was merely surprised.

"...Ms. Eremite?"

"That's right. I'm glad you remember my name."

She smiled. The young Tanta felt a little bit unsettled by her expression.

"Um, did you need something from me?"

"Tanta." Her expression dripped with affection. "You've connected with your blessing."

"!!!"

Tanta regarded Eremite with surprise, yet the woman smiled as she always did.

Eremite knew the power of weakness, and that was perhaps her greatest strength. The Eremite with Tanta was just an illusion. Multiple layers of complex cloaking magic were layered atop it, but the core was not a harmful spell. It was merely a type of Send Message.

The magic carried Eremite's image and words. It had no adverse effect on Tanta's mind or body. The illusory facade of Eremite couldn't even disturb grains of sand on the beach.

Anyone with a basic understanding of magic could disrupt the spell. It was elementary—first-tier. And that's precisely why it got past Tisse and Yarandrala. Because it was just an illusion reflected in Tanta's mind, they didn't sense it. Yarandrala's plants noticed nothing because Tanta's body was the same as it had ever been.

Two of the strongest people on the continent failed to recognize something was wrong, because that something was so weak. That was Eremite's strength.

"..."

Tanta was silent.

Red had warned him not to tell anyone about his blessing, and he understood how dangerous it would be to confide in a stranger.

“It is fine. You need not tell me the blessing you have been given,” Eremite said.

“Y-yeah, sorry, I can’t say it.”

Tanta bowed apologetically.

The illusion could not exist outside of Tanta’s field of vision, so when he lowered his head, it vanished save for the feet. Tanta, who lacked any knowledge of magic, failed to notice.

When he raised his head, the vision of Eremite returned, and she was able to speak again.

“I am a cleric. God has assigned me this role to guide followers in doubt.”

“Role...”

Tanta looked troubled.

In this world, the common understanding was that clerics and priests were good people. Members of Zoltan’s church had helped Tanta many times in the past. A few holy people were scary, but the general consensus was that they were all generally kind. Bishop Shien, the leader of Zoltan’s church, was a local hero, friendly and charismatic with everyone.

As a child, Tanta had been taught to respect followers of God.

“I have a dream of being a carpenter, but...my blessing doesn’t have anything to do with that, so I’m a little worried.”

Tanta kept his exact blessing private, but voiced a worry that many struggled with.

Eremite listened silently, only responding once the boy was finished.

“I can understand your confusion. You’re not alone. Many believers struggle to reconcile their Divine Blessing and their life.”

“That makes sense.”

“I’m sure your friends believe that you should choose the path of a carpenter instead of following your blessing.”

“Mhm.”

“Then, allow me to speak of the joy that comes from accepting the role of one’s blessing.”

“But I’ve always dreamed about becoming a carpenter.”

“I understand, but were you to proceed without knowing what might come if you only accepted your blessing, you might come to regret it.”

“...”

Tanta’s face puckered in protest. He had his dream of becoming a carpenter, and even though he was a child, he understood that even if he failed, it would still have been his choice.

He wouldn’t consider any route but his own.

And Eremite knew that. That’s why she didn’t reject his dream. Not at first.

“Do you know the story of Blessed Scribonius’s Temptation?”

“Scribonius...? Umm, that’s the important person who used his ring of blessing on a sick friend, right?”

“Yes. He was a man who prayed for the happiness of his friend over his own. The important point of the story is that the demon showed Scribonius both a happy future and an unhappy one.”

“Both...”

“Scribonius gave up the happiness that awaited in the future and accepted misfortune so that he might fulfill his vow to save his dying friend. He died in his prophesied misfortune and was beatified as Blessed Scribonius.”

“God didn’t save Scribonius?”

“God did save him. Scribonius died, but to this day, he is remembered and honored as blessed.”

Tanta thought for a moment, not quite understanding.

“Umm, so you mean that I have to know the future where I don’t become a carpenter, too?”

“Yes, knowing both and then choosing your path is the trial that God asks of us, and the love God shows to us.”

Tanta struggled to comprehend.

“You’re not saying I have to give up my dream, are you?”

“Just like your friends, I believe it is important you choose your path for yourself. However, it would not be fair to choose without also knowing the joy of accepting your blessing, would it?”

“I guess so... I can at least listen...”

Eremite smiled. “Tanta, allow me to share with you my story... The story of Saint Eremite.”

Interlude

The World Seen by the Saint

I am Eremite.

The daughter of a noble who was given the Divine Blessing of the Saint.

My great-grandfather was a soldier raised to the station of knight as a reward for his accomplishments on the battlefield. My grandfather expanded on his domain, gaining a baronial peerage and becoming a hereditary noble.

My great-grandfather was given the Divine Blessing of the Knight, and my grandfather had the Divine Blessing of the Aristocrat. Both of them led ideal lives. On their deathbeds, they were surrounded by a great many friends and were grateful to Demis when called to His side.

However, my grandfather made a single mistake that became the source of my family's misfortune. Do you know what it was?

My grandfather left his estate to his only son, my father.

My father was granted the Divine Blessing of the Hound Tamer. He loved dogs and was praised by all the other nobles for the animals he raised. He was kind and beloved by the people of his land, and he was a good person who cared deeply for his family as well.

However, he wasn't meant to be the master of an estate. He might have understood the hearts of dogs, but failed to see the malice in people. He knew how to use dogs to hunt, yet was poor when it came to sending people to war. And although he could judge how much a dog would eat, he struggled in matters of money and farming management.

Father was tricked by a neighboring noble, defeated in battle, and lost rights to the water and mine on his territory.

The latter had been a major source of income, and without water, agriculture

became impossible. What little money remained dwindled away paying for water that had once been his, and thus, my family's fortune swiftly ran dry.

My father was a kind lord, but the people did not wish to starve. They came to despise him as a useless ruler who could do little else but be nice. Ultimately, my father had no choice but to become a puppet of the noble who'd deceived him.

The people's hearts grew distant, and it was only a matter of time until the land was stolen. My family's estate would end with my father.

Father didn't have the resolve to face his difficulties. My once gentle father fell into drinking and grew violent. He even released the hunting dogs he'd loved so much. During those brief times when alcohol released him, he wept and apologized endlessly. It was so pitiful I could only look away.

Mother and my elder brother abandoned my father, going to the noble who took over. As far as I know, they still work in his estate.

I remained, however, believing that were I to leave, Father would end his life.

Father placed his hopes in my blessing.

Pleading with a bishop he'd gifted a hunting dog, he secured a way for me to travel to the Last Wall fortress, so that I might become a successful cleric.

He asked me to gain authority and return to save our house. "If the estate is restored, our family will return. We'll be able to live together again," he said.

Father's problem was a conflict between two minor nobles. A sufficiently powerful member of the church could have intervened and resolved the issue.

But would that have brought my father happiness?

His misfortune was brought on by his attempt to fulfill a role other than that assigned by his Divine Blessing.

So I destroyed Father's house.

The land he'd protected, that I might inherit it, now belongs to the noble who deceived him.

In exchange, Father has been given sufficient assets to live and an

environment where he can raise hunting dogs for the noble.

Father has not forgiven me, but I have heard that his present life is a happy one.

It is not a misfortune to have one's life dictated by their blessing.

A Knight has the happiness of a Knight, a Noble the happiness of a Noble, a Hound Tamer the happiness of a Hound Tamer, and a Servant the happiness of a Servant.

Divine Blessings are an expression of Demis's love for us.

Have faith in that love. There is joy in faith. And that joy shall become virtue.

Even if you do not yet understand, please remember that God's love is always with you.

Chapter 4

Cooking Fun

The next morning.

“In the end, we couldn’t get any answers from her,” Ruti said disappointedly.

“She’s an ascetic, so even if we tried to beat it out of her, she’d just endure it. All we can do for now is keep her from trying anything.”

Ruti, Rit, Yarandralla, and I gathered in a tent on the beach.

Tisse felt responsible for Eremite evading detection last night and was staying with Tanta and his family to protect them.

I never would’ve guessed Eremite would contact Tanta while we were fighting. Ruti was probably the only person who could’ve noticed Eremite’s illusion without knowing of it in advance. The moment we moved Ruti away from the camp, Eremite won.

“I didn’t think she’d ever try something like *that*,” Rit said.

I nodded. “Yeah...”

She’d really outwitted us. There weren’t many people who could pull off such a stunt against us. From Eremite’s perspective, it must’ve taken no shortage of good luck. She’d only managed to use Appraisal on Rit and me. Even if she’d somehow deduced that the Hero was with us, she couldn’t have known whether it was Tisse or Ruti. And that was setting aside Yarandralla and her powerful control over plants, too.

Eremite had used herself to lure out Ruti, but there was a possibility I might’ve left Ruti at camp and taken Yarandralla instead. Had anything gone differently, Eremite could’ve been killed. We weren’t quick to resort to that, but picking a fight with multiple superior opponents was a good way to die in a world filled with conflict.

Using yourself as a lure worked when you had an ally acting separately who could follow through even if you were caught or slain.

Eremite was powerless now and bound up in her little cabin. I'd investigated the place before leaving her there. Other than the usual sort of magic items church members kept, I didn't see anything special.

There was no doubt that she lived alone.

"There's no one else odd on the island, right?" Rit asked.

"Yeah, we searched all over last night, but found no sign of anyone but us, the villagers, and Eremite."

She'd outfoxed us, but she'd been captured and tied up in exchange. It didn't make any sense. Without any allies, she was powerless now. Why had she gone to such risky lengths alone?

"Was she confident in her strength and assumed she'd win against you and Ruti?" Rit suggested.

"If so, I think she would've snuck into camp directly rather than kept to a roundabout method. If she had the power, I'm sure she would've simply incapacitated us and done whatever she was after."

Rit hummed. "True... So what is her goal then?"

Her goal... All Eremite had done was speak with us on the first night, then show up again at the spring on the second day, and lure us away to cast a spell on Tanta last night.

"I'm sure it wasn't any sort of mental manipulation," Ruti said.

That meant all Eremite had done was talk to Tanta. She shouldn't have been able to check his blessing, but there was a good chance that she'd received the same sort of training as Cardinal Ljubo, and could discern the Cardinal blessing on sight.

"All that just to make Tanta a cardinal, though?" Rit commented. "Is that worth risking the life of a high-level Saint?"

I reviewed the facts. "Hmm..."

When reviewing everything Eremite had done, it became clear that her goal was more concerned with Tanta the Cardinal than Ruti the Hero.

Cardinal was an extremely rare blessing, but it wasn't a one of a kind like the Hero. The church wished to take in everyone with a Cardinal blessing, but not all of them were fit for the organization. Some were released following their education, after it was determined they were unsuitable to climb the organization's ranks.

Finding one Cardinal wasn't so critical that the church would go to any lengths. It certainly wouldn't hurt people to see it done.

"The values of the truly faithful differ from normal people's," Ruti answered calmly. "Rather than trying to understand her perspective, it would be better to objectively discern what she's after by considering what she's done."

"From that point of view, it seems pretty obvious that her goal is to have Tanta fulfill his role as a Cardinal," I said.

That didn't feel quite right, but there was no choice but to accept it.

"Convincing people to follow that path is one aspect of religion," Ruti added.

"If that's true, then the problem's been solved. Eremite can't interact with Tanta anymore, and while she seems to have gotten to him a little, he hasn't given up on his dream of being a carpenter," Rit said.

Ruti nodded. "Yeah, Tanta can achieve his dream."

"It doesn't feel right..."

I couldn't help but feel like this wasn't the end.

"But Eremite can't do anything, and there's no one around to help her," Rit reminded me.

"Yeah," I agreed. "By our understanding, the danger is past. She shouldn't be able to escape with a Saint's skills alone."

Eremite couldn't do anything, so we'd won.

"It doesn't feel like it, though," I replied. The bad feeling in my stomach was akin to cutting an enemy but never feeling it through your sword. Swordsmen

hated that sort of sensation. “We can’t let our guard down.”

Rit bobbed her head forcefully. “You’re right. We’ve still got the rest of today and tomorrow. The boat should come by around noon tomorrow. We’ll need to work hard to ensure nothing happens while making this a happy memory for Tanta.”

We’d need to be cautious, but being overly timid wouldn’t do. We were all supposed to go fishing today. There was no need to worry about Eremite eavesdropping, so we’d be able to enjoy without holding back.

Two days. Tomorrow was our return trip, so we’d probably play on the beach in the morning and then stop by the village to say goodbye. That made today our real last day to do something different and fun.

Upon realizing that, I felt like it’d be a waste not to make the most of our remaining time. It was time to get ready for some angling!

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Our list of tasks before casting our rods was as followed: 1. Make breakfast.

2. Make a lunch to enjoy while fishing.

3. Prepare the bait to use for fishing.

“So, are you all ready?”

“““““Yes, sir!”””””

Tanta, Ruti, Nao, and Mido were lined up in front of me.

“Big Bro!”

“What was that, soldier?”

“Captain Red!”

Tanta took my joke a little too seriously, but I was glad he seemed to be in high spirits.

“Wouldn’t it go faster if we divided up the work?”

“An excellent question,” I answered. “You are correct. It would be more efficient to divide the work among separate teams. However, in doing so, you would only get to enjoy one of three fun experiences.”

“Ah!”

“The fun of devising a breakfast menu for everyone to enjoy and that of imagining the sort of flavors we could all have for lunch.”

“That sounds great!”

“Preparing the bait for sea fishing is fun, too. You need to think about what bait would entice a fish.”

“But I don’t know what a fish would like!”

“You should be able to understand at least a little after swimming around the island.”

“Hrmmm...”

Seeing Tanta cross his arms and try to get into the mind of a sea creature caused Nao and Mido to grin.

“Anyway, we’re all going to work together on all three tasks!” I announced.

“Yes, sir!”

Okay, let’s get to work.

Dividing the work was definitely the most efficient method, but going step-by-step together would help Tanta follow along at every point.

“Now then, let’s get started on breakfast,” I said.

Our selection for today was a salmon and coconut milk stew, and grilled mushrooms.

“Hey, how about I show you the adventurer style of cooking?”

Tanta raised an eyebrow. “Adventurer-style?”

I pulled out some preserved biscuits. They were a standard ration for adventurers out on the road. Admittedly, they didn’t taste bad, but eating them every day was rough.

“With some nice ingredients, you can put these biscuits to good use.” I ground them up finely. “If you think about it, they’re basically just flour and salt.”

I put the crumbled biscuits into the pot with butter and let it simmer. After demonstrating it, I had Tanta try.

“So this is how adventurers cook!”

“Traveling with flour comes down to personal preference. Having rations you can eat as is proves handy, but when dealing with an invisible monster, you can scatter flour on the ground to track its movements. That’s why some adventurers carry raw flour around in small packets.”

As an adventurer grew stronger and gathered useful magic items, there were easier methods for dispatching invisible monsters, but the average person without an item box had to make do using limited tools. Flour was a long-lasting food source, but had other uses, too.

There were even branches of the Adventurers Guild that tasked rookie adventurers with coming up with a hundred different uses for a stick.

“Chalk powder can be used, too. It doesn’t need to be flour.”

“Huh.”

Tanta stirred the pot carefully. Watching him do his best was endearing.

“Is time to add the vegetables?”

“Mom!”

Nao and Ruti had finished chopping, so I let Nao take my place managing the stew. Now mother and child could cook together.

“This is fun,” Mido said as he came over. “Thank you, Red. This trip is going to be an unforgettable experience for my family.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Mido had taken care of preparing the salmon.

“I’m pretty clumsy, so it’s a bit embarrassing having someone as good at cooking as you watch me,” Mido confessed.

“You did a careful job. There isn’t a single bone left,” I replied.

Gonz had complimented Mido’s carpentry before, telling me how careful it was. Mido wasn’t gifted with Gonz’s talent, but he still did good, trustworthy

work.

“I wonder if I’m a good enough father,” Mido said rather suddenly.

I frowned a little. “Why?”

“I couldn’t have done something like this for Tanta myself. And Gonz knows a lot more when it comes to carpentry. I was a failure as an adventurer, and now I get by with a lot of help from Gonz and Nao. It makes me wonder if I’m a good parent at all.”

“This is supposed to be a fun trip, you shouldn’t worry about things like that.”

“Heh heh... I guess I can’t help but worry if there’s something I should do for my boy now that he’s becoming an adult.”

“Dad!” Tanta raced over to us. “Bring the salmon!”

The stew was coming together. All that remained was to add the biscuit flour mix and let the whole thing sit for a while.

“We should work on the mushrooms,” I said.

Mido nodded. “Okay.”

We got to work chopping the mushrooms that would accompany the stew.

Mido watched my hands carefully.

“You really are skilled, Red.”

“Only because I cook so often.”

For a little while, there was only the sound of mushrooms being chopped.

“Tanta looks...happy. Not just on the trip, but always. So I think you must be a good father, Mido.”

“...”

“I don’t have any children yet, so I’m not really sure, but Rit and I want to have a family like yours...and I want to be a father like you.”

“A father like me?”

“You understand, even if you think you don’t. When we were talking about what skills Tanta should take first, you said that Tanta’s happiness was most

important.”

I lined up the mushrooms I had cut with the ones Mido had cut.

“The fundamental nature of cooking is whether the person eating the meal enjoys it or not. Being able to chop mushrooms well or debone a salmon skillfully is nice, but they aren’t the point of the process.”

“You’re saying I’m a good father because Tanta’s happy?”

“Yes. You can be proud of that.”

“You’re really good at encouraging people, Red.” Mido chuckled. There was a faint quiver in his laugh, and I could hear a soft sniffle.

That’s probably enough.

We finished chopping the mushrooms quickly. Mido and I were quiet for most of it.

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I took care of finishing the stew. The Cooking skill affected that part, so there was no escaping that.

““Breakfast is ready!””

Ruti and I high-fived, as did Tanta and Nao.

“Now then, before we eat breakfast, let’s take care of the first steps for making lunch,” I said.

“Just the first steps?” Tanta asked.

“Yeah, today’s lunch is going to be crepes.”

““Crepes!”” Ruti and Tanta cheered. It sounded like my sister was even more excited than the actual kid.

“Before we eat breakfast, we should prepare the batter for lunch.”

Eggs, flour, butter, and sugar.

Although I preferred cow’s milk, there weren’t cows on the island, so we had to use goat milk.

“Just blend this all together. Nice and simple.”

“We’re using normal flour this time,” Tanta noted.

“Yeah, we could always break up more biscuits, but it’d be a hassle to break enough to make crepes for everyone.”

The adventurer method I’d shown to Tanta earlier was useful sometimes, but it was obviously easier to use proper flour if you had any around.

“Hahaha.” Tanta laughed, and then he and Ruti started mixing the batter.

Something about blending stuff was always fun.

The two of them seemed to enjoy making the batter for nine people’s worth of crepes.

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The breakfast everyone made together was delicious.

Flavor-wise, it might’ve been better if I’d done everything, but knowing we’d done it as a group gave it something special.

“You made this, Tanta?”

“Mhm!”

“This is good!”

Gonz tousled Tanta’s hair with a grin.

I scooped out a bit of salmon to eat. The coconut milk paired with it really well.

“Did you prepare the salmon, Red?” Yarandralla asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s been completely deboned. That’s pretty difficult for anyone who doesn’t usually cook.”

“Haha... Actually, I did that.” Mido raised his hand bashfully.

“Oh! Wow, you did really good!” Yarandralla praised.

Mido’s face reddened a bit. “Heh heh.”

Tanta puffed out his chest in a show of pride for his father.

He really is a good father.



Once we finished breakfast, it was time to make crepes for lunch.

Naturally, everyone pitched in.

Preparing the ingredients and cooking the batter were my jobs, while everyone else would fill and wrap the crepes how they preferred.

There was a lot of seafood to use, of course, but we also had sausage, scrambled eggs, fresh vegetables and fruit from the island, pickles, and some candied fruit I'd brought along.

By breaking up the work this way, my Cooking skill would ensure everyone got to eat something tasty, and they'd still get to choose what went into their crepes.

"Lettuce, sausage, scrambled eggs, slices of salmon, shrimp..."

"Whoa, Tanta, if you add all of that, it's bound to burst."

Gonz looked a bit amazed as Tanta added the things he liked to the crepe one after the other.

Kids always liked meals that let you add whatever you wanted.

Tanta's family had fun watching as he wrapped up his crepe.

"Look, Red!"

"Mine looks tasty."

Rit and Ruti showed me their handiwork. It seemed they'd enjoyed this as well.

Looks like it was a hit with everyone. Hmm... What about mine? The crab looks tasty...

Once lunch was ready, all that remained was to make the fishing bait.

"We'll be using flour again," I said.

Flour really was handy.

"Are you going to make a bait dumpling?" Tanta asked.

“Oh, I’m surprised you were able to guess.”

“We’ve made them for fishing in the river back in Zoltan!” Tanta explained.

It wasn’t a secret method or the like, so it wasn’t too surprising that he knew about it already.

““A bait dumpling?””

Rit and Ruti both cocked their heads. Honestly, it was a small shock that Rit didn’t know about bait dumplings.

“I don’t really know much about fishing, but don’t you usually use insects or small fish as bait?” she inquired.

“Fishing has a pretty long history, so people have used lots of things,” I said.

“I assumed we were going to use the crabs Gonz and I gathered.” Rit held up a bag of little crustaceans.

They’d been broiled, and the bag had been wrung out to remove excess water.

“The crabs are part of it, yeah. Thanks for gathering them.”

While we were making breakfast, I’d asked Rit and Gonz to pick up crabs on the beach.

“Can you break them up a bit for me?” I requested.

“Roger!”

While Rit got to it, I chopped some garlic and mixed it into the flour.

“Then we add the crab and a bit of water until it gets a paste-like consistency, and there you have it.”

“Huh. It really is a dumpling.”

Once the dough was ready, all that remained was to shape it into little balls and put one on your hook.

Whether dumplings or insects and worms were better bait depended on the fish you were after. However, gathering enough bugs would’ve been a lot of work with nine people fishing today. Dumplings, which could be made in mass,

were more accessible.

In Zoltan, there were shops that sold bait, but not out here.

“What to put in the bait dumpling is really up to personal choice. You can bring a lot of options and see how the fish respond and change accordingly,” I said.

Rit’s face brightened now that she understood. “Interesting. There’s lots of possibilities!”

“I made them with what we could get together easily, but if nothing bites, we can try another recipe.”

Adjusting tactics was part of the fun of fishing.

Dumplings could have different ingredients mixed in on the spot, and people who were squeamish with insects or worms could use them, making them perfect for light-hearted fishing.

“We need to make enough for nine people, so everyone should pitch in!” I said.

With that, Tanta and the others hopped to it.

The doughy consistency felt nice in the hand, and Tanta got into kneading the dumplings.

Today’s theme was definitely “things that are fun to make.”

Judging by everyone’s expressions, it looked to be a success.

“That should be enough! Let’s go fishing!”

Everyone cheered in response.

Let’s make this another fun day.



The complex coastline on the eastern side of the island was likely the result of the sea currents.

“It gets deep quickly as you move away from the beach, making it a bit too dangerous for swimming,” I remarked.

“But it looks good for fishing,” Tisse replied. I don’t know where she got it, but Tisse donned a proper angler’s outfit and had sunglasses on. Mister Crawly Wawly was wearing a fishing cap, although it probably didn’t do any— No, I guess it blocked direct sunlight, so maybe it did have a purpose this time.

They both looked raring to go.

One person breaking out professional gear when a group of friends came together for fun was a little odd, but I was glad Tisse was excited, if nothing else.

“Wow, Tisse!”

“Heh heh, you’ve got a good future ahead of you if you can recognize how impressive this is, Tanta.”

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly were practically sparkling.

Although Tisse maintained her usual blank expression, I had to imagine her eyes looked a little smug behind those sunglasses.

“All right, Red! I challenge you!”

“I didn’t know anything about fishing last time, but I’m different now.”

Rit and Ruti were both in high spirits, too.

I couldn’t afford to lose.

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“No way...”

I lost. Utterly.

“Yay!” Ruti flashed Vs with both hands.

She was the undisputed champion in terms of most caught.

Tisse had landed the largest.

I was second in both categories, although the gap between the two first-place winners and me was tremendous. I’d never had a chance at winning.

“We were secretly practicing.”

“We went fishing together.”

Only now did Ruti and Tisse happily reveal their secret.

It was a little frustrating, but I was glad to see my little sister growing up.

“At least you got second place.”

Rit sounded disappointed. She hadn’t hooked much of anything. She’d come in seventh place, even losing to Tanta.

“I beat Ms. Rit!”

“Good job, Tanta!”

“That’s my boy!”

Tanta’s parents gathered around him to celebrate.

Mido and Nao had mostly aided Tanta, so it was more like the three of them had collectively defeated Rit. Still, this hadn’t been a genuine competition. Rit making a show of losing was part of what made this fun for everyone. I suspected she was playing it up a bit.

She really was kind.

“Red! When we get back to Zoltan, we’re doing special fishing training, just the two of us!”

Determination suddenly ignited in her eyes.

Yeah, she really was kind. Probably.

I guessed we could go fishing together again when we got back.

As we joked around, there was a powerful gust. Mister Crawly Wawly almost lost his hat, but he managed to hold it down.

“Red.” Yarandralla was looking up at the sky. “We should finish up fishing.”

“Awww, but it’s still so early!” Tanta whined.

It was probably best to listen to Yarandralla.

“Sorry, Tanta, but a storm is coming,” Rit explained.

I only had a vague feeling there might be a storm, but the two spirit users were confident.

“It looks like we might not be able to go back tomorrow,” Rit added.

Yarandrala nodded. “You’re right. Ships won’t be able to sail out.”

“It’ll be that bad?” I asked.

“Yeah, anything smaller than a large ocean-faring vessel won’t be able to handle it.” Yarandrala had captained a ship in the past, so I trusted her judgment on that.

“When we get back, we should pack up the tents and find shelter in the village,” I said.

“Aww, we’re even putting the tents away?” Tanta was sad. Our trip was going to be extended, but putting away the tents made it seem to him like it was ending early.

I patted his head.

“You can always come again, if you want to.”

“...Yeah.”

Coming out here was a little bit of an adventure, but if Tanta raised his blessing level, he could drive off any of the monsters around Zoltan. Once he could, the trip here would be no problem at all.

In fact, he’d be able to go almost anywhere other than the Wall at the End of the World. The freedom of childhood would end soon, but in exchange, Tanta had the freedom of adulthood waiting for him.

So long as he was free to choose, he could take whatever path he liked.



We divided up the fish we’d caught and put them into our bags.

They would do just fine for tonight’s dinner and tomorrow’s breakfast.

The big one Tisse caught was too large, though, so she tied it up with a rope and carried it over her shoulder.

What should I even do with an eight-meter-long tiger shark?

Once we reached our camp, we quickly packed up the tents. Breaking down camp went a lot faster than setting up.

Rit put the packed-up tents away in her item box.

It was over in no time.

“The weather’s still pretty nice. Is a storm really on its way?” Gonz asked.

The sky was bright, but there were lots of clouds.

“Look, the fishing boats are coming back.” I pointed out to the water.

“Huh, they are.” Gonz’s eyes widened in surprise.

To me, the more surprising thing was that simple fishers had noticed signs that only the first-class spirit users had spotted. I guessed there were some things that only people who lived here on this island and on this sea for so many years could sense.

People were impressive, building up an instinct that could match hints from spirits, if only in their one particular area of expertise.

“Hey, Red,” Rit whispered in my ear. “What should we do about Eremite?”

“We can’t just leave her...”

She was a high-level Saint. Ordinarily, a storm wouldn’t be any sort of problem for her. She’d lived here on her own for five years, after all.

“She’s bound, can’t leave her cabin, and shouldn’t be able to use magic. It’s a pretty rough position for a spell-focused blessing like the Saint. I guess it would be best to check on her.”

“Who should go?”

“You and I are probably best. I don’t want to let Ruti get appraised, and I’d rather leave Yarandralla as the backup since she can communicate with the forest plants. Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly are focused on protecting Tanta and his family, which leaves us.”

“Roger!”

“We can slip away after we check in with the village.”

Naturally, we’d tell Ruti, Yarandralla, and Tisse about the plan, but there was no need to worry Tanta and his family or make the villagers suspicious.

Once the storm passed, it'd be time to leave the island. Then we could free Eremite, and everything would be over.

After that, she could continue her isolation as much as she wanted.



"Thank you for taking us in," I said.

"Of course. We were just about to go to you," replied the village chief.

The villagers gave us a warm welcome when we reached their settlement.

"It was a sudden storm. The fishers came back in a hurry, too."

Windows were being shut and folks were stowing things that had been left out.

They were really quick to take action.

As expected of people of the sea. They've experienced lots of storms.

"Leave the fish you caught to us. We'll make something great with it."

"Thank you. The food during the feast was delicious too, so I'm looking forward to dinner."

"Thank you as well. We can't go out to fish during the storm either, so you offering to share with us helps."

We decided to share our catches of the day with the locals. We'd reeled in too much for nine people, so this worked out perfectly.

Ruti had caught so many fish that her bag was almost overflowing, and Tisse's tiger shark was so enormous that I'd worried how to prepare it.

Plus, I wanted to enjoy the lobster Mister Crawly Wawly had caught with his thread while it was still fresh. Really, sharing our spoils with the villagers was a great help.

"There isn't much here, but please take it easy until the storm passes."

There wasn't any sort of lodging for guests here, so the village chief was letting us stay in his home.

We'd all be huddled together in sleeping bags on the floor, but it was a lot

better than camping out in a storm.

“Umm...” Tanta raised his hand. His face looked serious.

“Hm?” answered the village chief.

“What about the ship that you made?”

“We moved it into the woods, but it might get broken in the storm. That’s just how it goes around here, though.”

There were a lot of storms in and around Zoltan, so it was just accepted that things might be wrecked. A big part of why the people of Zoltan were naturally lazy came from the climate being what it was. Even if they worked hard, poor weather could still dash their efforts.

Tanta was born and raised in Zoltan, so he knew that, but...

“Can’t anything be done?” He sounded frustrated.

“I appreciate the feeling, but...” The village chief scratched his head, a bit unsure how to put it.

His expression made it clear he believed this was a lost cause.

Tanta didn’t seem ready to believe that yet, though, so he worked hard to think of something. Perhaps an older Tanta would’ve found a solution, but the current one didn’t.

Ruti smiled as she watched him.

“...I’ll carry it here.”

“Big Sis?!”

“I can do it... I’ll protect the ship you helped make.” Ruti smiled slightly.

“Thank you!”

“Mhm.”

My sister could definitely carry a half-built fishing boat to the village without any trouble.

The vessel was only in its second day of construction. Losing that much work was an acceptable loss for the villagers. However, Ruti wanted to protect what

Tanta had helped build. No one who would actually use the fishing boat had asked for help, so this had nothing to do with the Hero's impulses.

This was merely Ruti's desire to protect a boy's memories.

Seeing her natural heroic determination rather than the compulsions of her Divine Blessing made me happy.

"Red," Rit called.

"Yeah, let's go check on Eremite now."

While Ruti was taking care of the fishing boat, Rit and I headed to Eremite's cabin.

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The wind was growing stronger, and black clouds filled the sky.

At this stage, even I knew for certain that a storm was closing in.

"Looks like it's bound to start raining soon. Let's finish this up quick and head back."

"Right."

We ran through the woods.

A forest was perhaps the best environment for Rit's Spirit Scout. She moved through the environment without ever losing speed.

"I can see it ahead," I said.

"That's her cabin? Pretty solid construction for something made by just one person," Rit commented.

"She's a high-level Saint. I imagine she used magic to cut down the logs and place them."

It wasn't a luxurious lodge by any stretch, but it was much better than the hermit standard of tree branches woven together with mud daubed across the structure.

"It has a solid base formed of four posts stuck into the ground. The logs weren't just placed straight onto the ground, so it should be able to withstand the storm to some extent," I noted.

Rit frowned. "What's the point of the solitude then?"

Like Ares the Sage, Eremite the Saint had access to clerical and arcane magic. She could handle almost anything by herself.

A half-elf Sage friend of mine once erected a castle of earth on a battlefield using magic. That went to show how powerful a spell could be.

"Oh, visitors."

Upon stepping into the cabin, I saw Eremite sitting in the chair, exactly as I'd left her.

"You sound in good spirits," I said.

"Yes, this is also a good adversity."

Eremite was bound to her cabin by chains, with her hands tied up using a special knotting technique to ensure her fingers couldn't move. She couldn't use a spoon and had to eat directly from a bowl.

It couldn't have been very pleasant, but keeping her from using magic was necessary.

"A storm is approaching," I explained.

She nodded. "So it would seem."

"That's why we've come to check on you... We were thinking of closing the windows and doors. That wouldn't be a problem for you, would it?"

"No. I am forbidden to ask others for aid during my solitude; however, it is not forbidden for me to receive aid. I am grateful that you offered of your own initiative."

"Your home will be able to withstand the storm if we do that for you, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, then for the sake of the Saint who can't move freely, we'll help of our own initiative."

Rit and I quickly sealed up the place.

"It's unfortunate that the field outside will go to waste. A little longer, and

there would have been some lovely eggplants... I look forward to them every year.”

A quick look told me the vegetables hadn’t been growing well, owing to either the poor soil or the lack of sunlight because of the trees.

“I would have liked for Tanta to enjoy some.”

“Is making food for others the work of a holy woman in solitude?”

“Ordinarily, it would be forbidden. However, Tanta is a fellow servant of God.”

“That’s for Tanta to decide,” Rit shot back at Eremite sharply.

That’s enough preparation for the storm.

“Is that sufficient?” I asked.

“Yes, thank you very much for your help.” Eremite smiled faintly as we left.

“I don’t like it!” Rit had a grim look on her face. “She’s absolutely planning something!”

“That definitely wasn’t the look of someone whose plans have been foiled,” I agreed.

It was troubling that we still didn’t know what exactly she was after.

“Rit, would you?”

“Sure thing.”

She formed a seal and cast a summoning spell.

“Little guardian, crawl forth from the spirit tree... Summon Spirit Gecko!”

There was a *pop* as a little spirit vortex formed, and a small lizard appeared in her hand.

“Please keep an eye on her.”

The gecko looked up and stuck out its tongue.

Eremite’s cabin was too far from the village for Rit to maintain her link with the summoned spirit beast. Calling a spirit to keep watch was only valuable if the creature could inform the summoner if something happened through its

telepathic connection, but that only extended about 100 meters.

However, a spirit gecko was different.

When a spirit beast received a significant amount of damage, the summoner felt the shock of it. And a lizard could remove its own tail. Unsurprisingly, it had no combat ability to speak of, and the only long distance message it could send was that it had removed its tail, but that was plenty. A spirit gecko was incredibly useful, far more than a first look suggested.

Rit's summon clung to the backside of one of the pillars holding up Eremite's cabin. It would be safe from the storm there.

With that done, we returned to the village, all the while hoping nothing would happen.

Chapter 5

The Saint's Temptation

The morning of the fifth day arrived.

Rain pelted the walls, and the wind howled past. A violent storm raged outside.

There was no way the boat was coming to get us.

When I got up, I had some water and leftover soup from yesterday.

The latter had gone cold by now, of course, but filling my stomach helped clear my head.

Getting up was enough to rouse Rit and the others, though we took care not to wake Tanta and his family.

With the windows shut, it was totally dark inside the house. The only light came from the occasional flash of lightning that shot through every small opening of the building.

"It seems the house will be fine," Tisse remarked.

"Yeah," I agreed. "There's not much danger it will collapse." Tisse was right, this house wouldn't budge, even in this awful weather. "It would be nice if nothing else happened," I added.

Tisse nodded. "Indeed."

"How is your magic power holding out, Rit?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I can maintain a spirit gecko for a day and still have some to spare."

"Yarandralla?"

"It's difficult to call on the strength of plants during a storm. They're busy taking care of themselves."

It was difficult to pick up traces of movement during the chaos of a storm,

too.

“It’s kind of fortunate Eremite made her first move two days ago instead of today,” I remarked.

She was already so hard to sense. If she had used the storm as cover, even Ruti might not have noticed her until she got close.

“Even if she had, I wouldn’t lose,” Ruti answered indignantly. She looked pretty annoyed.

I wonder why she hated Eremite so much. I didn’t exactly like her either, but...

“She’s similar,” Ruti stated.

Similar to what?

Ruti didn’t offer any more, instead sitting against the wall and closing her eyes. Despite how it looked, she was searching for unusual presences outside.

There was little else to do for now.

We all sat down and waited for the storm to pass.



The villagers judged time by the movement of the sun, so on stormy days with the windows blocked out, they got up later than usual.

There was nothing to do outside, so most of the locals worked on fishing nets or repaired clothes.

It’s got to be after nine already.

The room was still dark, and most villagers were asleep.

“Red...!” Rit’s sharp gaze all but told me what had happened.

“Something happen with Eremite?”

“Yeah, there was a reaction from the spirit gecko.”

I picked up my sword and fastened it to my waist.

“What do we do?” Rit asked.

“We should head out to check.”

Ruti stood up. "I'm going, too."

"Are you sure? Eremite can use Appraisal. It'll be risky if she gets too close."

"It's fine as long as she doesn't touch me, and she won't be able to."

If she's willing to use that much strength, then...

"Got it. Then all three of us will head out."

We quickly got ready, trying our best not to make any noise.

"Where are you going, Big Bro?"

Unfortunately, it was still enough to wake Tanta.

"We're going to take a look at things outside for a bit. You can just go back to sleep," I said.

"Okay... Be careful."

He was still drowsy and lay down again without much thought. In no time, he was resting peacefully.

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My Lightning Speed wasn't much use in such terrible weather, but it would've taken me a while to reach Eremite on my own strength.

"We'll catch up soon."

"Be careful, Big Brother."

"Thanks... Lightning Speed."

I took off running.

My body was light, and I could barely feel the wind of the storm.

Rit's Wind Shield protected my body, and Ruti's Gift of Elk Power gave me the agility to handle bad footing with ease.

It was hardly any time at all before I reached Eremite's secluded home.

"That's...?!"

The cabin was wrecked.

It was easy to see what had happened.

“Kiii!!!”

“A wyvern!”

An earsplitting cry pierced the air.

A wyvern had destroyed the cabin. It had come here in the storm to find a perch to rest and attacked the cabin to find food.

“Eremite...there!”

Even with her hands bound and unable to use magic, she evaded the monster’s strikes.

Evidently, the report from the gecko hadn’t been in response to her escaping.

I drew my sword. Honestly, I would’ve preferred not to fight to protect this woman, but there was little choice.

“Hahhhh!!!”

I leaped from the cover of the forest foliage.

Rather than deal with a prey that was constantly evading and running away, the wyvern seemed to prefer the one that jumped at it willingly.

Turning its long neck to face me, it opened its fanged maw and sped through the air like a shot. After evading its deadly bite, I severed the monster’s left wing.

The wyvern threw back its head to roar in agony, and the moment it did, I moved my blade across its neck.

The wyvern’s body slumped. Running up its back, I thrust my sword between its bones and into the monster’s heart.

Once my sword was free, I jumped down on the creature’s left side, where I’d cut its wing. If, by some chance, it had any strength remaining, it wouldn’t be able to attack me on its injured side.

“Kij, giii...”

The wyvern groaned and finally went limp.

“Thank you very much for saving me,” Eremite said.

I sheathed my sword and shrugged.

“Doesn’t look like you needed it. You seem to have plenty of strength left.”

“Not at all. I was desperate, just trying to escape.”

As far as I could see, Eremite had no means to attack, but she didn’t have a scratch on her, either.

“Red!”

“Big Brother!”

Rit and Ruti had arrived. The sight of the wyvern on the ground was enough for them to know what had transpired.

“Looks like it wasn’t anything serious, then.” Rit let out a little sigh. She picked up the gecko and touched her finger to it, giving it some magic power. “You did really well. Thank you.” The lizard’s tail regrew, and then it shook its head as though pleased. “I was sure Eremite had been up to something.”

“How rude. All of my actions are for the sake of good and love.”

Rit’s expression tightened in obvious disdain. Honestly, mine probably looked similar.

“Now then, what do we do about this?” I looked at Eremite’s completely destroyed cabin. We couldn’t just leave her here like that. However, it was dangerous to let her use magic.

“I guess we’ll have to carry her back to the village,” Rit said.

“...I guess there’s nothing else we can do.”

I would have preferred to avoid that.

“It’s fine,” Ruti commented.

Drawing the goblin blade from her back, she put her strength into a swing at the ground. The earth shuddered from the might of the stroke.

“That’s...” Eremite’s mouth was agape, utterly stunned.

Ruti’s blade left a huge gash in the ground, forming a cave deep enough for a person.

“She can wait out the storm there,” Ruti said.

“I’m grateful for your consideration. I cannot simply go to the village, for that would break my isolation. Thank you.”

“Sure.” Ruti’s response was flat and disinterested. She took the end of the chain around Eremite’s ankle and fastened it to a boulder.

Previously, it had been connected to the cabin’s foundation, but the wyvern had broken it free.

“Let’s go back.” Ruti turned to leave, judging everything done.

Then she saw the sky come alive. A loud boom followed shortly afterward.

“A wyvern!”

A large, winged shadow had appeared, seemingly from the lightning.

“Another one?!” Rit exclaimed.

“And it’s near the village!” I said.

Was it a friend of the one I’d defeated?

The wyvern rode the turbulent storm winds as it plunged for the island settlement.

“It’s okay,” Ruti said. “Tisse and Yarandralla are at the village.”

That’s right. They could take care of a wyvern without anyone getting hurt. Still, there was no reason for us to hang around here.

“Let’s get back quickly,” I said.

Rit and Ruti nodded.

Eremite smiled, then obediently got into the hole that Ruti had made.



Eremite constantly grinned because she’d already fulfilled the role given to her by God.

While Red and the others were still away, Yarandralla sensed the wyvern’s approach and went out to meet it.

Tisse, wary of Eremite’s magic, climbed a roof with a commanding view of the

area to watch Yarandrala's back.

Both of them reacted as best they could to the situation. If anything happened in the village, they'd respond immediately.

At least, that's what they believed.

"Ahh!"

A scream cut above the roar of the wind, sounding throughout the village. One of the homes began to creak and shake.

"Run!!!" someone shouted, but there wasn't enough time for the people inside to escape.

A fisherman who managed to get outside was quickly buffeted by the strong wind, which brought him to the ground.

The building collapsed not a moment later. There was a terrible crash, a scream, and then grim silence.

The people inside other homes hurried outside, including Tanta and his family, rushing to help.

Yarandrala's battle with the wyvern was lost in the storm, so the villagers didn't notice it.

A couple and their young child were buried alive beneath the wreckage of their home. They were bleeding and unconscious, but breathing for the moment.

Tisse remained where she was, judging that the three weren't in danger of dying just yet. There would be plenty of time for Yarandrala to heal them after felling the wyvern. Instead, she prioritized investigating whether Eremite's magic had anything to do with the house's collapse.

There was a possibility that this was meant to distract her. Tisse didn't detect Eremite's involvement, but her choice to remain vigilant against the woman was the right one.

However, she couldn't have known what would follow.

"What do we do?!"

Tanta. There were people in front of him who were hurt—good folks who’d been kind to him.

“Big Bro Red!” he called. Unfortunately, Red, who was always ready with medicine on hand, had yet to return.

“Mido! Help me move this!”

Gonz and Mido were moving the rubble.

The reliable adults lacked the power to heal the injured.

A younger Tanta would have gone searching for Red and the others. If he had, he likely would’ve found Yarandrala and told her to help the villagers.

That should have been the end of it.

However, Tanta had the power to save these people himself now.

Connect to my blessing... Okay, that’s it.

Tanta put all of his skill points into clerical arts.

Feeling a bit dizzy and giddy from the odd feeling of magical knowledge suddenly appearing in his mind, Tanta immediately used a healing spell.

“High Cure!”

Light enveloped the injured child.

The glow was excessive and wasted magic power, but on a dark, stormy day, the radiance of clerical magic left a powerful impression on the villagers.

The child’s wounds closed instantly, and when the light disappeared, their pained face looked at ease.

“T-Tanta...?”

The boy didn’t notice Gonz’s astonishment, moving next to treat the injured couple.

It was his first time using magic, and his first experience of magic power running out.

The instant he confirmed that all of the injured people were well, a powerful lethargy struck him, and he collapsed.

“Tanta!!!”

“It’s okay... He’s just exhausted.”

Tisse watched as Tanta and the people he’d helped were carried into the village chief’s home.

There was no trace of any magic...but was that really a coincidence? No...

She hurried to see Tanta.

If Eremite was waiting for this moment...

Tisse was an assassin. She had trained herself to act efficiently.

To her, it seemed impossible that Eremite could’ve been waiting for something like this. There were too many variables beyond control.

But that’s just from a human perspective.

From the point of view of a being who existed beyond humans, this was all easily arranged.

Mister Crawly Wawly touched Tisse’s finger.

“...Thank you, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

Tisse hadn’t realized she was clutching her fist so tightly. She released it slowly and exhaled. It was too soon to be so nervous.

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About fifteen minutes had passed since Ruti, Rit, and I finished things at Eremite’s cabin when we made it back to the village.

Tisse and Yarandralla were quick to fill us in on what had happened.

I went to check on the unconscious Tanta, taking a seat next to him.

“Red... Is Tanta going to be okay?”

I smiled to put Gonz at ease.

“It’s just exhaustion from using up his magic power. It isn’t serious. He cast spells without any practice, and his body wasn’t prepared for the act of actually using magic. That’s all.”

I gently brushed the boy’s golden hair.

“He’ll be good to stand in around ten minutes. Still, he’s bound to be tired, so it’s best if we let him rest.”

“Really? In that case, just let him sleep.” Gonz looked relieved. His tense shoulders relaxed somewhat. “How are the injured?” he asked.

“Tanta’s magic completely restored them. There won’t even be any scars.”

“Ain’t that something. To think Tanta could do something like that...”

“Yeah. Tanta is a kind kid. And he’ll be able to do more and more going forward, but...”

I examined at Gonz’s expression. Although subtle, I noticed he felt a bit inferior to Tanta for already using such powerful magic. The Craftsman blessing was perfect for a carpenter, but Tanta already had a power that a Craftsman would never possess.

I put my hand on Gonz’s shoulder.

“To Tanta, we’re the reliable adults. Let’s do our best to make sure that remains true.”

“Yeah.” Gonz nodded.

It looked like he understood what I was getting at.

“Right, there was something I wanted you and Mido to look at,” I said.

“Huh? You want our help?”

“It means walking in the storm, but something about the house that collapsed caught my attention, and I want the eyes of two skilled carpenters to check it for me.”

“...Got it. Give us a minute to get ready.”



Gonz, Mido, Rit, and I stepped outside wearing coats.

The storm was getting worse.

“It’s liable to peak soon, so it should pass by tomorrow.” Rit’s gaze was focused up on the sky spirits.

I couldn't see them, but if Rit said as much, then it was a sure thing.

"Does that mean our ride will be here tomorrow?" Gonz asked.

"It'll probably be the day after. Even if the weather clears up, the sea's bound to be choppy. I figure the Zoltan crew will wait a day."

"Guess we'll get to lie about the island a bit more tomorrow."

Undoubtedly, Gonz and Mido had work waiting for them back home, but laughing it off was the Zoltan way.

We continued toward the collapsed building.

"Be careful not to get hit by flying debris," Rit cautioned "I wouldn't even dream of trying to get close without your magic," Gonz replied.

We were all being shielded by Rit's spell. Any small debris that hit us would bounce off.

"There." I pointed to the broken support.

Gonz and Mido both leaned in close and touched it with their fingers.

"This is..."

"In your expert opinions, does that look natural?" I questioned.

"No. The way it's rotted out isn't typical at all... It wouldn't normally end up like that," said Gonz.

"I agree. You wouldn't see such a narrow range of damage unless this specific section was submerged in water for a long time," Mido added.

Gonz scratched his chin. "It's like time moved faster for this one section of wood."

I see. So that really is what happened.

"Thank you, that makes it clear."

That woman! What happened to her solitude?! She snuck into the village and messed with the support of this house!

Fortunately, no one had died from it, but it was entirely possible someone could have.

I really was starting to hate her.

“Hey, Red, that means someone did this on purpose, right?” Gonz said.

“Yeah... I don’t have any proof...but watch out for Eremite.”

“That ascetic lady?!”

When had she had the opportunity?

The forecast hadn’t predicted a storm, and Yarandrala hadn’t sensed one coming until the fourth day of our trip. Eremite had been tied up on our third day here, so the timing didn’t make sense unless she knew about the storm before it appeared.

“Red, what’s going on?” Rit looked grim. She’d undoubtedly noticed the same problem I had.



We all waited out the storm inside.

Tanta woke up an hour later, and the villagers thanked him profusely.

That their savior wasn’t a hero like me or Yarandrala, but Tanta, the boy who’d helped with their fishing boat, moved them all the more.

Having the village chief, someone older than his father, take Tanta by the hand and give such profound gratitude was something Tanta had never experienced before.

His face turned red from surprise and bashfulness.

Around noon, the villagers started to make lunch. The storm continued to rage, so no one was out and walking around, but bad weather didn’t keep people from getting hungry.

Today, we ate fish fillets and coconut soup. Recipes on the island used fish oil, giving the meal a bit of aftertaste, but Tanta and his family seemed to enjoy it well enough.

“Big Brother Tanta.”

“What is it, Dennis?”

A boy named Dennis sat next to Tanta. He had to be roughly three years

younger than Tanta.

“Is your blessing Priest?”

“Eh? Um, no, that’s...”

He struggled to respond. I listened in, ready to cover for him if he tried to reveal his actual blessing.

“Really... The truth is, I’m a Priest,” Dennis said.

Tanta looked surprised. “You’ve connected with your blessing already?”

“No, I can just feel it is all. It’s been a year and a half now.”

Apparently, Dennis had come to Tanta to talk about his blessing. He couldn’t have known that Tanta had actually skipped right past that stage and connected with his blessing only a few days ago.

A Priest blessing wouldn’t have access to High Cure until level 4 at the minimum. To Dennis, Tanta must have seemed like a strong adult wielding the full power of his blessing.

“Hey, Big Bro Tanta, are you part of the Zoltan church? Can you take me with you?”

“What?! I’m not a member of the church!”

“But you have an even more special blessing than Priest, don’t you?”

“That’s... Why do you want to leave this island, Dennis?”

“Because I’m a Priest.”

Becoming a priest because you were given the Priest blessing was standard thinking for this world.

“Is there anything you want to do?”

“I don’t know...but I want to be like you! So I want to study in Zoltan’s church and become a good priest!”

The boy had a carefree smile. Tanta looked unsure how to respond.

“Really? That’s great,” I said, stepping in. “But first you need to connect with your blessing. It’s best for you to live with your family until then.”

“But I can’t connect with it...”

“There’s no need to rush. Tanta’s older than you and only recently connected with his blessing.”

“Really?!”

“Y-yeah, when I came to the island.”

“Here?!” Dennis exclaimed with such surprise that Tanta looked embarrassed.

“You should stay with your family as a child for now, just like Tanta with his family. Once you connect with your blessing and go into the church, you won’t be able to play with your friends as much as you want anymore.”

“I don’t want that!”

“Heh. Then for now, enjoy your time with your friends. That’s the sort of thing you’ll only be able to do now. And I think you’ll find those experiences useful once you become a priest.”

“Ohhh...okay!” Dennis thanked me and then turned to Tanta. “Thank you, too, Big Brother!”

“Y-yeah.” He looked troubled. Tanta’s frantic effort to help the wounded people had ended up inspiring another boy. And the responsibility of that clearly made him uncomfortable.

“I know what you’re going through,” I said while patting Tanta on the head.

“Have you always had this sort of feeling, Big Bro?”

“You really are growing up, Tanta.”

“Me? A grown-up?”

I sat down next to Tanta. We were silent for a little while. There were some things best shared without words.



We had thick fish steaks for lunch.

They were made from toned grouper with very little fat and had an elegant flavor. However, the fish oil made the final taste a little rougher. It wasn’t the best meal ever, but it was a nice change of pace.

“Praise, huh,” I muttered while sitting outside the circle everyone else had formed to eat.

Tanta had used the power of his blessing and been praised for it.

“When you act in accordance with your blessing and are adulated for it, your blessing fills you with a powerful sense of rapture,” Ruti said, a plate of food in her hand. She was sitting beside me. There was no table, so we were on the floor. “Eremite was trying to get that to happen to Tanta.”

“It can’t be.” I shook my head. “Using a high-level Saint just to put Tanta in a position where he’d be nudged toward obeying his Divine Blessing?”

It seemed absurd.

Risking the life of an adult with one of the most powerful blessings in the world for the chance at maybe influencing a single boy to follow the path God had chosen for him?

“That was definitely God’s plan.” Ruti paused to look at her hand. “There is meaning in a Saint guiding a fledgling Cardinal. Getting people to follow the role dictated by their Divine Blessings is crucial. All the lives Eremite could have saved on the island if she weren’t isolated meant nothing by comparison. That’s how God sees it.”

“Ruti...”

“I understand because of the Hero. God doesn’t care if the Hero saves people. That was just a necessary part of the plan. For the Hero, people are merely sacrifices to recreate the first hero’s soul.”

There was anger in her expression and powerful determination in her red eyes.

“That’s why I can’t lose to Eremite. I won’t let Tanta have the right to live his life stolen.”

Ruti’s voice was soft, but unshakable.

The storm would pass soon.

“This gets settled tomorrow,” Ruti declared.

“Yeah,” I agreed.



When I awoke the next morning, I found the sky was bright and blue, without a cloud to be seen.

Villagers were busy clearing the debris from the storm and the collapsed house. The fishers were already out at sea. The water was rough, but apparently, that meant big catches, so everyone was excited.

“Let’s head back to the beach where we were before. We’ll just get in the way here,” I suggested.

“Good idea,” Rit said, nodding.

We gave our thanks to the village chief and returned to where our camp had been on the beach. We also made sure to return the half-built fishing boat to the beach. The blueprints drawn in the sand were gone, but the real outline remained in the builders’ heads, so it would be fine.

“It feels weird setting everything up again!” Tanta was getting excited as he helped Gonz put up the tent.

Our trip was supposed to have ended, yet had run over into extra time. The sea was too choppy for swimming, but we could still play on the beach.

“Rit, hold that for me.”

“Got it.”

We were putting up a tent, too.

Birds that had fled the storm were back, soaring in the air and chirping happily. A seagull slowly turned to eye our camp.

The awful weather was finally behind us.

“Big Bro!” Tanta shouted.

Looking over, I saw him holding a rusty chain.

“What’s this?”

“It looks like it washed ashore in the storm.”

Tanta ran over to me and Rit with the chain in hand.

“It feels really light!”

“Hm?”

I took the chain from Tanta.

It felt of a perfectly normal weight to me.

“Oh, this is a staff for clerical arts!” I said, unable to hide my surprise.

“A staff? This chain?”

Tanta cocked his head, understandably so. He’d actually found a type of magic item called a cleric’s staff.

Rit took the chain from me. “This is a priest version of a mage’s staff,” she explained. “If you use clerical arts while holding this, it will help by making you less likely to mess up the cast, and it decreases the magic power required, too. It’s a great tool for someone learning clerical spells.”

“Really?!”

“For people who can use clerical arts, the chain is half as heavy as normal and is as strong as one five times as thick. Also, if you keep it with you for a full day, you’ll be able to call it back to your hand with a command word at any time,” I added.

Chains and ropes were considered to carry a divine aspect because they could bind demons. That’s why they were considered a type of staff for cleric-type blessings.

“Amazing!” Tanta said. “But why was it on the beach?”

“I’d guess it fell into the sea a long time ago, and the storm dragged it up. There are a lot of things down at the bottom of the ocean,” I replied.

A gift from Demis for a fledgling Cardinal, huh?

“Is it okay for me to keep it?! It looks like it would be really useful for construction!”

“Yeah, it’s sturdy, and you’ll be able to make it unwind and return to you with a word. I bet it’ll make for a really handy tool.”

God's gift would be used to advance Tanta's dream.

That's fine with you, right, Demis?

He'd chosen the gift, but it was up to Tanta how to use it.

"Big Brother."

"Red."

Ruti and Tisse were both staring into the woods.

"She's here, then?" I asked.

Ruti nodded. "Mhm, it's Eremite."

Rit and I stood up.



There was a jangling sound as the woman approached. Eremite was dragging a chain behind her.

"She pulled her binds free of the rock Ruti attached them to without magic," Rit said.

"It saves us the effort of going to get her," I replied.

Ruti stood at the head of our group, with Rit and me behind her. Yarandralla brought up the back. Tisse was hiding somewhere unseen.

"You came," Ruti said.

When Eremite appeared from the foliage, I saw that her hands were still bound.

"Good morning. I've come see Tanta."

My sister didn't bat an eye. "Tanta is going back to Zoltan tomorrow. We won't let you take him away."

Eremite's lips spread slightly into a narrow smile.

"Tanta has come to know God's love. He is different from you. He is like me, one chosen by God."

"One chosen by God, huh?" I said.

“In a sense, you are as well, Red.”

Eremite had used Appraisal to see my blessing. Guide existed to protect the Hero at the start of their journey. That was the entire reason it existed.

“No,” I responded. “My life is entirely the result of my choices. Demis’s will had nothing to do with it.”

I fought to protect Ruti, but not out of obedience to the impulses of my Divine Blessing. Were I the weak sort who obeyed every whim of the Guide, I would’ve died long ago.

The Guide started out very strong. That’s why it was able to protect the Hero. Had I followed my blessing, I would’ve fought with nothing but that simple, raw strength until I was eventually outmatched. I would’ve never defeated any truly powerful enemies.

“I suppose those who are given weak Divine Blessings simply cannot comprehend,” Eremite said dismissively.

“My blessing must look pretty pathetic through Appraisal.”

Ares had thought the same of me. When he’d used the skill on me, my blessing had seemed worthless to him.

“We won’t let Tanta go with you... What are you going to do?” Ruti leveled her sword at Eremite.

The two were separated by only a hundred paces.

“As a Saint, I am capable of fighting to some degree, but with my magic sealed, I cannot rescue the boy.”

“Rescue,” huh? Sounds like she really believes that.

“Then do you intend to negotiate?” I questioned.

“No, I am meant to guide Tanta, not to treat with the misguided.”

“Hah. You never stop smiling, but I guess being tied up for a few days has gotten on your nerves,” I needled. “Everything you’ve done has been according to your Prophecy skill, right? It’s all proceeded as expected, which is why you’ve gone along with it despite growing increasingly frustrated.”

“To think you would know of Prophecy... It is described only in the church’s most secret apocrypha. Did you perhaps have a Saint friend?”

During my time as vice-captain of the Bahamut Knights, I’d used my authority to gain access to the archive of Avalonia’s Grand Cathedral. I’d been looking for a way to free Ruti from her blessing, but it also allowed me to read about Saint skills.

Simply reading about Prophecy wasn’t enough to understand its full effects, so my comment was a half-bluff.

“Prophecy. To hear the words of Almighty Demis and know what you should do. Omniscient, omnipotent Demis guides me, so I need only follow the holy path, and I shall succeed. Only a Saint may acquire this ultimate skill.”

“So that’s why you put up with all this? The Divine Blessing of the Saint sounds rough.”

Eremite’s cheek spasmed at my provocation.

“Feeling a little angry? Has so much time in solitude dulled your tactics?”

“I have no intention of resorting to such frivolities.”

Sure. We’ve had so many difficult opponents lately that it’s almost refreshing to face one who responds to such a cheap taunt.

“So, you can’t use your magic and sly tricks aren’t exactly your forte. How are you going to fight then?” I said.

“In accordance with my Prophecy, of course.” Eremite pulled a pure red orb from her cloak. “Allow me to demonstrate how mighty the Saint blessing is, even without magic.”

“That’s...!”

I had seen a member of the church using one of those spheres before, during a battle with the demon lord’s army. Only a person with a high level, high-tier cleric-type blessing could use one.

“Shape of Nagaraja!” Eremite called.

“Look out! It’s a demon beast transformation jewel!” I shouted.

Eremite transformed into a giant serpent with seven heads. Animal polymorphing magic wasn't too uncommon. The Gift of Elk Power enchantment Ruti had cast on me during the storm was a type of transformation spell that granted me an elk's abilities.

Power-type transformations altered physical abilities without changing appearance, while Shape-types, as the name implied, completely transformed the user.

"It's my first time seeing a demon beast transformation," Rit whispered, astonished.

"Unlike animal transformation, demon beast transformation magic was lost during the era of the last demon lord. Now it survives only in the form of spells sealed in jewels created decades ago. To think she'd use something so rare!"

I had to work so hard just to convince them to consider using one during that battle with the demon lord's army!

Remembering how difficult it had been to get permission back then left me feeling more than a little bitter.

"With this, magic is irrelevant! If you won't hand Tanta over, then I'll just eat you!"

Eremite opened her crimson mouths, baring her sharp fangs.

"Go ahead and try." No sooner did Ruti say the words, than one of Eremite's heads lanced forward for where my sister had been standing.

"Too slow!" Yarandrala shouted.

Eremite, a woman with a powerful blessing, had transformed into a great beast capable of destroying a country.

Her power was enormous. If I was fighting alone, I would have tried to draw out the battle until the transformation reverted.

However, Ruti stood at our vanguard, with her sword drawn against Eremite. And this was Ruti fighting of her own volition to protect Tanta.

"Gyaaaaah!!!"

Three of the seven heads were lopped off in a flash.

Saint was certainly a mighty Divine Blessing, but the Hero was unmatched.

Eremite writhed, trying to understand what was happening, but it was too late.

“Grahhhh?!”

Another three heads fell.

It was overwhelming. Ruti had to fight without letting Eremite touch her, but it hardly held her back. Eremite could scarcely understand her rapidly approaching defeat.

Now only one head remained. Once it was severed, the mighty nagaraja would fall.

“Why?! I did just as the prophecy directed!!!”

Eremite’s composure was gone. She’d managed to remain calm all this time because she’d trusted in the future she had glimpsed. Now it was crumbling before her.

This failure undoubtedly shook her faith in her Saint blessing and Demis.

“God isn’t omnipotent,” Ruti declared as she looked down at Eremite.

“Blasphemy!”

“It’s the truth. God can see the entire world and understand what natural phenomena will happen. He knows how people will act because people have Divine Blessings. Prophecies are just predictions that take those factors into consideration. But not even God can manipulate people’s will.”

Ruti and I had concluded as much when discussing Demis. He possessed power beyond our realm, but could not interfere directly or alter the wills of living beings. Those independent thoughts were most likely the origins of the souls that Demis desired.

That’s why Demis created Divine Blessings—to enforce a way of living without harming free choice.

“There is nothing Almighty Demis cannot do!”

“There is,” Ruti fired back immediately. She was so adamant that Eremite was left speechless.

“Tisse,” my sister called.

“Yes.” Tisse emerged from her hiding place with Tanta.

“Tanta!” Eremite shouted.

The monster’s remaining head wobbled as it rose, its golden eyes taking in the boy.

“So this is what you look like. You seem clever. Your face befits a holy man.”

“Ms. Eremite...” Tanta recoiled fearfully. Honestly, it was impressive he didn’t try to run outright.

“Eremite.” Ruti raised her sword to keep Eremite from moving. “I’ve given a lot of thought to how we’d defeat you.”

She looked straight at Eremite, but the transformed woman ignored her, speaking to Tanta instead.

“Tanta, when you saved those villagers, you felt God’s love, didn’t you? That joy is the reason why we live, our one and only euphoria. It’s a gift that can only be felt by those chosen by the divine to possess special Divine Blessings.”

“I...”

“Please, say it! If you tell me that you wish to accept God’s love, I will give my life to protect you! Please! Just say the words!”

Tanta looked scared. He glanced at Ruti, who smiled and nodded.

“Tell her what you think. How did you feel when you helped those people during the storm?” she said.

“Okay, I...” Tanta looked at Eremite. He didn’t look as though he were trying to challenge her. Rather, he had the clear eyes of someone trying to convey his honest thoughts.

“I want to make a house here someday that won’t collapse during a storm.”

“Huh?”

“Knowing a home was responsible for people getting hurt made me upset. Once I become a carpenter, I’ll make one that keeps people safe and happy.”

“Impossible... That can’t...” Eremite froze, unable to believe what she was hearing.

Her Prophecy had foretold that she would lead Tanta to the path his blessing desired of him. She had labored to construct the perfect scenario to make that future a reality.

Yet Tanta wouldn’t yield to the Cardinal.

“Tanta! They’re just making you say that, right?! You’ve been chosen! You are beloved by God!”

Eremite knew that the church taught that God’s love was given freely to all, but in her anguish, she voiced a very different sort of opinion. That’s likely how she really felt.

She was special, someone with the Divine Blessing of the Saint. Perhaps that’s why she strove to be saintly.

Now I get it. She’s like Ares. That’s why Ruti and Yarandralla were so wary.

“No.” Tanta shook his head. “I’ve always wanted to be a carpenter like Uncle Gonz and my dad. Even before I met Big Bro Red.”

“But you’ve connected with your blessing!”

“I don’t care!”

The blunt rejection left no room for argument. Eremite’s prophecy had failed.

“God can’t manipulate people’s wills...,” Ruti said. “Do you understand now?”

Ruti had known that Eremite intended for Tanta to follow his blessing the moment we’d caught her, and she’d elected to let it happen.

“No matter what happened on this island, it can’t undo all the time Tanta has spent with Gonz and Mido. I was worried you might get desperate and abduct Tanta, but I knew he’d never lose to Demis.”

“It shouldn’t be possible for a child to overturn God’s machinations...” Eremite’s voice was ragged from her labored breaths.

“Tanta is a special child. Not because of his blessing, but because he has a powerful determination to fulfill his dream,” Ruti explained.

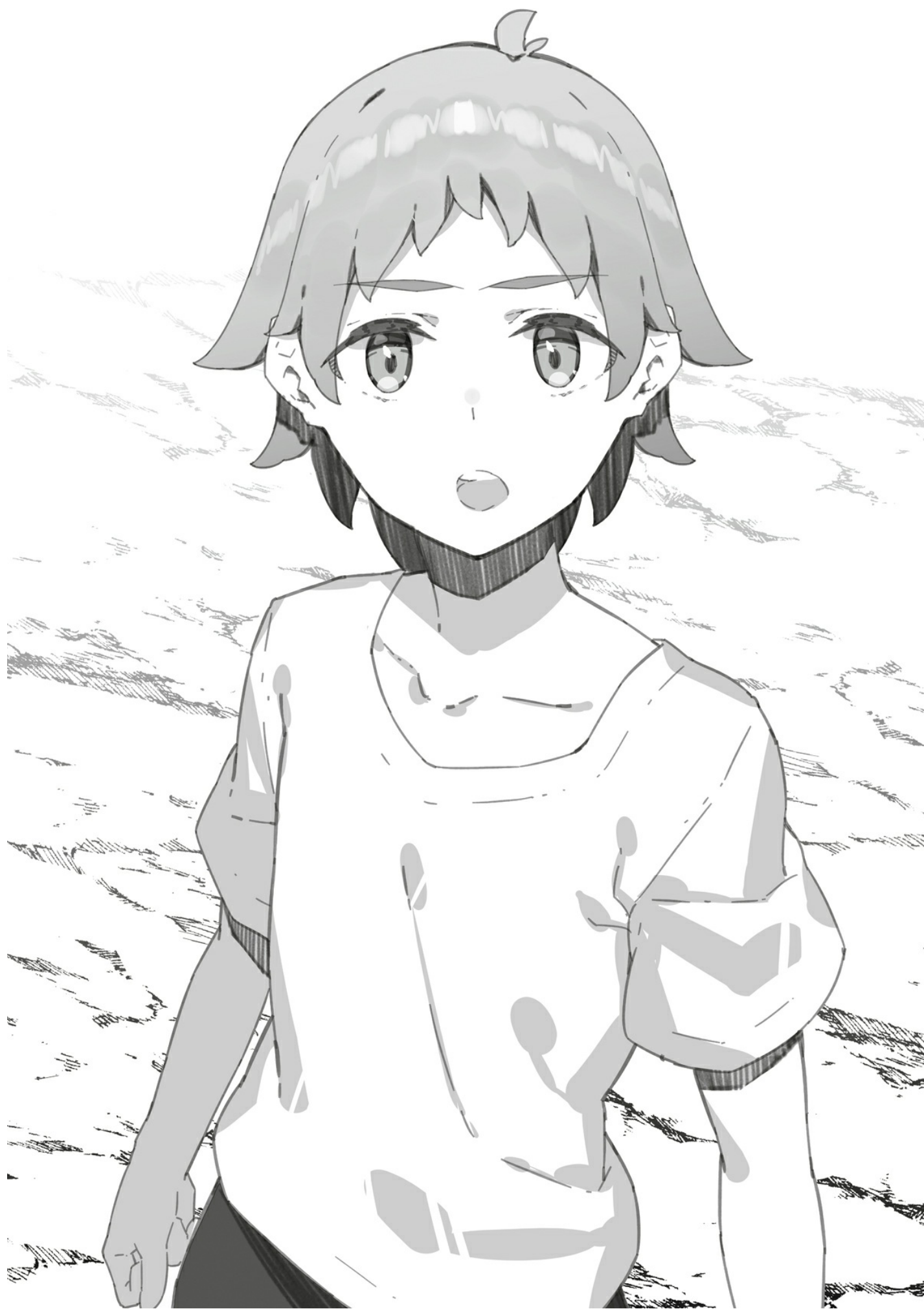
He wasn’t exceptional because his blessing forced him to be. It was because he had a goal to aspire to, the kind of potential everyone had in them.

Following a blessing granted a feeling of joy, but that wasn’t how dreams worked. The joy and the misfortune all came from your own heart. People were meant to make their own paths, not march along those set by Demis.

“Eremite...the joy and pain handed down by God can’t bind those who are truly strong,” Ruti said.

“God’s love can’t possibly lose to the likes of mortal will...”

“Tanta’s life is his own. You’ve blinded yourself, but you saw it just as clearly as anyone else.”



Eremite's body returned to normal. She lay on the ground with her hands covering her sightless eyes.

"O, Lord!" Eremite writhed and turned away, as though to flee from the world.

Tanta's determination had defeated her.

Ruti sheathed her sword, looking satisfied.

Chapter 6

Summer Memories

It was the day after the battle with Eremite. Our trip was finally at its end. No clouds marred the sky. The sea was blue and clear.

This was the beauty of the time after a storm.

“Now let’s swim!”

""""""Yeah!!!""""""

Rit, Ruti, Tisse, Mister Crawly Wawly, Tanta, and Gonz all answered my shout with great enthusiasm.

Yarandrala, Mido, and Nao were behind them, raising their right arms, despite not joining in the cheering.

We'd decided to swim to make the most of our vacation until the last second when the boat came.

“Let’s go, Tanta!”

“Yeah!”

Gonz, his nephew, and everyone else jumped into the water. Even Nao, who'd been seasick on the first day, was enjoying herself in the ocean.

“It’s finally done,” Yarandrala said. She had approached me with Tisse close behind.

“Thank you both,” I said to them. “A lot happened, but in the end, things worked out, and we got to enjoy ourselves.”

"It really was a lot. But I'm glad Tanta will be okay," Yarandrala replied.

I shook my head. "It's not that simple. His life starts now. I'm sure he'll struggle and come to know plenty of uncertainty."

"True...", Tisse agreed quietly.

“But we’ll be there for him. His childhood is ending, but he’s still our friend.”

Yarandrala and Tisse smiled and nodded at my remark.

“Hey, where’s Mister Crawly Wawly?” I asked.

He’d been swimming with Tisse, but I didn’t see him in the water.

“Over there.”

“Oh?”

Tisse pointed, and I followed her finger to the grill we’d used for the barbecue. Looking closely, I spied a frying pan on the grill. Mister Crawly Wawly was moving around hurriedly.

Something like a headband was wrapped around his head.

“What’s he doing?”

“He wanted to make the last day’s lunch himself.”

“Huh?! He’s cooking?!”

I knew he’d taken the Cooking skill, and I’d seen him help Tisse with meals before, but it was a bit of a shock to watch him making food for people by himself.

“Apparently, he’s making fried spaghetti.”

“Wow.”

He really was a crazy high-spec spider.

“I can’t wait to try it,” I said.

Tisse bobbed her head. “Me too.”

I couldn’t help but get excited, wondering how his handiwork would taste.

Yarandrala and I waved at the spider to cheer him on.

He hopped up in acknowledgment.



“Oh, Red!”

After we’d had lunch, Rit suddenly called to me as though she’d remembered

something.

Mister Crawly Wawly's fried spaghetti had been delicious, earning high marks from everyone. Ruti and Tanta even had seconds.

"I brought a beach ball along, but totally forgot about it!"

Rit pulled a large ball from her item box. It was so large that it would've been tough to throw it with one hand.

"I wanted to play with it, and it completely slipped my mind!"

"Are you sure? The ship's coming soon, isn't it?" Nao asked.

Our boat was bound to arrive in a little while, but there was still some time yet. Maybe the merchant was late departing Zoltan because he sold a bit extra.

"It's not every day we get to enjoy a vacation on the beach, let's make sure we don't end it with any regrets." I scarfed down the last of my spaghetti, and everyone else finished up quickly, too. "Time for the last game of the trip!"

We ran to the beach and started throwing the ball around.

"This really has been a great time," Rit said to me.

"Yeah, it truly has," I agreed.

We laughed together as we chased after the ball.

Our island trip was filled with smiles to the very end.

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Not long after, the boat arrived, and soon, we were on the way back to Zoltan.

"Mmm, that's a nice breeze."

Rit stretched. I could see from her neck down to her breasts.

My heart raced a little.

I'd seen her in a bikini plenty during the trip, but it never got old. She was always cute and wonderful.

"So, Eremite orchestrated the storm ahead of our arrival, right?" Rit said.

Ah, a serious talk. I should focus.

“I think so. Not even a high-level Saint could manage that kind of weather manipulation on the fly. I’m sure she was working for days before we showed up.”

I’d suggested that we visit the beach the day I ran into Tanta at the cemetery. He’d seen some kind of white shade, and I’d proposed the idea on a whim to cheer him up.

That had to have been Eremite. Her Prophecy skill had told her that if she frightened Tanta, I would suggest heading to the island.

We’d been playing into her Prophecy skill the whole time...but Tanta had a strong enough dream to resist being drawn into his blessing. Eremite never stood a chance.

“Was it really okay to leave Eremite alive? She could be trouble in the future,” Rit wondered.

“It’s fine,” I replied.

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Following the battle, Eremite had been left devastated by her failure.

This is the only chance, I thought.

“Now it’s a test of endurance.”

“Endurance...?”

Eremite looked up at my comment.

“Your prophecy failed, making this our victory.”

Her face twisted in terrible anger, but I ignored it and continued.

“But Tanta’s life is just beginning. I’m sure his blessing will influence him many times in the future.”

“...”

“He won’t forget what’s happened here. So we won’t know if your prophecy has truly failed until Tanta dies.”

“...!”

Eremite seemed to deduce what I was getting at.

“That’s why I call it a test of endurance.”

“Indeed... Yes. Mark my words. Someday, Tanta will choose Demis’s love...and until then, I shall continue to wait on this island.”

Eremite trusted in God and Divine Blessings, and now that she’d done everything necessary to realize her prophecy, there was no other course of action but to wait.

I suppose there was a chance she might choose another path, but she was a little more suggestible in her current state, so I figured she’d accept my logic.

Eremite wouldn’t know if she’d won or lost for a very long time. I didn’t expect her to make any problematic reports to the church until then.

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“The most important battle in the war is the negotiation process after defeating your enemy,” I muttered.

During my time as a knight, I’d been entrusted with diplomatic negotiations many times.

Sir Flores, the knight I’d served as a squire, said that a knight needed the heart to understand a defeated foe. He wasn’t exactly suggesting sympathy, but rather, that we needed to understand the enemy to succeed at postwar negotiations.

Eremite believed in her prophecy, so rather than crushing her faith, I’d aimed to neutralize her threat by using that belief against her.

“She can’t accept Tanta’s dream, but having a connection to someone that powerful is still good for him. Now she’s driven to see her prophecy come true before Tanta dies. If he’s ever in serious danger, she’ll save him,” I said.

Rit shrugged. “Hopefully, it never comes to something like that.”

Either way, the point was that Eremite wasn’t a threat anymore.

“If only Ruti had taken it a little better,” I groused.

“Yeah.” Rit smiled slightly.

When I'd finished negotiating with Eremite, Ruti had vented her annoyance by hitting me on the back once.

"I was surprised. Ruti always agrees with how I've done things, so I didn't expect her to be so upset."

She'd wanted Eremite completely gone.

I definitely understood why, but we both understood keeping Eremite alive was for the best. That's why she'd done nothing more than give me a little punch.

"You look almost happy about it, Red," Rit remarked.

"Because I am!" Ruti had her own thoughts about what was right and wasn't blindly accepting mine. That was a good thing. "Honestly, I'm so happy I might cry."

"It's that emotional for you, huh?" Rit's expression turned to a wry grin.

My little sister was growing up. Of course I was glad.

As the conversation died down and we looked out at the sea, Rit abruptly asked, "Hey, what was that thing at the end about?"

"What thing?"

"You asked Eremite a question, right?"

"Oh. I was just curious about something."

Before we left Eremite, I'd asked her a single question.

"If you didn't have the Saint blessing, would you have had such powerful faith?' right?" Rit said.

"Yeah."

That's what I'd asked her.

"Her answer was 'Of course I wouldn't have had such strong faith had I not been a Saint.'"

Rit sighed. "I guess that's how a blessing supremacist would answer."

She was probably right about that.

“Is that really how faith should be?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“It isn’t just limited to clerics. Sometimes, I can’t help but wonder how Ares would’ve answered that question. I asked Eremite because I thought she might answer like he would’ve.”

“Ahh, I see. Ares did feel like he thought he was special because of his Sage blessing.”

“Do you think that maybe they both thought their blessings were the only things that gave them value?”

Rit exhaled through her nose. “Maybe.”

Perhaps that was why Ares couldn’t forgive me.

I’d taken the Sage’s role as advisor, so he came to question the worth of his Divine Blessing, making him doubt his value.

If that was how he felt, maybe he’d had no choice but to try and get rid of me and take over all the responsibilities I’d held.

“You’re getting pretty gloomy,” Rit said as she hugged my head. “Don’t think too hard about it.”

“I just wanted to understand Ares a bit...since it’s summer.”

I smiled as Rit held me to her chest.

“Hey, just so you know, your public flirting increases by the day.” Tisse had appeared from nowhere, pointing at the merchant who was smiling awkwardly.

“Ah, sorry.”

I apologized even though my head was buried in Rit’s chest. Tisse shuddered at the sight, although her expression remained largely unreadable.

Later, I learned she was close to bursting out laughing. At least, close for Tisse.

“We’re all alone out here on the ocean, it’s not like anyone else can see,” the merchant responded generously.

He was a good guy.

Rit blushed a bit and quickly released me.

“Still , it looks like you had quite the fun trip.” The merchant looked toward the bow.

Tanta and his family were huddled together under a blanket, sleeping. Mister Crawly Wawly was curled up on top, resting with them.



The merchant smiled gently as he watched the family. “They look pretty satisfied. They must’ve had a great time.”

“Yeah, it was a really fun vacation,” I said.

We’d never forget these summer memories.

Rit cast me a bright smile. “It was great fun.”

The green island was yet visible in the distance. White seabirds flew past overhead.

We’d put on sunscreen, but Rit’s face was just a little bit red. Her blue eyes narrowed as she grinned.

Seeing her smile made me truly grateful that we’d gone on this trip.

Epilogue

Growth

Three days came and went after we returned from vacation.

“No one’s coming.”

I was slumped on the counter in the apothecary.

Back to reality.

The shop had been closed for a week, but hardly anyone had been inconvenienced.

“It’s like they didn’t even notice we were closed,” I grumbled.

“Haha, Zoltan in summer really is hopeless,” Rit answered.

There was no way to make any sales. Clinics weren’t buying anything except medicine for heat-related issues. People in Zoltan were too lazy to even see the doctor.

“Here.” Rit brought me a cup of cold water. I downed it in one gulp. It was nice and cool, the perfect thing for a hot day.

“Maybe we should go on another trip.”

Rit laughed. “Another trip already?”

I was seriously considering just shutting down business completely during this season. However, before I could commit to the idea, the bell on the door jingled and sang its tune.

“Hello, Big Brother.”

“Hi, Ruti.”

I stepped my sister. She’d been working at her plantation since we got back. I guess she’d finished taking care of the responsibilities she’d missed.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Ruti said.

“Oh yeah?”

Whatever Ruti had on her mind was obviously more important than any shop work.

I stood up immediately.

“Should I make some tea? We can talk in the back,” I suggested.

“No, outside is better.”

“Outside...”

Does this involve physical activity?

Rit and I glanced at each other.

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The three of us moved to the yard.

“You put in a lot of work on the island,” I praised, hoping a cheerful remark might ease what I suspected was going to be a tense discussion.

Ruti had been the key to defeating Eremite. She’d thought to let the woman’s prophecy play out so she’d have no choice but to accept Tanta’s determination when it failed. Ruti had been great at devising strategies as the Hero, but she’d struggled when it came to people’s feelings. Fortunately, that seemed to be a thing of the past.

“I’m proud of you,” I said.

“Thanks... I did my best.” Ruti smiled bashfully. However, her expression quickly turned serious again.

“Brother, I’ve gained access to another New Truth skill.”

“What?”

New Truth was an irregular blessing Ruti had developed. It didn’t grant skills when its level increased. Previously, it didn’t seem to have any skills except for Ruler, the one that appeared with the blessing itself.

“A new skill... What sort is it?” I asked.

“I suggested talking outside because I thought a demonstration would be easier.” Ruti turned to Rit. “Rit, try to hit me with magic.”

“Huh?!”

“You can go all out if you want.”

“I believe you, but...I’ll go with a weaker one.”

Rit and I were both surprised, but we could tell that Ruti wasn’t joking.

Rit formed a seal before her left hand.

“Spirits of fire, gather at my fingers and be my blade! Fire Arrow!”

A burning arrow launched from Rit’s palm. The simple spell could be cast with a level 1 blessing. Ruti could evade it easily, yet she didn’t. She made no attempt to stop it at all.

“Ruti?!” I cried, worried.

The arrow slammed right into her.

I blinked in disbelief. “The magic dispersed! But you didn’t use any skills or spells!”

The arrow disappeared right before making contact.

“Wait, a skill activated... Some kind of auto-triggering ability?”

For just an instant, I saw something like black haze covering Ruti’s body. It must have intercepted Rit’s magic.

“This is New Truth’s second skill, Ruler’s Garb. It nullifies all types of magic and energy attacks.”

“Nullifies. It doesn’t just reduce damage?” I questioned.

“Mhm, nullifies.”

“So it’s sort of like Antimagic, but it also negates energy-based attacks.”

Antimagic was an advanced spell only accessible to higher-tier mage and cleric blessings. Inside its field, all magic lost potency, forcing those within to resort to fighting with their bodies or normal weapons. Not even the caster was immune to its effects, and since those who used it possessed spell-focused

Divine Blessings, it was a somewhat paradoxical ability.

Although powerful, it cost a tremendous amount of magic power to maintain. Even someone with Ares's strength could only maintain a field for around a minute. Antimagic was a powerful spell, but challenging to use in equal measure.

However, Ruti shook her head.

"No." Ruti created a magical light in the palm of her hand.

"You don't mean..."

"Mhm, this skill only nullifies my opponent's magic. It is automatically invoked, always active, and doesn't use up any magic power."

"That's absurd!"

It was cheating. A skill like this would make every magic caster in the world fall into despair. Support spells and enchanted weapons were magic, too, after all. They'd be rendered worthless when they got close to Ruti, like anything else. Even non-casters would have to fight Ruti without any magical boosts at all.

"That's way too strong!" Rit, who used spirit magic, understood just how absurd Ruti's skill was better than I did.

This was a different sort of strength than that of the Hero's powerful skills.

"Ruler's Garb, huh?" I whispered.

There was meaning in a skill's name. The skills created by Demis tended to be self-explanatory, but what was Ruler's Garb supposed to mean?

The first skill Ruti had gained, Ruler, had a kind of mastery over Divine Blessings. I'd assumed that was where the name came from. However, Ruler's Garb suggested a different interpretation.

What if Ruler is a reference to this New Truth?

"I guess it's too early to tell."

I shook my head. There was a more immediate question anyway.

"Ruti, do you know what you did to unlock that skill?"

“Mhm.” Ruti put her hand on her chest. “When I was playing with you in the water and smiled from the bottom of my heart, and when I decided that I would beat Eremite... Making memories on the island released the skill.”

Ruti’s expression was tranquil as she recalled our time on the island.

This was unprecedented. A blessing had grown without death. This was completely different from every other Divine Blessing in existence.

“The blessing is growing as you grow,” I said, amazed.

A blessing that grew in connection with a person. A blessing that affirmed a person’s way of living. I could scarcely believe such a thing existed.

Living was difficult without the power of Divine Blessings. They made it possible to defeat giant, fearsome monsters and to make things like weapons, homes, and food. All living creatures killed each other to develop their blessings. Such was the world that Demis desired. However, New Truth broke those rules. If every person had a blessing like New Truth, one that grew alongside them, there would be far less conflict.

“We’d have a world where no one would object to living how you pleased instead of being subservient to your Divine Blessing. People would be really free.”

A world where people became stronger as they grew and developed personally.

Something the Asura demon Gajasura said crossed my mind.

“If you ask us, all the creatures dominated by their blessings are the bizarre ones.”

Was this how things had originally been?

Was Ruti awakening New Truth something more important than the battle with the demon lord’s army?

“Big Brother...”

Ruti looked concerned.

Don’t get scared. If you get scared, that will just make Ruti worry, won’t it?

She's not the Hero immune to fear anymore. She's a normal girl.

Whatever secrets New Truth held, it wouldn't change the fact that I would always protect Ruti.

This summer's memories were irreplaceable, and the same would be true of autumn, winter, next spring, and next summer. We'd have a lot of great times together.

That was my hope and the reason I fought.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book! This is the author, Zappon.

Volume 11 starts a new arc. To still be writing after Red and Rit's engagement... Whether a light novel series continues is entirely up to the support of the readers. Thanks to all of you, I've been able to chronicle their story this far.

Thank you so much!

And thanks to all of your passion, I have another thing to report!

A second season of the anime has been confirmed! Yay!

The first season was well-received in Japan and internationally, and it enjoyed a tremendous response. The anime is only getting a second season because you all enjoyed it all over the world. This afterword should be in the translated version, and while it might take longer to reach international readers, I want to express my gratitude to them, too.

The work on it has only just started, but Director Hoshino from the first season and the rest of the staff are hard at work making an interesting anime! Please look forward to more news!

Let's talk a bit about the main series.

Volume 11 was a story of family and Tanta's growth. Unlike Al, who grew up during a specific incident, the situation of Tanta becoming aware of his blessing and being forced to choose between his dream and blessing is a more common situation in the world. When Red and Rit have a child, they'll have the same sort of things to deal with that appeared in this book.

This was also a story of summer vacation and the beach. It was winter when Ruti came to Zoltan, so it's been a long time since swimsuit season, but summer has finally arrived!

Hooray!

I hope you enjoyed Yasumo's wonderful cover and interior illustrations as much as I did.

In addition to the anime, the other adaptations are progressing smoothly.

Masahiro Ikeno's manga has reached the climax in volume 3 of the light novel. It's a magnificent depiction of Ruti and Tisse's emotions and a must-read.

Volume 1 of Mutsuki Higashioji's spinoff starring Rit is currently on sale. I'd be honored if you gave it a try as well.

The video game adaptation is also still available on Steam and enjoying good reviews.

This book could not have happened without the help of many, many people.

Thank you, Yasumo, for the beautiful illustrations. Ruti in her swimsuit was adorable. I was so happy that I wrote those scenes.

A book coming to press doesn't happen without outstanding work by proofreaders, designers, printers, and everyone else involved in the production. My sincerest gratitude goes out to all of them.

To my main editor going forward, Iwata, thank you for bringing this book into existence. Your support made it possible to complete. I look forward to working with you next time, too!

With that, let's meet again in Volume 12!

Zappon

Looking out at a cloud-shrouded autumn moon, 2022

This is Yasumo.
I'll continue
to work hard,
so please look
forward to it!



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