
BANISHED
FROM THE
HERO'S
PARTY
I Decided to Live a Quiet Li
in the Countryside
13
ZAPPON
Illustration by
Yasumo


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BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,
I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside


I'd expected this moment would come someday.
"Hero Ruti and Sir Gideon! The twin wings of humanity's hope are in Zoltan?!"


“I love you
as you
are now
the best.”

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Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha

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Translation by Dale DeLucia
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Yen Newsletter

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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 growing up, having regained her humanity.



Tisse Garland

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



Yarandrala

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



Mister Crawly Wawly

Tisse's pet spider. He's been active on his own lately and was recently seen at the Adventurers Guild...

Taraxon

The demon lord without a blessing who declared war on the world. With his army crushed and his plans as the demon lord in ruins, he has finally headed to Avalon as the Asura Hero.

Bui of Maoduester
(Shisandan)

An Asura general who cornered Red and friends but was defeated in the end. He has returned to Avalon as Taraxon's faithful retainer.

Prologue

Happy Ending

It had been six years since the demon lord's army that dominated the dark continent had begun its invasion of Avalon.

The long war that had extended across most of the continent was finally drawing to a close.

"The gates have fallen!"

"We'll hold back the soldiers inside! Open a path for the Hero!"

The coalition army led by Van the Hero forced its way into the royal castle of Flamberge Kingdom, now occupied by the demon king's forces. With Van and Esta in the lead, they cut down the flail-wielding greater hell demons and opened the door to the throne room.

"You have done well to reach me, Hero."

A two-headed, six-armed Asura demon stood before them.

"I, the one and only Heavenly General Vajra, shall be your demise!"

"Hmph! You're the one cornered here, so quit acting so high and mighty!" Lavender fired back from atop Van's shoulder.

The Hero pointed the tip of his sword at Vajra.

"Prince Salius's navy and Albert's squad have burned all the ships in the harbor. You have nowhere left to run."

Esta and Ljubo stepped forward as well, standing at Van's side.

"I suppose you were intending on buying time for your remaining forces to retreat, but you've miscalculated."

"We are aware that Asura demons revive even when killed; however, inquisitors of the church excel at capturing targets without killing them."

Hearing Esta's and Ljubo's words, Vajra was silent for a brief moment.

Slowly, it opened its mouth.

"…I see. And yet I am still the heavenly general entrusted with

supreme authority over the demon lord's forces. So long as I stand, his army remains!"

The final general wielded six magic blades. They were all artifacts passed down for generations on the dark continent, on par with the holy blade wielded by Van.

"The Hero strikes down evil to save those suffering in the fires of war! I challenge you, Heavenly General Vajra!"

Van was resolute and undaunted in the face of the demon lord's strongest general.

He was the prince of a lost county. This castle belonged to his father, the king of Flamberge. To defeat Vajra would be to avenge his father.

The comrades who supported Van were Cardinal Ljubo, the masked knight Esta, and the fairy Lavender.

It was a legendary battle engraved in the histories of the continent of Avalon.

And humanity was victorious.

Chapter 1

A Lack of Fall Memories

The alliance was victorious.

The glorious news spread across the continent in no time.

Yet Zoltan was on the frontier, all the way at the end of the road.

The news reached the capital of Avalonia in a week but still hadn't arrived in Zoltan.

"Fwaah."

Yawning as she stepped outside the store, Rit looked out at the fall colors of Zoltan.

"It's getting a bit chilly. I guess it's about time we brought out the winter clothes."

Zoltan's long summer had come to an end, giving way to a short autumn.

"As soon as you start thinking about doing something autumnal, it turns to winter… Ahh, what a shame."

Yellow leaves fluttered from the trees to the ground, which only reinforced the feeling of fall ending.

"I know!"

Rit went back inside, the look on her face saying she'd just thought of something.

Even now that the world was at peace, the people of Zoltan went about their days in the same way.

* * *

Mornings started early at Red & Rit's Apothecary…at least by Zoltan standards.

I woke up before the sun had fully risen and started preparing medicines in the workroom.

"*Pi, piroro, kii*!"

I could hear the lively call of the morning birds through the window. It had a distinct rhythm in fall, made by a bird that had migrated from the north called the “piropiro” bird in Zoltan.

I didn’t really think it sounded like “piropiro” all that much, but hearing my friend Gonz explain it at length, apparently it had started being called that after it was mixed up with another bird that had a “piropiro” call.

Zoltan could be a silly place sometimes.

“*Pi, piroro, kii*!”

Still going at it, huh? …Okay, then.

“Pi, piroro, kii.”

I tried copying it on a whim.

“*Kiii*!”

I got a shrill cry back.

It sounds a little annoyed… Did I not pull it off?

“Mmph.”

I heard a voice. Turning around, I saw Rit in the door, covering her mouth while trying not to laugh.

“I—I was just…”

“Maybe I should try, too.”

Rit walked over to the window and put a finger in her cheek.

“*Pi, piroro, kii*!”

“Wow, that was really good.”

Who knew?

“*Pi, piroro, kii*!”

“*Pi, piroro, kii*!”

The piropiro bird called back in response to Rit.



“Sounds like you fooled it.”

“I used to do this a lot as a kid. Guess I still remember how!”

“You have this bird in Loggervia, too?”

“Yeah. It’s a common summer bird there.”

When I’d heard they were migratory birds from the north, I hadn’t imagined they flew all the way here from Loggervia.

“That’s the call they make when they’re searching for a mate.”

“Wow, you know a lot about them.”

“In Loggervia, we get to know them well. The birds lay their eggs in summer but need a mate when they’re migrating. They fly south with their family, and the children leave the nest once they get there. Then, before returning north, the children find partners of their own,” Rit explained in detail.

In the capital of Avalonia where I’d lived, the piropiro bird could only be seen during the short time it took to rest its wings there between migrations.

I’d studied all sorts of things to support Ruti, but I hadn’t known anything about a migratory bird that was so close by.

There was still so much for Rit to teach me.

“What’re they called in Loggervia, by the way? They’re called piropiro birds here in Zoltan.”

“Piropiro birds?! No way!” Rit covered her mouth with her bandana and grinned. “They’re called honeymoon birds in Loggervia. Since they fly from the distant south with their partners.”

“How romantic.”

“The Duchy of Loggervia is known for its military, but that’s not all there is to its people.”

There’s a custom in Loggervia for married couples to take a month off work and spend it together drinking mead. Seeing these birds come together from so far away must have created that vision of an ideal couple.

Loggervia was a nation of snow and steel that dominated the north of Avalon. It was highly militarized, yet it seemed the citizens also had their romantic side.

“Still, though, the piropiro bird? Hehe… I can’t believe they’re called something like that.”

“It’s incredible how differently people in Loggervia and Zoltan see things.”

“It’s so funny!”

Rit smiled again. I could see her white teeth through the gap in her red bandana.

“That reminds me!” she said, clapping her hands.

The piropiro bird flew away at the sudden loud noise.

“About the Harvest Festival this year…”

“Yeah, it’s next week. Gonz was all fired up about it.”

For the people of Zoltan, who loved to avoid work, a festival was the perfect excuse.

That alone was enough to get everyone excited. There wasn’t any of the tradition or ceremony of the festivals in Avalonia, but they were no slouch when it came to fun.

During the Harvest Festival, produce from the northern district of Zoltan and the neighboring farming villages was gathered and displayed for sale, and shops that created items using that produce opened stalls.

It was managed mostly by the farmers in the northern district and the Adventurers Guild.

Most of the people living in our neighborhood would be taking part as guests, but…

“Red & Rit’s Apothecary should sell something!” Rit said, her eyes glistening with excitement.

* * *

“Even if we want to put up a stall, it’s such short notice…”

We kept talking while standing behind the shop counter.

It was a quiet day for the store. I used to worry about that, since we’d only just opened last year, but now it was fine. Demand for an apothecary came in waves.

After a year, we also knew when we could just chat some.

“We had fun at the beach this summer, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. I also enjoyed going out to the island and diving.”

“Me too! However,” Rit said, holding up a finger, “we haven’t done anything to enjoy fall!”

“Yeah, if you just spend fall here in Zoltan working, it’s over before you know it.”

Last year, we’d found ourselves mixed up in Bighawk’s mess,

and autumn had come and gone without us even realizing it.

"I'll have to start preparing for winter before long," I said.

"While that *is* important, right now, fall's staring us in the face!"

"And that's why you want to set up a stall for the festival?"

"Exactly! A lot of your medicines are good for everyday sorts of things, right? I'm sure our regulars all know about it, but we should try to spread the word about the one-year anniversary hair tonic you made."

Rit was totally fired up.

And if she was going to go that far, then I guess I had to pull my weight, too! "All right, then let's give it our best shot!"

"Yay!"

We'd be taking part in a fall festival.

That seemed like a pretty good way to get into the season.

"But the festival's next week, and we don't have a plan… Did you have something in mind?" I asked.

"I figured it would be a stall with medicines set up for sale, but just that might be a bit lacking," replied Rit.

"I doubt many people will stop by a medicine stand when they're in a festive mood."

Compared to the boisterous mood of a festival, a bunch of plain little bottles of medicine would be a little too underwhelming.

"And coming up with a new tonic will be rough timewise."

Everything I could think to make with my knowledge and skills was already being sold, and improving on a medicine we'd already been selling, or adjusting it to use in a different way, would be difficult on such short notice.

"Actually, I just so happen to have a good idea," Rit said, smugly putting her hands on her hips.

"You do?"

"Mhm, want to hear it?"

Rit was purposely puffing herself up. She did that every once in a while.

It was so cute.

"Yeah, I'd love to."

Rit smirked, then slowly pulled a pair of glasses out of her pocket.

They were wizard goggles, a magic item that revealed monsters invisible due to magic…though Rit had probably just pulled them out of her item box for effect.

Right now, they were just for show.

“Your medicines are cheap, effective, and well-liked by everyone who tries them.”

“Yeah, I’m really grateful for that.”

My blessing is Guide—an ability with the purpose of guiding the Hero—so medicine isn’t my specialty. The only medicines I can make are ones accessible with common skills.

“But people can’t understand the appeal of your medicines without trying them.”

“Of course.”

“So our focus this time should be on the containers!” Rit held up a little bottle full of medicine. “Specifically, making these cuter!”

“I see.”

Paying attention to appearances…

“That might be a good idea.”

It wasn’t something I did, but there were plenty of knights who paid special attention to the design of their armor and helmets, aiming to awe or terrify their enemies.

Dragon mail—which was modeled after the creature it was named for—was particularly popular. However, the craftsmanship was unbelievably expensive, made upkeep a pain, and even often reduced its defensive capabilities.

I was utilitarian when it came to gear and left its appearance up to the craftsmen. I’d particularly hated the idea of making my helmet any heavier than necessary and preferred light armor to take advantage of my Lightning Speed.

The point being, I hadn’t even considered changing the design like that, nor did I have the knowledge to do it.

“I don’t really know much about it, though,” I told Rit. “Do you?”

“I’m the delinquent princess who snuck out of the castle to be an adventurer in town. I’m well-versed in both art, from growing up in the palace, and in business, from merchants around town!” Rit answered proudly.

“I can always count on you.”

“Ehehe. Usually, I’m the one giving you advice on the things you make, but for once, it’s the other way around.”

Rit and I had walked completely different paths in life. Because of that, I could rely on her opinions, and I could say with confidence that she was the reason our apothecary was running as smoothly as it was.

That said, the skills we’d both acquired meant that it was my job to actually make whatever it was that took her advice and suggestions into account.

“This is so exciting.”

There was still a lot more we could do running the apothecary, and I looked forward to it more than ever because I could do it with Rit.

“So what should we do n—?”

But before I could finish, the door opened.

“Big Brother.”

“Sir Red.”

It was my little sister, the former Hero Ruti, and Habotan, the demon lord’s daughter who’d moved to Zoltan in the summer.

“Welcome. Did you have breakfast already?” I asked Habotan.

Ruti had always eaten her breakfast when she came at this time.

“Yes, sir. This morning was beans stewed in eggplant.”

“Oh?”

That was a dish I’d never made before. According to Habotan, you mashed the eggplant into a paste and made a sauce with it, which you then cooked the beans in. I asked her about what seasonings went into it, but she didn’t know.

The meals had been perfunctory when she was living on the dark continent, so Habotan didn’t have much knowledge when it came to cooking. As a result, she found the food in Zoltan new and exciting.

She also gave the best sorts of reactions, which had made her incredibly popular with the cooks here. From time to time, Zoltan chefs would drop by the house where she was staying and show off one of their special dishes.

“I wonder… Who was it that came today?”

“I’ll ask when we head back, and we can go there together to eat sometime,” Ruti said enthusiastically.

Yeah, that's a nice idea.

"Sounds good."

"I can't wait."

We both smiled at that.

* * *

Standing at the counter, we sipped herbal tea while we chatted.

"Looks like you've settled into living in Zoltan, Habotan."

"Do you think so?"

"Before, you wouldn't have thought to come by here for no particular reason, right?"

"You're right!" Habotan replied, her eyes widening in surprise.

Rit and I couldn't help but chuckle at her completely honest response.

"What've you been up to lately?"

"This one has been working at raising her blessing level in the vicinity of the town."

"Alone?"

"No, Sir Ruti has been accompanying her when she has time, and this one has also found an adventurer comrade."

"You have?"

Habotan was the demon lord's daughter. She had a special blessing and skills, and could fight with shuriken and shortswords, but barehanded—or rather, using her beast-like claws and inhuman fighting style—was her strongest form. In addition to this, she also had a skill that could nullify magic. That's a skill no normal blessing can access…although Ruti also has a similar skill.

"I doubt any Zoltan adventurers would be able to determine your blessing from how you fight, but some might suspect you of having a special blessing. Is it an adventurer you can trust?"

"On that point, it is fine. Please, do not worry yourself!"

Habotan's chest visibly swelled with pride.

Yeah, I'm worrying myself a little.

I glanced at Ruti.

"I haven't met them, either," she said.

"Really?"

“Humblest apologies, but this one’s comrade prefers not to show himself around Sir Ruti…”

“This is getting more and more suspicious!”

It had gone past the point of being just a joke.

Habotan couldn’t be called “worldly” by any extent of the imagination. Seeing her look at me with a face bereft of even the barest trace of suspicion, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

“Does Torahime know this adventurer?”

“Yes, sir. Lady Torahime said that it was fine if this one worked with him and gave her seal of approval!”

I guess it should be okay if Torahime knows about it…

“I still can’t help but worry.”

“He really is a good person,” said Habotan.

“In that case, bring him along next time, and we can have a meal together.”

“Really?! This one is sure that Sir Frank would love that!”

So his name’s Frank?

It wasn’t really a rare name, but was there an adventurer here named Frank?

Rit and Ruti both shook their heads, too.

…This is suspicious.

“Well, I guess I’ll look forward to meeting this ‘Frank.’”

There was no point in dwelling on it now.

It could be an underling from the demon lord’s army after Habotan…but no, there was no chance of that. I couldn’t imagine anyone evading Ruti’s or Tisse’s notice, and even if they did somehow, they wouldn’t bother trying to approach Habotan in such a roundabout way as posing as an adventurer. They would just try to assassinate her.

So we could continue with the lighthearted chat.

“Right, the Harvest Festival is next week. Raising your level is important, but since you’re staying here in Zoltan, why not take a bit of time off for the festival?”

“Ah, this one heard about the festival from Sir Frank. She is going to run a stall.”

“”What?””

Rit and I both were surprised.

“You’re running a stall at the festival?”

“Yes! This one was thinking of selling accessories and ninja

tools from the Jade Kingdom."

"Should you really be selling those?"

Were they out of money? They were being treated as VIPs from the Jade Kingdom, so they should have been provided with enough silver coins to live on.

"Regarding our monetary situation, Lady Torahime sold the treasures we brought from the demon lord's castle while we were in the Jade Kingdom, so we have enough to live idly for a century."

"I'm jealous… So then why the shop?"

"Social studies. It was Lady Torahime's suggestion."

It was an unexpectedly straightforward answer.

"Torahime really thinks about all sorts of things, doesn't she?"

"Yes, sir! She is truly kind!"

The former heavenly king of the demon lord's army had become a proper parental figure.

Torahime was living with Habotan while continuing her rehabilitation. After the battle with the demon lord's army, she'd been so badly weakened and overexerted that she'd needed long-term recuperation.

Despite being exhausted and on the verge of death upon just getting to Zoltan, only a few days later, she'd used up all the magic power she had left casting Demon's Flare and sealing the souls of the two new heavenly kings. This was just a price she'd have to pay.

I really hoped she'd recover her strength before the demon lord's forces came after Habotan again…but I don't know much about demon physiology, so it was hard to say.

"Still, though, what a coincidence. Rit and I were just thinking of setting up a stall for the festival, too."

"You were?!"

"We decided we wanted to do something seasonal."

"What are you going to sell?" asked Ruti.

There was a spark of interest in her eyes.

"We just came up with it this morning, so we're still fleshing it out, but the idea is to make the medicine bottles more stylish and autumn-y," replied Rit.

Our conversation had gotten interrupted, so I hadn't heard about this yet, but it sounded like Rit even had an idea on the

direction of the design.

Giving the packaging a seasonal feel, huh? …That would be a good reminder for people to buy more when the season changes, since the medicine inside might be getting old.

It was a good idea.

“I can’t believe this.” Ruti’s lips formed an *O* of surprise. “Tisse and I were also planning to open a stall for the festival.”

“You too, Sir Ruti?!”

This time, it was Habotan’s turn to be shocked.

“Our plantation doesn’t have any customers other than physicians and the Merchants Guild. We’re in the red, and we’ve been at a loss over what to do.”

Ruti was holding her head in her hands.

I felt bad for her, but it was still adorable.

“Medicinal herbs have a pretty limited demand.”

They were mostly just used as ingredients for various remedies.

In a small village without a clinic, most families knew how to make the bare essentials, like antidotes. However, in Zoltan, it was better just to buy medicine rather than the herbs themselves.

Part of the reason there hadn’t been a plantation growing medicinal herbs in Zoltan was because it was hard to make money off it.

“I talked it over with Tisse, and we decided that for the Harvest Festival, we’d explain to people how to use herbs to make insect repellents and for pets, and that we’d make herby foods and teas… What do you think, Big Brother?”

“I think that’s a great idea. If people know how to use the herbs themselves, you’ll be able to sell them to normal people, too.”

“I’m glad.”

Ruti had also been thinking about a lot of things.

She’d struggled with the plantation work at first, but now that she was used to it, she was really coming into her own.

“In that case,” Rit said, standing up, “we should set up our stalls together!”

““Yeah!””

Rit’s proposal sounded like fun, and we all immediately agreed.

*　　*　　*

After that, Rit, Ruti, Habotan, and I went to the Adventurers Guild to register to participate in the Harvest Festival.

“Oh! Hi, everyone!”

Megria had been standing at the reception desk talking to an adventurer when she’d noticed us and called out. Hearing that, the adventurers around us all looked in our direction as well.

“Whoa, Ruti, Rit, and the Jade ninja Habotan…?!”

Murmurs spread throughout the room.

Ruti, Zoltan’s strongest adventurer, Rit the Hero, and the ninja Habotan from the Jade Kingdom in the Far East. No Zoltan adventurer would be able to ignore any one of them, yet they’d all just come into the guild together. It was only natural people would be surprised.

As for the apothecary in the midst of their group…nobody so much as looked at me.

It wasn’t as if I particularly wanted to stand out, and it would be a hassle if I attracted too much attention and word got out that I’m the knight Gideon, so I guess it was fine.

Still, as contradictory as it was to feel this way, I was a little bothered. I guess that’s just what it means to be human.

“Hmm, it wasn’t like that a year ago,” Rit said, looking at my face. “Back when we first reunited, you really hated standing out at all. If you ask me, you even went a bit overboard hiding your strength.”

“You think?”

Rit flashed a sparkling smile. “I think you’re more your natural self now!”

Looking at how I’d been right after getting kicked out of the party and at how I was now, living in Zoltan, a lot had changed within me. If I’d been able to find myself again after a heartbreak like that, then I had Rit and Ruti to thank for it.

While we were talking, Habotan briskly stepped forward.

“Sir Megria! What is required in order to set up a shop for the Harvest Festival?!”

“Huh?! You want to put up a stall, Habotan?”

“Yes, ma’am! This one is going to open a ninja shop alongside

Sir Red's apothecary and Sir Ruti's medicinal herb farm."

""A ninja shop!!!""

Every adventurer in the guild leaped at that.

Even though Habotan was a ninja, her voice carried clearly, reaching even the back of the room.

"Eh, uh, huh?"

Adventurers came to gather around the bewildered Habotan.

There were a few people with the Ninja blessing on this side of the Wall at the End of the World, but its real home was on the other side. And there was no way to learn about the sorts of tools and weapons that real ninjas used just from a blessing.

"Do you have tools a Thief like me could use?!"

"I'm a Martial Artist, so have you got any gear that doesn't impede movement?!"

"There's a Ninja in my party. I'll be sure to bring him by your shop!"

Habotan was completely overwhelmed by the wall of noise.

It had been some time since she'd arrived in Zoltan, but she still wasn't really used to having people surround her…despite being the future demon lord.

"All right, everyone, that's enough for now," I called out. "That's part of the fun of the festival, so you don't want to spoil the surprise now, right?"

"And we have to apply for a stall with Megria first anyway," added Rit.

The adventurers dispersed, apparently satisfied by our explanations.

"It looks like you caught everyone's attention."

"Y-yes, this one will do her best." Habotan looked nervous yet still determined. That said, I wanted her to enjoy the festival rather than work hard for it.

"Oh, right. Megria, the three of us would like to have our stalls all together, if that's possible."

"Let me see…"

Megria pulled out a thick notebook and flipped through the pages. It must've had the locations and names for all the stalls being run for the festival.

"How much space will you be needing?"

"For my shop, just the standard amount for a stall…"

I glanced over at Ruti and Habotan.

“I’m planning to have a kitchen in mine, so I’ll need one double the size.”

“Lady Torahime advised this one to store the valuable goods in a case, so slightly more space than the standard stall would be preferable.”

“So you’ll be wanting proper stalls, then. In that case, the south side of the northern district might be better than the plaza.”

During the Harvest Festival, there were lots of stalls that just spread out a cloth and sold items from on top of it. Those sorts of shops tended to be gathered together in the space set aside for them at the market or in the harbor plaza. Those areas got a lot of customers, but they weren’t the sort of places where you could take your time looking at specific shops.

“I was hoping to be on one of the streets in the northern district rather than in the plaza,” Rit said. “The main events for the festival are there and in the central district, right? The street connecting them is where it gets the busiest, and lots of people will look around while waiting for the shows to start.”

“But wouldn’t such an ideal place already be all filled up?” I asked dubiously.

Megria giggled.

“Everyone in Zoltan waits for the last minute to apply. It’s still half empty.”

“…The festival’s next week.”

When I was a low-ranking member of the Bahamut Knights, I’d been called up to work security for the festivals in the capital. That was how I knew festivals there started filling up a year in advance… In other words, as soon as one ended, people immediately started submitting their applications to run stalls for the following year. Though, there, it was less about being excited for the festival and more about shops trying to take advantage of the festive mood to draw in customers.

If you asked me which was better…I’d say I preferred the way they do it here now.

I really have turned into a proper citizen of Zoltan.

“I don’t want to start any arguments just because we applied early, though.”

“That’s just how it goes every year. The only people who might

cause some sort of problem are a handful of merchants from central, and they've already submitted their applications. Most of the stalls are just people looking to enjoy the festival from the sales side of things."

"That's Zoltan for you."

"And if you're all setting up stalls, I imagine it will become a topic of great interest. So let's put you on the main street of the northern district where a bit of a crowd won't cause issues," Megria said, glancing around.

A few adventurers were standing in the middle of the guild, trying to hear what we were saying. It seemed rumors were already spreading fast.

"It looks like it's shaping up to be an exciting festival."

"Yeah!"

Rit and I looked at each other with smiles.

* * *

Three days before Red and his friends decided to take part in the Harvest Festival, a fishing village in the west of Avalon was throwing a grand Harvest Festival to celebrate their liberation from the demon lord's army.

Harvest Festivals happened on different days in different lands, and this village held theirs a little bit earlier than most. Unlike festivals in larger towns, the main events here were eating, drinking, and celebrating, but in the morning, everyone got excited to compare who had the biggest catch.

"Bui, the village is filled with festival joy."



“Yes, sir.”

Two travelers were sitting drinking ale.

One was a handsome young man with a swarthy complexion named Bui. Next to him was a swordsman with a tempered body and sharp features.

A first-rate swordsman would recognize the Jade Kingdom influence in the long, gently curved sword at his waist. But in this village, there were only those without strength who’d endured hardship these past years.

They weren’t the sort of people who would question the two travelers’ identities.

“Sir swordsman, please have this.”

A villager held out a plate of steamed fish.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m just sorry this is all we can manage in thanks.”

“It’s more difficult for me to find food and drink than to slay an owlbear.”

“With our youngsters finally on their way home from the war, there’s no way we would have been able to face them if the village was destroyed by an owlbear.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, those of us who remained behind have a duty to stay alive and welcome home our children, for the sake of those who fought and those who died.”

“So that’s your battle, is it? What magnificent resolve.”

The swordsman flashed a white smile at the villager and accepted the plate.

The reason for the two travelers’ warm welcome was because they had defeated an owlbear that was threatening the village. The swordsman was a savior to the people here, none of whom could fight.

“This is a nice village. I’m glad I saved it.”

“I agree. Though they may have different blessings, they share the same joy.”

The two men smiled from the bottom of their hearts.

Even though so many of the tragedies that had befallen this village were their fault.

Bui’s true form was Shisandan, the Asura demon who’d once

fought Red and friends.

And the swordsman's true form was Demon Lord Taraxon.

The war had come to an end on this continent, but the demon lord's journey here continued.

Chapter 2

Preparations for the Harvest Festival

The next morning, once Rit, Ruti, Tisse, Habotan, and I finished breakfast, we started talking about our plans for the festival.

“Ruti and Habotan, you two have already decided on what you’re going to sell?”

Habotan was planning to sell some of the gear she’d brought with her from the Far East, so she didn’t need to prepare anything.

Ruti had talked about selling the sort of medicinal herbs that people could use in their daily lives, so it sounded like she already knew what she was planning to sell as well.

Yet neither of them nodded. They looked unsure about something.

“This one does not know what the people of Zoltan might wish to buy.”

“I see. There aren’t any other stores here selling Eastern gear, so there’s nothing to use for reference, either.”

“Indeed… Since your store is closed tomorrow, I was hoping to ask your opinion.”

So she’s got the goods but isn’t sure about what to put out.

If Habotan had bigger pieces of gear, she wouldn’t be able to display everything at once. That meant it was important to know what to focus on.

“There’s one thing I’m not sure about, too.”

“What’s that, Ruti?”

“We’ve decided on all the products we’re going to sell. We’ve got medicinal herbs for animals, and bath salts…”

“Nice. Sounds like you and Tisse are all set.”

“But we’re still working on the menu for dishes using medicinal herbs.”

“Cooking, huh? …I bet it’s hard to balance the flavors right.”

“I was hoping to ask you about it when you’re off tomorrow.”

“Was that the original reason you came by yesterday?”

In Ruti’s case, she always stopped by, so maybe the festival had nothing to do with it.

“But you have your own preparations to make, Big Brother,” Ruti murmured dejectedly.

I smiled and patted her on the head.

“Don’t let that bother you. It’s a festival, so we should all enjoy ourselves. And you can give Rit and me some advice on the containers we’re making, in return.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best…!”

Ruti held my hand resting on her head and nodded, a determined look in her eyes.

It was a very peaceful sort of resolve.

“Isn’t that nice, Ms. Ruti?”

“Mhm.”

Tisse also looked relieved.

“Are you making the food, Tisse?”

“Yes. Mister Crawly Wawly and I have the Cooking skill, so we will be the ones preparing the food.”

Oh yeah, he can make food, too.

Thinking back, I remembered eating the spaghetti Mister Crawly Wawly had made. Summer this year had been a blast, so we had to make sure fall was fun, too.

We’re serious about enjoying our quiet life here.

“But there’s still so much for you and Rit to do,” Tisse said.

“True. I mean, we only got the idea to take part in the festival yesterday.”

“Yeah, we haven’t gotten anything ready so far.” Rit crossed her arms and let out a groan. “Mrgh, at this rate, maybe we should split up tomorrow, and I can go look for a craftsman.”

““No!”” Ruti, Tisse, and Habotan all cried out at once.

“You should enjoy the festival with Big Brother,” said Ruti.

“I mean, yeah, but…”

“I have an idea,” Ruti said firmly. “I’ll watch the store today, and you and Big Brother can go look for a craftsman.”

“I-in that case, this one will assist as well!” Habotan volunteered.

“That is an excellent idea. I will take care of the work at the

plantation, so why not let Ms. Ruti and Habotan hold down the fort here?”

The three of them were all willing to help out so Rit and I could enjoy the festival together.

“All right, as long as you don’t mind,” I replied with a smile.

Just as I wanted to help the three of them make fun memories of the festival, Ruti, Tisse, and Habotan all wanted me and Rit to enjoy it.

It was a peaceful, happy time in Zoltan.

* * *

It was just after nine in the morning, and Rit and I were walking through the town.

“Glass or ceramic…?”

We were thinking about what to use for the bottles’ material.

“What about wood?”

“That could work, too… Some medicines can start to eat away at wood, but the ones we’re planning to sell for the festival are pretty normal, so any container that can keep them dry should be fine.”

“What about a nice autumn leaf design painted on a wooden bottle?”

Even in the middle of town, there were still traces of nature. Looking to the side of the road, I could see trees full of red leaves swaying in the breeze. As I gazed at them, the image Rit had described appeared in my mind.

“Yeah, that might be nice.”

“Right?!”

In which case, of the people we know…

“He’s the only one.”

“I can only think of one person, too.”

A friend we could rely on.

“Storm!”

“Stormy!”

The furniture craftsman Stormthunder.

No one in Zoltan knew lumber better than he did.

⁕ ⁕ ⁕

“You here, Stormy?” Rit called out as we stepped into his shop.

“…Hm?”

Ordinarily, he would have come flying out, but today the place was quiet.

“I can sense someone inside, though.”

“Yeah, Storm’s definitely here…”

It wasn’t normally like this. Something was weird.

We headed to the workroom in the back.

I opened the magnificent walnut door and peered in…

“Storm?!”

The half-orc craftsman was lying on the ground in front of a mostly built vanity.

Rit and I quickly ran over.

“Red, is he all right?” Rit asked, sounding worried.

But then…

“*Hrk… Haah…*”

“…Seems like he just wore himself out and fell asleep.”

Rit breathed a sigh of relief.

⁕ ⁕ ⁕

“If you’re tired, shouldn’t you just sleep in a bed?” I asked.

“I’ve still got work to do,” Storm said, shaking his head. “I have to get this vanity finished for the festival.”

“Oh, that’s a level of motivation you don’t often see in Zoltan.”

“Zoltan’s seeped into my bones, but I am still an immigrant… I might slack off at work, but I ain’t gonna slack off for a festival!”

“Zoltan really has gotten hold of you, then.”

I knew he made a piece of furniture every year to exhibit and sell at the Harvest Festival, but I hadn’t realized he was so insistent about it.

“People generally already know where they’re gonna shop for the furniture they want, particularly those who procure goods for nobles. Making a big impression at a festival like this is the only way to find new clients.”

“I see.”

Storm had lots to consider, since he was running his own business. Business owners like us had it rough.

“Come to think of it, you were always hanging out and drinking with Gonz at other festivals, but it seems like you’re really busy for the Harvest Festival.”

“That damn Gonz… Despite how he is, he’s Zoltan’s top carpenter. Jobs just roll in for him even if he doesn’t do anything.”

“He’s lazy, but he’s definitely skilled.”

Starting a sentence with “They’re lazy, but…” could apply to pretty much anyone in Zoltan, but even with that disclaimer, Gonz’s skills really were exceptional. Despite his personality, he never had to worry about work.

And in truth, he was actually pretty well-off.

“He’s a far cry from you, Storm.”

“Who asked you?! I make more than your apothecary!”

“What’s that? Well, the three of us are all first-class at our jobs.”

“Oh, uh, yeah…”

Storm’s bald head turned red. There was no point in dwelling on a middle-aged man blushing, though.

“But I see. So you’re busy, then?”

“Yeah. Can’t say the same for you, but I can’t be sleeping if Ms. Rit is stopping by!”

Storm quickly switched to his ingratiating salesman’s smile. It was a side of him that only VIP clients like Rit and nobles from central Zoltan saw.

Storm wasn’t just a craftsman but a salesman.

At first, I’d sort of averted my eyes to it, thinking it was just the unpleasant reality for the neighborhood craftsman who was usually so feisty. But now, having spent more than a year running my own shop, I’d started to think of it as a warrior fighting for the sake of his shop and the products he made.

I should practice it myself.

“Mm, since we’re here, why don’t we get a shelf for tableware?” Rit said.

“I am as ever grateful for your continued patronage!”

“Do we even have a place for it…?” I murmured.

Storm glared at me upon hearing that.

“Isn’t it about time you considered expanding your house?”

“It was just built last year! It’s practically new!”

“Last time, you had to buy some bigger furniture for Ms. Rit! It’s the same as before—how dependable are you?!”

“Ghhh.”

Storm and I started our usual back-and-forth. It was a familiar exchange by now.

“Okay, okay, we’re all short on time, so let’s leave it there. We’ll take the shelf home ourselves, but there’s something we want to discuss with you, Stormy.”

“There is? Of course, whatever you’d like, Ms. Rit!”

“Thank you, but this time it isn’t about furniture.”

“What do you mean…?” Storm asked, cocking his head.

“The truth is, we’re planning on setting up a stall for the Harvest Festival.”

“What?! That’s rather sudden.”

“We wanted to do something seasonal, and the festival was a nice fit.”

“Ahh, yet another wonderful idea from Ms. Rit.”

“That’s kind of you to say. So we wanted to ask if you would make us some nice autumnal wooden containers for medicine!”

“Oh?!”

“Coming up with a new medicine on such short notice isn’t really possible, but making new containers is something that can be done a lot faster, right?”

“Ah, Ms. Rit, you’ll be a wonderful wife and a wise mother.”

Rit blushed a bit at Storm’s obsequious compliments. She hid her mouth behind the red bandana around her neck.

“So, Storm,” I switched in. “You’re an expert at woodworking, right? We were hoping you could help us out, but…” We’d been planning on asking him to make them, but seeing Storm sleeping in the workshop like that, it was clear he didn’t have any time to spare. “It looks like you’re busy with your own festival preparations, so do you know any other good craftsmen who might be able to do it?”

“…”

Storm crossed his arms and sank deep into thought.

“Or is everyone else also busy right now?” I asked.

Maybe the other craftsmen were all busy making display pieces for the festival, just like he was. If that was the case, it

would be hard to get the containers made…

“Did you really think I’d turned down a request from Ms. Rit?” Storm grinned fearlessly.

“But you’re so busy, you collapsed!”

“I’ve only shown a hundred percent of my full strength.”

“That’s all of it.”

“I haven’t done this in a decade, but really going all out and breaking my limits for once’ll be fun.”

“You don’t have to force yourself!” Rit immediately responded. “I just thought of it yesterday, so don’t push yourself too hard! I love the furniture you make, so it’s not like I’ll stop buying from you just because you said no to one request.”

“Hehe, that makes me happy to hear…but this is one of the joys of being a craftsman.”

The exhaustion was clear on his face, but his eyes were brimming with life.

There were times like that for knights and adventurers, too—setting out on an adventure where your survival was in jeopardy still brought a sense of euphoria, and the sights you could only see after overcoming such perils were a great reward.

Enjoying life doesn’t just mean taking everything easy. It means finding joy by living the way you want.

“And the vanity I’m making is mostly finished already.”

“Really? You seem pretty stressed over it, though.”

“The final bit is the hard part. I can’t quite picture how it all comes together…but making bottles for medicine isn’t a job I’ve done before, and I might just get an idea for this in the process.”

“I get that. When you hit a wall, sometimes a change of perspective can bring things into focus.”

“Right? So I’ll take the job.”

“”Thank you!””

* * *

“Do you have any plans for later?” Storm asked me.

“No, my sister’s watching the store, so we’ve got time today. But tomorrow, we’re going to be helping out her and Habotan.”

“In that case, we should get the design meeting done today.”

“Yeah, that would be a real help.”

“All right, then let’s get to it!”

Storm stood up and moved to his work desk, which was raised at an angle so he could draw schematics on it. The desk currently held a sketch of the vanity and a more detailed schematic showing it from the front, back, and side.

It was interesting getting a look into Storm’s work process.

He put the sketches away in a drawer and pulled out a new piece of paper.

“I’ll finish the sketch today,” Storm said, picking up a pencil. “I always start with a rough sketch, then a cleaner sketch, and then the schematic. I start the rough one just by doodling, so you two start talking through your ideas.”

“Got it,” I said.

Rit and I both nodded.

Instead of the usual cheerful half-orc we knew, Storm looked like a first-rate craftsman.

We really do have reliable friends.

“The concept is a medicine container that has an autumn feel to it. The medicines will be everyday sorts of things, so they probably won’t last more than one or two months.”

Storm’s pencil started moving as he listened to Rit’s explanation. He had a quick but delicate touch.

“The basic shape is something like the usual bottles at your place, but I can change that if you think of a good design.”

“It’ll feel different when it’s made out of wood.”

“Right. The goal here is to catch the eye and feel comfortable in your hand.”

“So it’s sort of like making a hilt for a sword,” I said.

“Yeah, that is like a hilt!” added Rit. “You need both of those factors.”

“I guess it’s probably like that. Not that I’ve ever made a hilt, though.”

Storm smiled wryly as Rit and I both connected with that analogy.

“You two really are well matched.”

“Ehehe.” Rit blushed and laughed.

“When Red said he was living with you, I wondered what sort of miracle had happened, or if God was just rolling dice and got

some sort of crazy result."

"You really thought that?" I asked.

I could remember how shocked he'd looked when I'd come into his shop with Rit.

"Of course I'd be surprised. At the time, you were just a friend who'd bought a cheap bed after haggling half an hour for a discount!"

"Sorry about that. That was right after I moved to Zoltan when I was saving up money to get my apothecary started."

"I knew that, which is why I gave you a bit of a discount."

That brought back memories. At the time, I'd been renting a room in a cheap little townhouse, and I'd mostly just eaten potatoes and eggs. Those two foods had all the nutrients needed to maintain my body, and I'd changed it up occasionally with greens I picked in the mountains or fish I caught in the river.

"You knew I was in Zoltan, so you should have come to meet me right away," Rit said with a pout.

Back then, I'd been scared of seeing her. I hadn't wanted to disappoint anyone else after getting kicked out of my party…

"But I'm glad you came to find me, Rit."

"Red…"

"Hey, don't forget I'm here."

Storm gave us another wry smile. His hands hadn't stopped moving at all during the conversation.

"Oh?"

Looking at the design on the white paper, I saw that Storm had drawn the silhouette of a bottle with a bit of a bulge at the middle. It had a red leaf in the center, with two birds around it, balancing out the overall design.

"That's really good. Did you think of that while we were talking?"

"Listening to the two of you, I thought it might be nice to carve in a pair of animals. And for the leaf here, I'd use a lacquer on top of the wood."

"That's great! It's really close to what I'd imagined!" exclaimed Rit.

"In that case, I'll come up with a few different patterns based on this. What do you think about making the birds a bit more abstract?"

“Abstract…? You mean like incorporating them more into the bottle’s design?”

“Yeah, you get it. Furniture and household items are there to be used. Same goes for a medicine bottle, right? The most important thing is that it’s easy to use, so the form and function need to work together.”

“Just like the ornamentation on swords and armor,” remarked Rit.

“Though nobles’ helmets prioritize appearance, so they’re hard to use,” I added.

“Again with the armor examples. But you’re right; it’s the same way with furniture. That said, when people buy things for someone other than themselves, they tend to buy pieces that look nice but are hard to use,” Storm said with a shrug.

Armor and furniture were both tools used by people, so they were fairly similar in that way.

* * *

“How about this?!”

““Oooh!””

Rit and I simultaneously reacted to the finished sketch.

“It’s cute, and it looks like it would fit well in your hand!”

“I know, right?” Storm was in a good mood.

“It really is a nice design,” I said. “Still a bit subdued, so it’d fit in just fine on a table or a shelf.”

“Medicine is something you always need to have on hand, so I made sure it wouldn’t stick out in a room. And with a design like this, it should look good lined up at your stall or on the shelf in your store.”

Rit and I both agreed, completely satisfied.

“In that case, I’ll work off this.”

“Yeah, please do.”

“Seeing as I’m the one making it, if I have this sketch, I won’t even need a schematic. I’ll make a sample, so come by the day after tomorrow to take a look at it.”

We’d have something we liked in no time at all.

Rit and I smiled; we were glad we’d come to Storm with this.

* * *

It was already evening by the time we walked home.

We'd been so focused on the container design that we'd forgotten to eat any lunch.

"Should we stop by the market to get ingredients for dinner?" I asked.

"Yeah. We do have company, after all," replied Rit.

"Want to go by the plantation to invite Tisse, too?"

"That's a nice idea! We're all going to get together tomorrow, but I'd still like to talk today as well."

"Me too. I wonder how they'll react when they hear about what happened with Storm today."

"I bet Tisse will be surprised."

"Why Tisse?"

"She's been getting all the furniture together for where she and Ruti are living. She's been to see Stormy about the bath and surroundings, in particular."

"Ahh."

Only some liquids could be placed in the containers we were having made this time, but Storm really knew his stuff when it came to water-resistant lacquer. That made sense, since he also made chairs and tables for outdoor use.

"Tisse said his work was reliable but that he has a tendency to miss delivery dates. I've never really minded that myself, since I was just buying items he already had on display."

"He's quite serious by Zoltan standards, but the mood here's still gotten to him."

"And Tisse is the type to carefully plan things out, too."

That said, even Tisse had gotten pretty acclimated to Zoltan this past year. She could smile and enjoy herself even if things didn't all go smoothly.

"Today's been a fun day," I said.

"Yeah!"

Even without the results to show for it, I'd really enjoyed the process of preparing for the festival together with my friends. That's why this was a battle we were certain to win. Whether or not we succeeded, we would never forget the fun fall memories

we'd made.

It was a type of victory I'd never known as a knight.

"Zoltan is such a nice place," Rit said.

"Yeah, it really is."

And with that brief exchange, we walked toward the market.

* * *

"What do you mean there are no ships?!" a traveler's voice echoed in the room.

They were in the town of Ryugan, in a small hut on the harbor.

Standing on the large Kronogan River, Ryugan was the only town where you could get a ship from here heading east.

"Like I said, the oarsmen are exhausted, so I can't send out any more ferries today."

"Huh? You'd do that even with guests waiting?!"

"We don't have enough oarsmen 'cause of the war. People will start to gather here now there's peace…but that's just how it is, so come back tomorrow."

The group of travelers stepped forward, about to erupt, unwilling to accept the worker's explanation.

"In that case, what if we take an oar?"

A tall swordsman spoke up from behind them, and the travelers let out a small noise of surprise.

"As you can see, I have confidence in my strength."

The worker shrank back upon seeing the swordsman's burly body.

"We're happy to pay the usual fare. If you can spare us just one ferryman, my comrade and I will row the boat. That's not such a bad deal, is it?"

"Well, in that case…"

The travelers all cheered, and the swordsman flashed a big, bright smile. There was a charisma to it that drew people to him.

But even if the swordsman Taraxon hid his identity and changed his appearance, he was still the demon lord.

"You're a lifesaver," one man said to Taraxon. He had an arrow scar on his forehead and wore lightweight traveling armor, but the bastard sword at his hip was a bit heavier and longer than a

simple sword for traveling. It could be wielded in one hand or two and was the type of sword preferred by many soldiers.

"The name's Harmon. Harmon Pearlman, from Zoltan. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Taraxon. Nice to meet you, Harmon."

"Eh?! T-Taraxon…?"

Harmon's voice trailed off when he heard the man's name.

"Sorry for surprising you. I have the same name as the demon lord."

"N-no, just having the same name doesn't make you evil or anything…but it is unusual."

"Yes, I believe it comes from the dark continent's language. It might surprise people, but it's the name I was given by my parents, so I'm not ashamed of it."

"Y-yeah, you're right! Sorry for saying something strange!"

"Don't worry about it. You're a good guy to apologize like that to someone you don't even know."

"Ha-ha… Let me buy you a drink once we reach the other side. I've got a bit of money to spare as a reward from the war."

Harmon let his guard down with Taraxon and started talking about all sorts of different things. Taraxon listened with interest as Harmon told him about the state of the war and described his memories from his hometown.

"So I volunteered for the war. Now that it's over, I can finally go back to Zoltan."

"You did well to survive."

"I was just a grunt. All I had to do was hold a spear and shield, line up with my buddies, and move forward or back depending on what they said. My friends were all stronger than me, and I thought they were all heroes…but they were cut down by the demon lord's army like nothing."

"Heroes can stand on the battlefield because there are soldiers holding the line. The reason humanity won is because you and your comrades were there."

"Heh, hehe, you're gonna make me blush… I'm sure your battles were even more impressive than mine, though."

"I wasn't on the front lines."

"Really? You seem so strong, so I just assumed."

"In that sense, you could be called more of a hero than me,

since you set foot on the battlefield of your own volition to save the world.”

“It doesn’t sound so bad when you put it like that… I feel like we’ll get along. All right, we’re drinking when we reach the other side! I’ll cover the second round, too!”

Once they got the signal that preparations were ready, Harmon headed to where the ferryman waited.

Watching him from behind, the demon lord wore on his face… a relaxed smile bereft of any malice.

Taraxon simply felt that he’d met a pleasant young man.

* * *

The next day.

It was a holiday in Zoltan, so Red & Rit’s Apothecary was closed for the day.

“Hm-hmm. ♪”

I hummed to myself as I took care of the breakfast preparations.

Today’s menu was a fall vegetable soup and a pasta with artichokes and small fish, easy on the cheese for the pasta.

“This should be enough for the morning.”

Ruti, Tisse, and Habotan would be arriving soon.

Today, I would be talking with Ruti about cooking with medicinal herbs, and with Habotan about her ninja tools. It was hard to judge flavors accurately on an empty stomach, though, so it was better to have some food first. At the festival, most of the people stopping by would probably have already had some food from other stalls, so they wouldn’t be coming in on an empty stomach, either.

“I wonder what sort of food Ruti and the others will make.”

I’d bought a lot of different ingredients at the market last night, in case they wanted to try a few different things.

It was shaping up to be another fun day.

* * *

After we’d finished breakfast, we all gathered in the living room.

“Now then, this one shall begin.”

Habotan laid down a cloth and set out a variety of gear from the Jade Kingdom.

“Shuriken, kunai, caltrops, katana, wakizashi, grappling hook, woven hat, hand towel, medicine, ink brush, smoke bombs, spirit ash, light powder, demon moss, demonic killer mushroom, devil’s claw, improvised siege cannon…”

“…Pretty much half of those aren’t ninja tools but demon lord items, aren’t they?”

“Ahh, this one made a mistake! Please forget that!”

Habotan had dangerous stuff like that hidden away, too?

Rit’s smile, like mine, twitched a bit.

“Oh, I saw this while we were traveling.”

“Yeah, it takes me back.”



Tisse and Ruti peered down with interest.

Now that they mentioned it, I remembered warriors in the demon lord's army equipped with those strange "devil's claws."

"Would you like to try using it, Sir Ruti?"

"Yeah."

Oh, the former Hero wielding a demon weapon. If anyone from the church saw, they'd probably faint.

Ruti slipped the claw onto a finger on her right hand and swung it twice.

"It's really hard to use."

She sure didn't hesitate to show her displeasure.

"Demons also use swords and spears, so why would they use something like this? It has such a short reach that's so hard to get any power behind it."

Rit put the claw onto her left pointer finger and cocked her head.

"We upper-tier demons can freely change form, so weapons such as swords and spears feel different depending on the user's body. However, devil's claws can be used the same way, regardless of form."

"Right. So it's a weapon for those who can transform their shape."

I tried putting it on, too…but there was no way I'd be able to block an opponent's attack or pierce a monster's thick hide with it.

That was demons for you, being able to fight with something like this.

"Do you think there may be a demand for this devil's claw?" asked Habotan.

"You should probably skip the demon lord stuff. For any number of reasons."

"I see…"

Habotan looked crestfallen.

But of course we couldn't do something like that.

"Also, these people are coming to a festival, so you probably shouldn't stock things that are too expensive," Rit said.

"That's true. Shuriken would be good to draw customers in, but you should probably keep the rest of your stock to cheaper items."

“Okay…”

“In that case, why not set up something so people can try using the shuriken?” Ruti suggested.

“The claw was hard to use but interesting. I think there’ll be lots of people who’d be interested in trying out Jade Kingdom shuriken.”

“Oh, what an excellent idea, Sir Ruti!” Habotan’s eyes gleamed excitedly.

“Based on the space you were given, the target would have to be a little under two meters away. It’s not that far, but it should be enough for someone using a throwing weapon they’ve never tried before.”

“Shuriken are difficult to use for people without any experience, so that will be plenty.”

Habotan’s chest swelled with pride as she declared that, of course, she could hit the target perfectly. Her smug, childish look was adorable.

“I can do it, too.” Ruti reached out for a shuriken, wanting to prove Habotan wrong, but…

“I don’t want you throwing them in our store,” I said.

“That’s a shame.”

Ruti obediently pulled back her hand. Beside her, Tisse also looked disappointed.

“Ms. Ruti and I would not miss our mark.”

I knew that, but still, I’d rather they didn’t throw weapons around indoors.

“Anyway, it sounds like Habotan has a plan for her shop now.”

“Yes, sir! Draw customers in with shuriken to sell hand towels and brushes!”

She could probably borrow a target from the training range, no problem.

“Thank you very much! It is fun running a shop!” Habotan said with a smile.

“You’re not actually a ninja, though, are you?”

“Correct. My true identity is the demon lord’s daughter,” she declared boldly.

I’m sure she only said it just because she trusted us…but we probably needed to teach her not to go around announcing that.

Rit smiled awkwardly and picked up the conversation.

“You really are knowledgeable about ninja tools and such, and you seem to be set on being a ninja, though, so I guess it just seems a little strange.”

“Ah, that?” Habotan leaned forward as she started talking. “It is a bit of a long story, but…”

She told us about an adventure she’d had while hiding in the Jade Kingdom.

It was really long, so cutting it down to just the essentials, Habotan and a ninja master who was protecting her had fought a spy from the demon lord’s army who’d snuck into the Jade Kingdom, and that experience had left a profound impact on her.

The original plan had been for Habotan to hide herself by pretending to be a ninja, and Torahime had thought she’d be able to pick up some of the personality traits and mannerisms in the process of understanding ninjas by learning their art of disguise.

Apparently, she hadn’t expected Habotan to get so obsessed with it, either.

“I want to demonstrate the appeal of ninjas for the people of Zoltan.”

It really felt like she was misunderstanding things a little bit, though.

Ninjas weren’t really something you were supposed to tell the whole world about.

* * *

Tisse and Ruti were in the kitchen with aprons on. Mister Crawly Wawly was there, too, wearing a bandana on his head. He didn’t have any hair, though, so it probably didn’t matter.

“Cooking with medicinal herbs is really hard.” Ruti crossed her arms in a mild show of frustration.

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly crossed their arms as well.

“How many dishes are you looking to have?”

“One dish to eat while sitting at a bench, one to eat while walking around, and one to drink.”

That made sense.

Food wasn’t the main focus of her stall; Ruti’s goal was to demonstrate uses for her herbs and to increase their customer

base to beyond just apothecaries and clinics. That meant cutting down on the number of dishes and focusing on efficient preparation time was the better choice.

“We’ve decided on the drink already.”

“A drink using medicinal herbs… So herbal tea?”

“Nope. I’ll make it now.”

Ruti put a few of the herbs she’d brought into a big metal cup, along with a pear and some berries. Then she put a fork in it.

“Whoa.”

“You’re stirring it so fast!”

She was blending it faster than the naked eye could follow. It turned into a slurry, then a juice. When she was done, Ruti poured it out into the five small cups that she’d set out beforehand.

“All done.”

She’d only added the raw ingredients, but there wasn’t any trace of them left in the juice.

I took a sip… The drink was quite bitter, but it was tasty, and it had a nice, healthy sort of flavor.

There was only one problem.

“Can a normal person make this?” I asked.

“Yeah, even I can’t copy Ruti,” said Rit.

An average person could squeeze a pear and some berries to get juice. Medicinal herbs, however, generally had to be ground down with a mortar and pestle over a long period of time. Ruti was the only person who could blend them into a juice using just a fork.

“Your goal is to show normal people ways of using medicinal herbs so they’ll buy them from you, right?”

“Mhm.”

“Then wouldn’t it be a problem to serve something that only you can make?”

“I didn’t think of that.” Ruti was astonished.

Lately, it had seemed like Ruti really had things together, but apparently she still had a few blind spots.

“But it’s so tasty…”

“The idea of making a juice… Even if you don’t use it this time for the festival, you should do it when you have another opportunity.”

“Yeah. One day, I’ll open a medicinal herb café.”

“Hmmm, that might be expanding your business a bit *too* much.”

The festival drink was going to need some more thought.

“I have an idea for the food,” Tisse said.

“We shouldn’t have a problem if you came up with it.”

Tisse had a good head on her shoulders, so I was sure she’d have thought of something easy to make that suited their goal…

“Then allow me to demonstrate.”

She set out various herbs, daikon, and an egg.

“First, boil two types of herbs together with salt to remove the bitter taste, then add sugar, soy sauce, and seaweed to make a soup. Peel the daikon, cut it into slices, score it, and then cook it with another herb. Adding this herb makes the daikon softer to eat.

“After boiling the egg, add a healthy pinch of this herb here, and it will soak up the flavor. This will give the boiled egg an interesting new taste, but when eaten with the soup, the flavor changes in a surprising way. Then simmer it for about five hours.

“I’ve also prepared *chikuwa* with medicinal herbs worked into the fish paste. It won’t be to everyone’s tastes, but it’s suited for people who find themselves in a rut eating *oden* every day.

“Once that is all done, just stew everything together in the soup, and you’ll end up with an *oden* like this one here.”

After her last bit of rapid-fire explanation, Tisse set out the completed dish she’d prepared beforehand.

Right, Tisse has really strong opinions when it comes to oden *and baths…*

“……”

“Uhh…”

“Tisse, that looks delicious.”

“Ooh, this one has never seen *oden* prepared with medicinal herbs before!”

Ruti and Habotan were impressed, but Rit and I had awkward looks on our faces.

Steeling myself, I spoke up.

“Tisse, I’m going to say something a little harsh—no, pretty harsh, so just prepare yourself.”

“I know what you’re going to say, Red,” Tisse said, holding up

her hand.

As expected of Tisse, it seemed like she'd already caught on to the problem.

"You wish to explain that creating an original type of *oden* is like setting sail on the ocean without a compass."

"Huh?"

"I understand. There are a wealth of options for what to put in *oden*; however, the most popular are the standard menu of daikon, egg, beef tendon, and *chikuwa*. The conclusion since ancient *oden* times is that the classical form should be mastered rather than creating an original type. Yet beyond the edge of the sea lies an unknown world to discover, and seeking that dream is human nature, is it not?"

"Uh, no… I don't get it at all."

"I am not so presumptuous as to believe I can change the course of *oden* history, however this is *medicinal oden*!" Tisse's eyes gleamed as she raised her right arm to the sky. "I believe it can bring people the courage to sail the unknown seas."

"What a moving speech," Ruti said, applauding generously.

Tisse has these silly sorts of moments every once in a while.

"No, it's not that."

"Hm?"

"Listen, Tisse… Here in Zoltan, they don't have a culture of making *oden* at home."



“But that’s…!”

“If anything, honestly, it’s pretty minor here.”

“……!!”

Tisse’s eyes widened.

It was her most shocked expression.

Sadly, though, it was the truth. To people here in Zoltan, *oden* was a strange, foreign dish. Even if it was good, it wasn’t something they would eat every day at home.

“So you would have to encourage a practice of making *oden* at home before even getting to the medicinal herb question.”

“That’s hard to believe…”

“Well…maybe you could open an *oden* school or something.”

“That’s it! Wonderful idea, Red!”

I’d been half joking, but Tisse was all fired up.

Anyway, I guess it was good she was feeling better.

“For now, though, it’s probably better to focus on household cooking using medicinal herbs. Trying to encourage the spread of *oden* and medicinal cooking at the same time would be incredibly difficult.”

I took an egg from Tisse’s *oden* and tried it.

Surprisingly, it didn’t taste bitter at all. The flavor of the herbs was mild and went well with the egg. I was sure it would be even better with some salt or mustard. It would work well as part of a main dish, as a snack, or even just to go with a beer.

“*Oden* itself might be difficult, but this egg is a good idea.”

“Oooh!”

“And the herbs you’re using. *Serpens ebrius* for upset stomachs and blue rust leaf to help blood flow, right? Not to mention the egg’s packed with nutrients. There won’t be any obvious visible changes if you use the herbs like that, but if you eat these regularly, it’ll lead to an overall improvement in your health.”

Rit and the others also reached out to try some egg.

“Oh, this is good!”

She was a fan, too.

“I’m pretty sure people here know how to boil an egg, so they can make them at home. And although it takes time to boil the eggs, you can prepare them in advance, so they won’t take any time to get ready at your stall,” Rit said.

“I think you should sell them as something people can eat

while they're walking around the festival," I added.

"I'm glad," Ruti said with relief.

She seemed happy to see Tisse's cooking being appreciated.

"Thank you. I've also discovered a new purpose—spreading the culture of household *oden*. I'm pleased I asked for your advice."

"Y-yeah. Glad we could help."

Tisse's eyes were burning with determination. That said, it didn't seem to have anything to do with the festival, so it was best to just set that aside for now.

"That means we have one more dish and a drink to go…," I said. "It's the standard, but what do you think about just a simple herbal tea for the drink? It's getting a bit cool now with fall, so a warm tea would go over well, I imagine."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea," Ruti agreed. "What sort of herbs should we use?"

"There are plenty of options, but since you're here, do you wanna just try all the herbs I have that seem like they'd go well in herbal tea?"

"That sounds like it'll take a long time. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I imagine it'll probably take until sunset. It's for the stall you're setting up, though, so let's have fun, leave no regrets, and do everything we can."

"That's right!" Rit chimed in. "I haven't tried many medicinal herbal teas before, so I'm looking forward to it!"

"The best way to find a new flavor is to experiment. Just like with *oden*," added Tisse.

"This one is also curious!" said Habotan.

Everyone wanted Ruti's festival to go well, and I felt just as happy for her.

Though one of us was still a bit too hung up on *oden*…

"Thank you, everyone."

Seeing Ruti's cheeks soften into a smile made me even happier.

* * *

We were all still there when dusk fell.

We'd decided on the medicinal egg, which could be ready immediately for the dish that people could eat while walking around, and a medicinal herbal tea for the drink. Those two menu items were done, yet we still hadn't settled on the main dish for people to eat while sitting on a bench.

"Hrmmm."

Everyone had their arms crossed, deep in thought.

As we sat there sipping a variety of different herbal teas, we'd come up with a number of different suggestions, but none of them had really worked.

"There are plenty of options if you assume the person making it has the Cooking skill."

That was the biggest issue we were having.

The dish we came up with needed to be something that any normal household could make.

Tisse and I had both taken the Cooking skill, so we could balance the herbs' bitterness with the flavor of a dish. We could cook the herbs to remove their astringency and make a simple arrangement of normal household dishes, but without the Cooking skill, the herbs' bitterness overpowered those flavors.

We couldn't think of a dish that was both standard Zoltan fare and was also able to mellow out the bitterness of the herbs.

"*Haah*. This might be too much for just us," Rit murmured.

"That's not like you, Rit. It's too soon to give up."

"Obviously, I'm not giving up. But we need someone else's knowledge to resolve this problem, just like how we went to Stormy yesterday."

"You think so?"

"This is the perfect time for it. Will you all come with me?"

Rit sounded full of confidence. But where were we going?

* * *

"This is…"

It had only been about a ten-minute walk from the apothecary.

The place where Rit took us was a lot closer than I'd expected…

"It's a well."

"The well."

“It’s definitely a well.”

It was the well in the center of the neighborhood.

“This must be the ‘watering-hole conversation’ this one has heard all about!” Habotan piped up.

Lots of mothers who’d come to get water were gathered around the well, gossiping and chatting cheerfully.

I often got pulled into the conversations when I’d lived alone in the townhouse, but I hadn’t come this way much since getting the shop built.

“Don’t you think this is the perfect place to learn about home cooking?”

“True.”

Rit was right; everyone here was an expert on Zoltan-style home cooking.

“If it isn’t Red!”

“Nao.”

“It’s been a while since I saw you here,” she said, smiling. “And you brought a crowd… Are you all here to draw water?”

“Nope,” Rit answered instead. “We came to learn some cooking from everyone.”

““Ohhhh!””

All the mothers around us reacted as one.

What had just happened…?

“So you want to know how to win Red’s stomach, huh?”

“Dear me, this is a serious matter.”

“I better tell Chika at the general store!”

Apparently, they were trying to help Rit. And it seemed they were really excited about it, too.

“I appreciate the thought, but tonight’s a little different.”

“Oh, really?”

“Well, I wanted to ask what sort of food you all usually make at home…so I guess the result is sort of the same.”

“Oooh!”

It seemed like this wasn’t Rit’s first time coming here. She was completely comfortable around these women, while Ruti and I found ourselves left behind.

“You come here often? I never knew.”

“I mean, it won’t be long before I’ll be one of the mothers here in Zoltan, right?”

“Oh, uh…”

“I’m confident when it comes to adventuring, but there’s so much I don’t know about being a mother, so I’ve been getting advice in advance from women with much more experience in that area.”

“Ah, so that explains the times you came back a bit later than expected.”

Sometimes when Rit went out to the market alone, she’d get home maybe half an hour later than normal, but she must have just been stopping by here.

While a part of me was able to calmly analyze that much, the thought of Rit being a mother still shook me a bit.

“Do you feel some reluctance about that, Red?” Tisse asked, staring at me closely.

Of course I’d been ready for that from the moment I gave Rit the engagement ring…or actually, from the moment I gave her the amber bracelet.

This shock I was feeling was…

“I’m just embarrassed.”

“I see. How wonderful.”

Tisse’s expression hardly changed as she complimented me.

Mister Crawly Wawly clapped his front legs.

“More importantly…”

Feeling even more embarrassed by Tisse’s reaction, I focused on the topic at hand.

“Sorry for bothering you, but we’re planning on running a stall during the Harvest Festival next week.”

“Oh? Your shop is?”

“My sister is also selling products using medicinal herbs from her plantation, and Habotan here is selling ninja tools from the Jade Kingdom.”

“Well, that sounds delightful.”

“I’ll be sure to stop by.”

The mothers were all excited at the news.

“There’s something we’d like your help with,” Ruti said, speaking up.

Ruti got along well with children, but I don’t think she’d ever gone out of her way to talk to women of this age group.

The mothers all looked fascinated at what had brought

Zoltan's Hero to ask them for help.

"I'd like the medicinal herbs we're growing to reach more people. They can be used not just to make medicine but also as ingredients in cooking…however, we can't think of an everyday dish to add medicinal herbs to."

"By 'everyday dish,' do you mean something even we can make?"

"Yeah. Something that doesn't require the Cooking skill, that any family could enjoy."

"I see. If there was a dish like that, it would give us a reason to buy your medicinal herbs as well."

"But we don't really use any medicinal herbs in our cooking."

"Sorry, but I don't think we can help you."

"What I'd like is for you to tell me what Zoltan homestyle cooking is. I'm sure I'll find some sort of hint in the sorts of foods you all make at home," Ruti said earnestly.

"Ahh." Nao crossed her arms and nodded. "In that case, we might be able to help. C'mon, everyone, why don't we try to give her a hand?"

"Oh my! I'm a bit embarrassed to show Ruti my cooking skills, but if you think that will help…"

"Why don't we go to Cotton's house and cook together?"

"Oooh, that's a lovely idea. We can all make something and take home a little bit of everything."

"That would be great. Everyone at home would love a dinner with all sorts of different foods."

With everyone chatting cheerfully, the matter was settled.

There was plenty of unrelated gossip, too, but that was just part and parcel for these sorts of gatherings.

"It'd be nice if I could cook for you every once in a while."

"Do you think it would please Lady Torahime if this one learned how to cook?"

Rit and Habotan were both fired up with different goals in mind.

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly had developed a passion for cooking lately as well, so they also looked excited.

And I loved cooking, so it went without saying I was excited.

*　　*　　*

Cotton Pearlman was a middle-aged woman who lived in a particularly large house downtown. Her husband, Lonsdale Pearlman, was a descendant of a noble line, who'd left the family in exchange for inheriting a sizable fortune. That made Lonsdale a commoner; however, he'd used that wealth as capital to set up a stonemasonry business, and back in the day, they had apparently handled more than half of Zoltan's stonework needs.

The company was no longer as big as it had once been, but the decorations on their large three-story home still spoke to his former prominence.

"Make yourself at home. Feel free to use the kitchen however you like."

Mrs. Cotton smiled warmly as she welcomed us into her house. She showed us to the kitchen, and I was genuinely impressed.

"This is a wonderful kitchen."

"There used to be lots of maids who'd cook here, but it's a bit of a waste now that it's just me."

There was enough space for five people to work in the kitchen without it feeling crowded. It was well-worn, but also well-maintained.

"Even places that don't look like they've been used much are nice and neat. It must be tough cleaning such a big area."

"Hehe, thank you," Mrs. Cotton said, smiling. "Cleaning up is a bit of a hobby of mine. It was much more rewarding when my children were younger, though; now all I do is dust, and it feels a bit lacking."

"All right, then let's all use it together!" Nao said.

Even if they didn't have the Cooking skill, just watching the mothers of Zoltan in the kitchen made their wealth of experience clear.

I knew I'd be able to learn a lot from them.

As we listened to their stories, they taught us how to make all sorts of dishes.

Interlude

The Demon Lord and the Soldier

Night, in the town on the other side of the Kronogan River.

Harmon had fallen asleep after drinking, and a cold chill ran down his back, waking him up.

It had been six years since he'd volunteered to fight and left Zoltan. Over that time, he'd developed a sense for danger that had kept him alive on the battlefield.

He quickly got up and looked out the window to see flames rising in the distance. Harmon pulled a telescope out of his pack—a tool he'd been provided with on the battlefield that he'd since come to rely on.

"S-survivors from the demon lord's army!"

He could see a large demon wielding a spear.

"Soldier demon! That's a survivor from the main force!"

A soldier demon was leading the orcs attacking the town.

It was a lower-level fiend in the demon lord's armies, but it was still an officer-class demon that usually commanded a squad of five soldiers.

"Shit!"

Harmon hurriedly put on the thick cloth doublet he wore beneath his armor. He didn't have time to don his armor, but the padded doublet was better than nothing.

Then he picked up his trusty bastard sword and raced out of the room.

"Mr. Pearlman!"

As soon as he left his room, he saw the inn's terrified proprietress.

"It must be bandits attacking… I'm waking the guests."

"Not bandits, survivors from the demon lord's army."

"B-but…the war's over!" She looked aghast.

"Wake everyone staying here and evacuate the inn."

“Okay…!”

The woman nodded. She was scared and confused, but the words of a battle-hardened soldier like Harmon were reassuring. There was a strength to them that made her think that as long as she did what he said, she’d be safe.

Just then, the door to the next room opened.

“Enemy attack?”

“So it seems.”

“Taraxon! Bui!”

The two men stepped into the hall, already holding their swords, and prepared to fight.

“Survivors from the demon lord’s army have appeared!”

“Hmm, this is a dangerous situation.”

“What should we do?” Bui asked.

Taraxon responded by flashing a smile and nodding. “We’ll defend the town.”

To Taraxon, the demon lord’s army was an enemy he’d dominated by force. Those who went against their orders and ran amok were to be punished.

“All right, let’s meet up with the town guard first,” Harmon said. “They’re probably panicked and can’t do much, so we should restore the chain of command.”

Taraxon’s eyes widened at seeing Harmon taking the lead.

“You’re coming, too?”

“Of course. I’m a soldier who fought the demon lord’s armies.”

“Even if they are just a remnant of the army, they’re stronger than the defenses of this town. You survived the war, and yet you would risk your life again?”

Bui’s tone held clear concern for Harmon, but the other man just shook his head.

“I know as well as anyone how powerful and terrifying the demon lord’s army is. Even now, I’m so scared, I can’t stop shaking.”

“Then you should evacuate with the others.”

“It’s because I know that fear that I have to fight.”

There was no doubt in his voice.

“…Ahh!”

Taraxon’s eyes gleamed at seeing his bravery.

“Splendid! Your courage is inspiring. I would like to fight by

your side.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, isn’t it?! Let’s go!”

Watching Harmon’s back recede as he ran with sword drawn, Taraxon smiled.

“Bui, do not let that man die.”

“Of course. God must be a fool to give someone so brave a mere Infantry blessing.”

“Indeed. That is the back of a true hero.”

That night, the town was attacked by over thirty orcs and one soldier demon. While there were some injuries and damage, thanks to the efforts of Harmon, Taraxon, and Bui, the remnants of the demon lord’s army were entirely destroyed.

Their names were carved in stone to commemorate the heroes who’d saved the town.

Chapter 3

Courage, Peace, and Everyday Life

The next day, Red & Rit's Apothecary.

After taste testing the food I'd made, I nodded in satisfaction.

"Garlic and smoked meat soup, and a baguette with smoked cheese."

That was today's breakfast, one of the results from last night.

In hot and humid Zoltan, leftover ingredients such as meat were smoked to preserve them, and this smoked meat was a common part of home-cooked meals in Zoltan.

"Using the medicinal herbs for smoking rather than eating them directly… I never even thought of that."

Adding a clump of herbs to the wood chips infused the food with a refreshing flavor.

"Leaves can be used for herbal tea and the medicinal eggs, and the stems and roots can be used in the smoke for preserving leftovers."

Of course, the herbs were also used to make medicine, and whatever was left from that could be burned for smoking as well. Different herbs contributed different flavors, and reducing waste would be a good selling point as well.

"Still, I use plenty of ham and bacon in my cooking, but I've never gotten in the habit of smoking things for everyday cooking."

Even if I had adapted to Zoltan, there were still lots of things I didn't know.

That was a fun thought.

"Ruti and the others should be coming by soon."

Just as that thought went through my mind, there was a *clang* as the bell at the front door rang.

The day was starting.

*　　*　　*

Rit, Ruti, and I were sitting around the table.

Breakfast had been a big hit.

For the stall, being able to set up a smoker and leave it helped a lot in terms of efficiency. The medicinal eggs also worked well as festival food.

And with that, Ruti's menu was all set.

"What are you doing today, Big Brother?" she asked.

"I'm planning to close up the shop a bit early and go to Storm's place."

"Oh."

"What is it?"

It looked like Ruti had something on her mind.

"What's up?" I asked again.

"There's somewhere I'd like you to accompany me at noon."

"If it's not going to take long, it should be fine. There's somewhere you want to go?"

"Mhm. Mrs. Cotton's house—I want to thank her."

"Ahh, yeah. It would be good to give her a proper thank-you and let her know you've settled on a menu."

It made me happy that Ruti was trying to build connections with all sorts of people. Her world had really grown this past year.

"Rit, can I ask you to watch the shop?"

"Of course! Be sure to give her my thanks as well."

"Will do."

Since we were going over there, I figured I'd make her some smoked meat using the medicinal herbs as a gift.

*　　*　　*

Noon, the Pearlman house.

"Thank you, but you didn't need to do that," Mrs. Cotton said with a warm smile.

On the table was diluted wine, to avoid getting drunk, and the smoked meat I'd brought.

"It's delicious. I'll be sure to come visit during the festival, too."

“But we were the ones who came to thank you…”

Ruti looked bewildered at being thanked, when she’d come to thank Mrs. Cotton.

Kindness begets kindness, and gratitude begets gratitude in return.

Ruti was also starting to understand that level of communication, and as her older brother, I was overjoyed and excited to see her keep growing.

“Last night, you mentioned you have kids, but are they not here now?” Ruti asked.

Not really knowing what to say, she was trying to make small talk.

“There are two of you living here?”

It wasn’t as if Ruti had researched the family; this was just her analysis based on the general signs of activity around the house.

“Right now, it’s just me and my husband…but my son used to live here as well. He’ll be twenty-five this year. When he was young, he was quite the little troublemaker, and Mr. Moen of the guards was always giving him an earful.”

“Was he a naughty child?”

“I suppose so. He was the sort of boy who would get into fights with older children. He just couldn’t accept things that weren’t right and had trouble compromising.” Mrs. Cotton had a distant look in her eyes as she spoke.

“You don’t see people like that often in Zoltan.”

“Hehe, you’re not wrong there. I often had to go and apologize on his behalf, but he never got violent or raised his voice at me or with his friends he adored. When he turned seventeen, Mr. Moen personally invited him to join the guard, and he trained to be in the reserve force.”

“He reformed.”

Hearing Ruti’s comment, Mrs. Cotton smiled, as if she’d said something funny.

“He was so blunt and ignorant of how the world worked as a child, but he grew up to be a splendid man who even took care to keep his room clean for my sake… It makes me happy, but it can also be lonely.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was a better person than his parents. Six years ago, when

he heard about the terrible struggle against the demon lord's army, he volunteered and left Zoltan to fight."

"He volunteered…?" Ruti's voice faded.

She and I both knew just how many soldiers had died on the battlefield.

"When I'm alone, I can't help but worry, so it's always nice when people visit like this."

I hadn't ever spoken much with Mrs. Cotton, but I had heard that the only son of the Pearlman family had volunteered to go fight in the war.

Seeing the concern in her eyes, I started to say something to bolster her spirits, when Ruti said, "I hope your son comes home safely, too."

"…Thank you. That's very kind of you."

She hadn't been able to say anything to calm Mrs. Cotton's worries. Ruti knew it would be irresponsible to claim he was still alive after a battle like that, yet it was still clear by her words that she genuinely cared about Mrs. Cotton.

Although she sometimes had trouble verbalizing her feelings, the reason Ruti was so adored by the people of Zoltan wasn't because she was the strongest adventurer but because of her kindness.

Mrs. Cotton's face creased into a smile.

Just then…

Bam, bam, bam, bam!

The sound of the door knocker rang out.

It made plenty of noise even when you just knocked it gently, but it sounded like someone was hammering away at it with all their strength.

"I'm coming! Who is it?!" Mrs. Cotton stood up, looking a bit troubled.

"Big Brother."

"Yeah."

Ruti and I both stood up as well. We could sense something unusual in the air.

"Just in case, why don't we come with you?" I said to Mrs.

Cotton.

“Really? Well, true, this is certainly not normal.”

A worried look crossed her face.

The three of us headed to the front door. The knocking didn’t let up the whole time.

“Coming!”

“Cotton! I’ve got big news!”

“Oh, is that you, Lou?”

“Lou?”

“My nephew. Though he’s not much younger than me.”

Mrs. Cotton opened the door to reveal a middle-aged man standing there, red in the face. He had a letter in his hand.

“What’s all the fuss about, Lou?”

“Cotton! The war’s over!”

“What?”

Ruti and I were both stunned to hear that.

“Wait, can you explain that?” I blurted out.

The man held up the letter for me to see.

“It’s a letter from my son, who volunteered to fight in the war! The allied armies won!!”

I scanned the contents of the letter. It said that the allied forces led by Van the Hero had captured the final stronghold of the demon lord’s army, the former Flamberge Castle, and shattered the enemy.

Nothing written in it conflicted with anything I knew.

“I think the letter’s real,” I said quietly.

Ruti nodded, too.

“Then…my son’s coming home.”

“Yeah! We’ve gotta give them a grand welcome home!”

Mrs. Cotton covered her face with her hands.

They’d finally defeated the demon lord’s armies…!

* * *

In a scorched field that was all that remained of a town burned in the war, a group of ash giants fought against two swordsmen and a man with a bastard sword.

“Harmon, on your left.”

“Got it!!”

Harmon thrust out his sword, using its long reach to keep the ash giant in check. Then he hammered the swarm of corpses being controlled by the giant from above, knocking them to the ground.

While Harmon protected them, Taraxon’s and Bui’s swords swirled like a wild storm, cutting down the giants.

They say monsters appear in the ruins of battles, but these are on a whole other level! The war’s over, so why does God keep testing us?!

Things should have been peaceful, yet walking back to Zoltan, he still found himself fighting. If they didn’t defeat the monsters here, the people who came back to this razed town might well lose their lives.

Harmon felt there were still things he needed to do before returning to Zoltan.

* * *

After we left Mrs. Cotton’s house, we called on Rit and Tisse and went to the house where Habotan was living.

“Really…?”

Torahime let out a deep breath.

Her face, constructed with the skill of an upper-tier demon, looked like a doll’s. There was even a certain frailty to it, likely a result of her still being in recovery, but her eyes couldn’t hide the powerful determination simmering inside her.

The reason we’d come to Habotan’s house was to tell Torahime that the war had reached its end. Since she and Habotan were being chased by the demon lord’s army, the fact that his forces had been driven from the continent was a crucial piece of information.

“Lady Torahime.”

“Yes, this is joyous news… Having served as one of the four heavenly kings, I knew better than anyone that the demon lord’s army was destined for defeat.”

“Yet you still look unhappy.”

At the very least, the possibility of the demon lord leading an

army here to Zoltan was now out of the question. So why did Torahime still look so unsettled?

“We warred and obeyed Taraxon and the accursed Asura because Lady Habotan was taken hostage.”

“Yeah, I was surprised when I heard that.”

The demons that made up the demon lord’s army had far higher morale than any human troops. Some knights even considered them to be the ideal soldiers; the demons would continue to fight and hold the line when any human would long since have broken and run.

However, that was only because they were bound by blessings that made them unable to disobey any order from a higher-tier demon.

This wasn’t a war that the demons had wanted.

“Countless of our fellows died in this war. They died as lowly invaders, pawns in the thrall of a false demon lord. They weren’t protecting anything.”

“Lady Torahime…”

“One day, I shall slay the demon lord. I will have vengeance for the lives lost in this war.”

“When the time comes, this one will support you, so please allow Habotan to remain by your side!”

“Thank you. To that end, please continue to increase your blessing level, gain knowledge and experience, and grow strong.”

“Yes, milady!!”

“While in Zoltan, learn well from Ruti the Hero and her comrades. Their strength will surely support you.”

It was an odd sight.

A former heavenly king of the demon lord’s army and the demon lord’s successor, hoping to learn from a human ex-Hero how to slay the demon lord.

I’m sure this hadn’t been in Demis’s script.

“Sir Ruti, please give this one another lesson on how to fight!”

“Sure.”

But, if you looked at it from another angle, it wasn’t really so strange.

A princess and loyal general fleeing from their country after the throne was stolen in a coup and seeking aid in a foreign land to reclaim the throne.

If anything, it was a classic story.

“Demon lord” and “Hero” were just titles decided by blessings. Habotan and Torahime were fighting their own battle of their own volition, and Ruti and I would protect and guide them until they set out on their journey… I guess that’s what made me the Guide?

In that way, Habotan and Torahime were heroes in the truest sense of the word.

* * *

The Demon Lord blessing serves the dual role of ruling over all the evil races of the dark continent and of fighting against the Hero as the pinnacle of evil.

That was the conclusion I’d come to, taking into account everything Torahime and Habotan had told us, what I learned in my investigations as a knight, what I’d seen as a member of the Hero’s party, and what I’d encountered here in Zoltan regarding the Hero.

Divine Blessings were created by Demis.

Their purpose was to recreate the soul of the Asura who’d been the first Hero.

Records showed that the demon lord only invaded our continent during times when the Hero was born. The church interpreted that as proof that God had never abandoned the world, but it was simple—if the Hero wasn’t in the world, the demon lord never left the dark continent.

The Hero saved people because that was what the first Hero did, and saving the world was just a means to that end. It was Demis who created evil blessings as well, so if the goal was to save people, then the Hero blessing would have to be overwhelmingly more powerful than any evil blessing. It could even have been made to have a high starting blessing level, like the Guide.

The demon lord was an enemy created to force the Hero to go through the same experiences as the first Hero. And when the Hero hadn’t been born, it served as a balancing presence to ensure that the forces of good and evil didn’t destroy themselves.

From what Torahime described, the position of the rightful demon lord in the army was simply to rule, while the four heavenly kings handled the actual management of the country.

What was expected of the demon lord was a powerful blessing and nothing more. Habotan had been raised inside the castle without ever leaving, because the Demon Lord blessing awakened within princesses and princes from clans with the potential to take over as the demon lord. They were essentially just vessels for the blessing, and as such, required no instruction to become ruler.

We knew of the example of Van's miraculous blessing change, but that was built into the system on the demon lord's side.

They resembled each other, although they weren't exactly the same.

The Demon Lord blessing, which should have been held by Habotan's father, the Raging Demon Lord Satan, had been stolen by Taraxon, an Asura lord without a blessing.

That was what Torahime had told us, yet it wasn't easy to believe blessings could simply pass from one person to another.

Not given what we'd seen in the ancient human ruins.

The devices there had shown that ancient humans had been capable of analyzing Divine Blessings. If there were some way of handing off blessings, there would've been no need to create the Hero Management Bureau to seal the Hero away for their entire life.

Considering all of that, Demon Lord must be a power that came from something other than Divine Blessings. That "something" reacted with the blessing Habotan and the other potential inheritors possessed and modified their impulses.

That was the conclusion Ruti and I came to.

There was just one mystery.

Why had the Demon Lord Taraxon, who had merely taken in the power of the Demon Lord, chosen to invade our continent?

* * *

After leaving Habotan's house, we all went back to our work.

This was Zoltan, so it wasn't like anyone would get angry at us

closing for the afternoon. Even if someone stopped by, they would just accept it and come by another day.

"But we can't even tell such wonderful news to our customers!" Rit said.

"I know! Why don't we give out some cookies to celebrate?!"

The war was over.

Despite the hopeless position we'd been in, humanity had finally triumphed.

And Zoltan had played a part in the victory.

The tide had turned for the alliance when Prince Salius and Van the Hero joined the fight—neither of which would've happened were it not for the events that unfolded here in Zoltan.

"We didn't send reinforcements to the front lines, but the hard work of the people living here in Zoltan made a difference. That's more than enough reason for everyone to celebrate."

"Yeah! This year's Harvest Festival is going to be so exciting!"

"Zoltan loves a festival, so I'm sure it'll really be bustling."

"And if that happens, the purse strings will loosen, too."

Rit gave a merchant's smirk, and I couldn't help chuckling along.

It wasn't the sort of expression anyone who'd known us as a knight and a princess would have expected us to make.

The war that had given birth to so many tragedies was finally over. If I was still a knight, I'm sure I would've been filled with joy and relief, my mind racing from the chaos of the aftermath and thoughts of how to start rebuilding.

But that wasn't me anymore… Here in Zoltan, we were walking a completely different path in life.

I could only be so carefree because we were living in peace. Even so, our attempts to live a happy life here had ended up playing a part in ending the war.

It wasn't as if we'd saved the world. Yet our efforts to live in peace had still been valuable.

I think that's true for everyone living in this world.

* * *

The sun was starting to set as Rit and I rushed down the street.

“Damn! We were celebrating too much, and it’s already evening.”

“Stormy’s shop must’ve closed a while ago!”

We were hurrying to Stormthunder’s store.

We’d planned to close the apothecary early and go there to talk about the medicine containers, but it had gotten late.

When we finally got there, we saw the CLOSED sign on the door swaying in the wind, just as we’d expected.

Feeling bad, I knocked lightly on the door.

“Storm—sorry for coming by so late. It’s Red.”

I heard heavy footsteps approaching the door, then a click as the lock opened.

“Heeey…”

“S-Storm…”

The man appeared from behind the door with massive bags under his eyes and sunken cheeks. It was awful to see how much he’d changed.

It isn’t good to overwork yourself.

“You’re laaate,” he said.

“Sorry, the shop was busy, so we ended up closing late.”

“That’s good. I’m glad we’ve both got plenty of work.”

“Ha, haha…”

I didn’t know if it was the all-nighters, but there was a rabid gleam to his eyes that was a little scary.

Storm let us in, and we moved to his workshop in the back of the store. It was clear from the mess there that he’d been working day and night without any sleep.

We made our way to the table, careful not to step on any of the objects scattered around the floor.

“These are the finished bottles.”

Storm picked up two bottles from the table and handed one to me and one to Rit.

“You made two samples?”

“There’s a reason for that.”

“There is?”

“Don’t worry about that right now. First, take a closer look at the finished product.”

The bottle I was holding was done up just like the sketch. The design looked even better in real life, leaving an impression

without standing out too much. The only colored parts were the small red spots for the birds' eyes, but against the pale, almost white wood, they were noticeable even at a distance.

The wood was sanded and polished to perfection, giving it a nice feel when I held it. It was as comfortable as if it was attached to my hand, yet it wasn't sticky, and I wasn't worried it would slip out of my grasp.

It almost seemed like the hilt of a sword made by a master craftsman. A slash from a sword whose hilt fits the palm of your hand has several times the strength of that from an ordinary blade.

"I haven't hollowed them out, since they're just prototypes, but you can see the design and try out the feel."

"Yeah, this is even better than I imagined," I said.

"I really love it, too," added Rit.

I was sure our customers would feel the same.

Storm, the master craftsman, had lived up to his name.

"I'm glad you like 'em. I'm proud of how they turned out." He looked satisfied with a job well done.

I needed to give him a bit of a bonus when I paid him…

"Nah, the price we agreed on is enough."

"Oh? That's a surprise, considering you're always so stingy."

"When have I ever been stingy?!"

"You didn't give me much of a discount when I was haggling, did you?"

"Don't you think the *real* miser is the guy who spent half an hour haggling over a cheap bed?!"

He had a point.

"This job opened up all sorts of possibilities for me," he continued.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Oh! Is that the vanity you were making last time?" asked Rit. She was pointing to a piece of furniture covered by a cloth in the back of the room.

"It is indeed. Would you like to see it?"

"Um, as long as you don't mind!"

"Of course not. Just for you, Ms. Rit."

Even when exhausted, he sure didn't forget to give Rit the VIP treatment. It was pretty impressive.

Walking over to the vanity, Storm pulled away the cloth.

“‘Hnh?”’

Rit and I both cocked our heads.

Compared to when we’d seen it before, the vanity seemed to have a more subdued, somber feel.

Had Storm not had enough time to finish it because of our request?

“Let me borrow those bottles for a moment.”

“Uh, sure.”

He took the bottles from Rit and me and placed them on the table of the vanity.

“‘Oooh!”’

The addition of the bottles completely changed the impression.

“Oh wow! Putting the bottles there creates a lovely design for the whole room! Amazing!”

“It’s reassuring to hear someone as perceptive as you describe it that way, Ms. Rit.”

His salesman’s smile faded into one that was genuine and heartfelt.

“There are little indentations here in the table section… Are they places to put cosmetics?”

The indentations were shallow and on the left and right sides of the vanity.

“Combined with these bottles I made for your request, this is a piece I can truly be satisfied with. If you put makeup or lotion in these and set them on my vanity, it makes a picture-perfect scene…”

He ran a finger along the edge of his handiwork.

“Furniture isn’t just for sitting around the house. This vanity isn’t complete by itself—it’s complete when it’s lined with accessories and being used by someone.”

Ahhh, I see.

Ordinarily, his customers would place furniture wherever they wanted, but this way, Storm could demonstrate how easy it was to use and the best way to incorporate it into a room.

“Is that why you made two test bottles?” I asked.

Storm nodded. “As a craftsman, it might be presumptuous of me to dictate how something should be used. And I don’t mean to say that this is the only way for furniture to be ‘complete.’ But

this vanity is one answer I can offer my customers."

"You're incredible, Stormy!"

The festival wasn't just an opportunity to sell things in a different way from normal—it was a chance to make something differently as well. For Storm, who was always making furniture to customers' orders, it was a new challenge for him to think of the best way for people to use a piece.

He looked more satisfied than I'd ever seen him.

"You made something really great," I said.

"Yeah," Storm replied, his chest swelling with pride. "So, Red, I've got a request."

"You want some cosmetics to use when you display it, right?"

"Yeah. Letting people sit down and actually try it out is the best way to get a feel for the vanity. Can you give me some generic stuff that any woman might use? …I don't really know much about makeup myself, so I need to think about how best to set them up before the festival."

"Got it. I'll get Rit's advice and deliver something to you tomorrow…but you should really rest for now."

"Yeah? I could even go over to your place now if you want."

"You'd collapse in the street before you made it."

Storm had gone past peak exhaustion and was numb to it, but his body needed rest.

"You look like you haven't been eating more than the bare minimum, either, right? Mind if I borrow your kitchen?"

"Huh?"

"What can I make quickly…? Soup, maybe? Anyway, I'll cook something."

"And I'll clean up the room here," chimed in Rit, looking at all the tools and bits of wood strewn around the workshop.

"M-Ms. Rit?! I could never let a customer do something like that."

"It's fine. You worked so hard on the request we gave you. I'm really grateful."

"Me too. Thank you, Storm."

"…Hehe. I guess I'll take you up on your kind offer, then," Storm said, smiling happily.

*　　*　　*

I took some eggs and potatoes from the pantry and whipped up a quick soup for Storm.

After he ate, the exhaustion seemed to hit Storm again, and he started dozing off.

I'm sure he's sleeping like a baby by now... The beds he makes are the best.

"That's one more thing checked off the list for the Harvest Festival."

"We just need Stormy to make a good number of them, and we'll be all ready."

Rit looked up at the sky as we walked together. "It's a full moon tonight. The autumn sky is so pretty."

"Yeah, it is."

Neither of us said anything, but we made our way to a nearby bench and sat down.

"We're so much better at handling the store than we used to be when we were just starting out," I said.

"I was expecting the preparations for the festival to be more hectic."

When Rit had first suggested it, I'd expected we'd barely have everything ready by the time we set up the stall on the day.

"Do you think we've gotten used to running the shop?" I asked.

"Hmmm." Rit put a finger to her lip in thought.

She looked so beautiful illuminated in the moonlight.

"I think it's probably Zoltan we've gotten used to, rather than the shop."

"Ah."

I had to agree.

"Working out who we can go to for advice, learning how people in Zoltan think, and most importantly, having more people willing to help us out."

"Yeah, exactly. We've really gotten comfortable in Zoltan," said Rit.

We'd completely gotten used to the tranquil, lazy life here.

"After all!" Rit said, holding up a finger. "We never would have thought to take part in a festival a week away! I'm sure we

would've been planning it a lot earlier in advance!"

"That's true."

We both laughed.

Being a knight and being an adventurer were both jobs that could be deadly if you neglected your preparations. If we'd intended to take part in the Harvest Festival, we would have planned to have enough leeway to handle any sort of trouble that might have come up.

Yet now, if Storm had turned us down, we would have really struggled to make our own containers. If it had come to that, we never would have come up with such a good bottle, especially not with so little time.

"It would have been fun in its own way, though," Rit said.

"Yeah, I'm sure it would've been."

Struggling and failing was enjoyable when I was doing it with Rit. Just working hard together toward something was enough to satisfy us.

"Red." Rit leaned closer. "It's cold at night."

"Yeah, you can feel winter coming. It's almost time to start bringing out the winter coats."

I wrapped an arm around Rit's shoulder.

"Can't we wait a little longer to get out the coats?"

"Really? It's pretty cold."

"But if it gets cold, we can warm up like this."

Rit wrapped an arm around me and snuggled close enough to share our body heat.

"We can't stay like this forever, though."

I rested my cheek on Rit's head, and I could feel her warmth.

"And besides, even with a coat, there'll be plenty of cold days."

"Can we cuddle up on those days?"

"Y-yeah…"

Rit's cheeks were flushed.

"It's cold, so of course they're red."

Rit hid her rosy cheeks behind her bandana.

The way she does that is so cute, I thought, hugging her close.

"Even if it's not cold, it still makes me happy to be like this."

"Hehe, in that case, I guess I'll let you bring out the coats," Rit said with a laugh. "In exchange, though, you have to give me a proper hug."

She'd been looking up at me through her lashes as she said that, and my face flushed bright red.

"Ah, you're blushing," Rit teased, seeing me look away.

Even as I still hugged her, she scooched up into my lap, trying to see my face.

Rit was blushing, too.

Just then…

Clang.

We heard a sound in the distance.

"…!"

Rit and I quickly separated. Then we adjusted our slightly ruffled clothes.

As we did, the clanking came closer.

"Armor?" Rit asked.

"Probably," I agreed.

"But that sounds like full plate."

"It's odd for someone to be walking around in Zoltan in full plate armor at this time of night."

Some guards and adventurers wore armor all the time, but even they only wore armor that was easy to move around in and protected the vitals.

Walking around in such heavy-sounding armor at night wasn't normal.

"Damn, I didn't bring a sword today."

"I only have this," Rit said, pulling out a couple of throwing knives.

I took one.

I couldn't really say I was satisfied, but it was better than nothing.

At times like this, I always wonder whether I should've taken some of the common Grappling skills, but it just wasn't feasible to fight barehanded without a Martial Artist's inherent skills or something like it.

And it goes without saying, but a sword's stronger than a fist.

Rit and I readied ourselves to be able to move immediately.

…Something's coming.

The clanking drew closer.

And the armor appeared from the darkness.

"…!"

Something instantly felt off about it.

The way it moved wasn't human.

In fact, it was hollow.

Living armor—a monster created by cursed armor that had started moving on its own.

It stopped in front of us. I couldn't see anything but darkness behind the visor.

"…"

"…"

The visor opened with a *clack*.

""Mister Crawly Wawly?!""

Inside was a familiar spider, raising his right front leg in greeting.



Chapter 4

To Each Their Own Adventure

“Oh wow, so you have threads all through the armor that let you control it like a puppet.”

Peering into Mister Crawly Wawly’s armor, Rit was impressed by the complex yet efficient system.

“The armor’s lighter than it looks, but it’s still incredible you can move it with such a small body,” I said.

Mister Crawly Wawly seemed to sway happily at the compliment.

“But why are you wearing armor?”

It was the obvious question.

He traced a picture on the ground, using the armor’s boots to explain.

“Ahh, I see. You can’t go to places with people, but you can when you’re in armor…so you do this when you need to meet a person who doesn’t know you already?”

The helmet nodded.

With this, he could even communicate with strangers.

Mister Crawly Wawly stuck a card out from a gap in the armor.

“”An adventurer’s identification card?!””

The name “Aaaa” was written on it.

Rit and I looked over the card again and again, wide-eyed with shock.

“E-rank adventurer Aaaa. I know Zoltan’s Adventurers Guild is careless, but I still can’t believe you managed to register under a fake name.”

“Who approved it…? Max, maybe?”

“Yeah. He definitely has moments when he just signs things without reading them.”

It was customary in Zoltan not to probe too deeply into people’s pasts, and there wasn’t too much trouble you could get

up to with just an E-rank adventurer registration.

In fact, the adventurers in Zoltan are a lot more peaceful than in any other town I've seen.

"People will trust you if you show them this card, so I guess that's enough to pass yourself off as a person."

That would work well for someone clever like Mister Crawly Wawly, even if he couldn't talk. Adventuring wasn't just about fighting—it was also about resolving problems with the abilities you could bring to the table. Thinking about it like that, I imagine he made a pretty good adventurer.

"You're not with Tisse?" Rit asked.

Mister Crawly shook his head.

"You go out on your own a lot," I said.

"It feels like you're always with Tisse, but you have your own adventures, too, don't you?"

Mister Crawly Wawly and I had once recovered a horse that had been taken by a griffin. Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly were best friends and partners, but they were equals who both had their own lives.

"Is there something you're investigating that made you have to pretend to be a person?"

Mister Crawly Wawly drew a sketch on the ground.

"Hmm… Lately, there's been fires in the forest late at night causing problems for the animals, and nobody knows what the cause is. You were asked to look into it, so you went out to investigate last night, and although you couldn't figure out the cause, someone was there. Earlier, when you were at the Adventurers Guild, you heard about a request from a nearby village about suspicious fires in the woods, so you think the person was probably an adventurer looking into it. That's why, tonight, you wanted to try approaching them as a person and asking them about it… That pretty much it?"

"I'm amazed you can make out that level of detail."

Rit looked surprised, but Mister Crawly Wawly and I got along well. I'd started to be able to understand what he was thinking from his gestures and movements.

"In that case, maybe I should come, too!" Rit said. "I'm a pretty reliable adventurer myself."

The armor clanked and shook, and Mister Crawly Wawly

appeared from inside it, jumping up and down.

“Can I join the party, too? Despite how it looks, I used to be a member of the former Hero’s party, so I’m also pretty reliable,” I said jokingly.

Mister Crawly Wawly raised both his front legs and swayed delightedly.

* * *

Tonight’s party was the hero Rit, the apothecary Red, and the reliable spider Mister Crawly Wawly.

“… ♪”

Mister Crawly Wawly was practically humming, apparently pleased to have some comrades along on his adventure. Seeing his reaction was reason enough to make me glad we’d come with him.

We’d left his armor behind inside the shop. Mister Crawly Wawly had used that to pass for a human, but with Rit and me in the party, he didn’t need it anymore…which was a bit of a shame.

Running was really tiring, but apparently making the armor walk around wasn’t really a problem for him. By carefully manipulating the center of balance, depending on whichever foot was on the ground, even small Mister Crawly Wawly could move a human-sized set of armor.

It would take longer for him to get around that way, though, so we’d put it away when Rit and I had gone to pick up our swords.

“I can’t belieeeve it…”

Rit was a lot more dejected about it than I was.

“I was so curious about how Armored Mister Crawly Wawly would fight.”

She’d even given him a special name.

Sitting on my shoulder, Mister Crawly Wawly looked up at me with a troubled look on his face.

“We should spar next time!” Rit exclaimed.

“You and Mister Crawly Wawly?!”

She couldn’t be serious…

But Mister Crawly Wawly seemed up for it, and he cheerfully waved his front legs.

“Really?! Hooray!” cheered Rit.

Well, they wouldn’t be sparring seriously so much as playfully demonstrating their techniques, so I guessed it’d be fine.

It wasn’t as if Mister Crawly Wawly had any particular interest in fighting. He probably didn’t even enjoy sparring. He was just glad that his friend Rit had gotten over her disappointment and was happy.

He’s a kind spider who can empathize with his friends. If his companions are happy, then he feels happy, too. He’d taken this quest the forest animals had asked of him because he wanted to cheer up his sad friends.

That’s what made him so strong.

* * *

With the light of the moon obscured, the forest was so dark that we couldn’t see our own feet without a lantern.

There was no such obstacle for the sounds, though. Unlike noisy summer insects, there was almost a lonesome quality to the chirps in the woods.

“There aren’t any monsters around.”

Holding a lantern meant alerting all the monsters in the woods to your location, but there was no sign of anything coming.

Mister Crawly Wawly tapped my shoulder.

“Even the monsters are troubled by the fires?”

Apparently, they were willing to let us pass, since we were here trying to resolve the issue.

It was a sight you’d never see when taking a job from a person. All in all, it was a pretty interesting experience.

“I sense someone over there.”

There was a serious look on Rit’s face.

Was it the adventurer Mister Crawly Wawly had spotted last time?

I prepared myself and focused my thoughts.

“Should we extinguish the lantern?” I asked.

“No, it’s probably better to go like this instead of frightening them and putting them on edge.”

“True. That sound good to you, Mister Crawly Wawly?”

I ran it by him, seeing as he was the leader of the party.

"…!"

It looked like he agreed.

We continued down the animal trail through the forest. After we walked a bit farther, the person moved. They'd noticed us.

"Heeey!" I called out.

The silhouette of a rotund man stood up.

"We're adventurers investigating the suspicious fires in the woods here. Are you an adventurer, too?"

"Yes, I am."

We'd gotten a reply.

The lantern light reached the man, illuminating his face. He had a round belly and an ax at his hip.

"We thought as much. Am I right in assuming you're investigating the same thing?"

I approached, trying to appear amicable. It was an encounter in the woods at night, so I had to be careful not to come across as a bandit.

"Eek!!"

But upon seeing my face, the man let out a squeal and frantically turned away.

At the same time…

"He's not human!" Rit shouted.

I'd noticed it, too, seeing his face and the way he moved.

"An ax demon!"

It was a demon in human form—a survivor of the ax demons summoned by Bighawk to make the Devil's Blessing!

"He's a bit far away, but…!"

I activated my Lightning Speed and closed the distance in one fell swoop. I didn't know much about the situation, so killing the demon would be premature, but I could take out its legs to stop it from moving!

I drew my sword and took aim at the fleeing ax demon.

"Wait!!"

A small shadow leaped out of the darkness, and a katana clashed with my sword, sending sparks flying.

I was going to launch another attack, but…

"…Habotan?!"

The person who'd protected the ax demon and stopped my

sword was none other than Habotan in her ninja outfit.

“This ax demon is this one’s comrade, so please withdraw your blade!”

“Okay.” Shocked, I withdrew my sword as she’d asked.

“Phew. Thank you, Sir Red.” Habotan sheathed her katana.

“No, I should apologize for attacking.”

I made sure she wasn’t hurt, then breathed a sigh of relief.

“Eeeeek!”

Still in human form, the ax demon fell backward onto its bottom.

“Red! What’s going on?!” Rit had caught up.

Habotan helped the ax demon up and smiled. “Allow this one to introduce her comrade, Sir Frank!”

“Ah, th-th-that’s, um, hello, I’m Frank.” The man bowed his head repeatedly.

“So, Habotan, the comrade you were talking about is an ax demon?”

I knew there was something suspicious going on here.

“I can’t believe there are still any of Bighawk’s underlings around.”

Bighawk was a man who’d made a deal with a contract demon and had led the residents of Southmarsh to try to become king of Zoltan. Rit and I had fought him last year, which had resulted in Ruti coming to Zoltan.

There had also been a young man named Bui who’d turned out to be the Asura Shisandan in human form.

Shisandan was a powerful demon who could even be called Rit’s and Ruti’s archenemy, but it was also thanks to him that we had the lives we did now.

You really do never know what life might bring.

“Sir Frank is a money collector for the Thieves Guild.”

So he’d been passing as human this whole time?

“People give ex-Bighawk guys the cold shoulder, so this is perfect for blending in.”

Hiding as a low-level grunt with a face no one remembered seemed like the best way to get by.

“But why’d you stay in Zoltan? What was your goal in hiding your identity?”

Ax demons were lower-tier demons, so they weren’t

particularly strong among others of their kind. That said, they were still powerful enough to overwhelm the average adventurer and would be able to single-handedly destroy a small town if it didn't have a strong military.

Why had a creature like that been hiding in Zoltan for over a year…?

"Sir Frank is living a quiet life."

"That's right."

The ax demon nodded at Habotan's explanation.

Huh?

"But you're a demon…"

"Is that really something the Hero's brother should be saying, when you're living a quiet life yourself?"

He had me there.

"Uh-uh, no way, I've never heard of a peaceful demon. And I'll bet you came to Zoltan in response to Bighawk's summoning."

"Well, that's true. The thing is, though, with a demon summoning, if the summoner dies, there's no going back to where you were before."

"Ah, right. There have been incidents where the mage who summoned a demon died, and the freed demon got up to some sort of evil."

"Tell me, how exactly am I supposed to get back to the dark continent after getting dragged out here?"

"Couldn't you have just joined up with the demon lord's armies? They still controlled a lot of territory back then."

"If I'd gone there, I wouldn't have gotten home. I would have just died as a sacrificial pawn."

I guess lower-tier demons had it rough, too.

"And if I made too much noise, the Hero would find me and put an end to me, right? So I had no other choice but to make a living as a low-level grunt in the Thieves Guild."

The ax demon gestured dramatically, trying to impress on us just how hard it'd been for him.

Hmm, sounds like it's been behaving…

"But you would have taken jobs robbing and pillaging if the situation had allowed it, wouldn't you?" Rit pointed out.

"No, no, not at all…"

His eyes had started darting all around.

This ax demon's situation had kept him from causing trouble, but he was by no means virtuous.

Still…

"If you're working for Habotan, it should be fine."

Habotan was the demon lord's daughter and a demon of the highest order. A lower-tier ax demon couldn't disobey her. It would be her loyal servant.

When Habotan eventually left to reclaim her kingdom, this ax demon would be one of the retainers by her side.

…That said, demons didn't have a whole lot of individual differences and had a clear hierarchy. Once Habotan got a full contingent of upper-tier demons, Frank would probably be kicked off the main team.

I almost felt a sense of kinship with him.

"You're Habotan's subordinate, so that's good enough for me. You're going by 'Frank'? You probably already know, but I'm Red, this is my fiancée Rit, and this is my friend Mister Crawly Wawly. Let's get along while you're in Zoltan."

"Y-yes, sir! I won't let you down!" Frank bowed obsequiously.

People feared demons for their evil deeds. There had only been a few ax demons on this continent before the invasion, and they were infamous for being cruel mercenaries and bandits.

I never thought I'd see one looking like this.

"Getting back to the subject at hand, we're investigating suspicious fires in the woods here. Are you two doing the same?" Rit asked.

Habotan nodded. "Yes. We took this quest from the Adventurers Guild and were investigating. It is a training exercise given to this one by Lady Torahime."

"Torahime decides the quests you take?"

"She is selecting quests befitting this one's current strength."

I see. In other words, one of the former four heavenly kings of the demon lord's army had judged based on her experience that an unexpectedly powerful opponent wouldn't appear here.

"That's a relief. Let's share what we know and continue the investigation."

""Yes, sir!"" Habotan and Sir Frank responded eagerly.

With that, we became a party of five: the hero Rit, the apothecary Red, the reliable Mister Crawly Wawly, the demon

lord's ninja daughter Habotan, and the ax demon living a quiet life as Frank.

Mister Crawly Wawly hopped up and down excitedly as our unusual party increased.

* * *

We soon found ourselves in a burnt field where one of the fires had happened. It was filled with plants that had turned to black charcoal.

"It's still hot. Be careful, Mister Crawly Wawly."

With a look of acknowledgment, Mister Crawly Wawly hopped down from my shoulder. However, he stopped in midair without touching the ground.

Spiderwebs sure are handy.

"Mister Crawly Wawly and I are gonna examine the area together, so let us know if you find anything."

""Okay!""

We split up to investigate the scene of the fire.

From what we could see, nothing about it seemed particularly strange.

Rit and Habotan both said they couldn't see any traces of magic.

"It doesn't look like the fire happened because of a fight, either."

It appeared to be a completely natural fire that had started from a single point and spread out—other than the fact that it had happened in the middle of a forest where there didn't seem to be anything that could've caused the spark to start it.

Just then, Mister Crawly Wawly started gesturing as if he'd found something.

"Huh? What is it?"

He pointed at the ground with his front legs.

"…This is where the fire started?"

It was a perfectly normal object; however, it had no business being here, in the depths of the woods, far from human hands.

"Firewood."

It was burnt, and only the charred remains were left, but it

was clearly unnatural. The wood didn't grow here—it was silver oak brought in from outside Zoltan. And it had been cut to the proper size from a log and dried out.

There was no doubt about it: This firewood didn't belong here.

"What's it doing here?"

The most obvious line of thought was that someone had come here, but…

"There's no sign of a campfire, and there are only a few pieces."

What could it mean?

As Mister Crawly Wawly and I were pondering that question…

"Ah!" Frank yelled.

We looked over to see him digging at the ground.

"What is it?"

Thinking he'd found something, Rit also stopped her investigation to look over.

"A ground rat."

"A ground rat?"

Frank had dug up a single dead rodent.

"Looks like it got cooked up nicely in the ground."

He opened his mouth and popped the little creature in.

"A bit rotten, but still good!"

He chewed at it contentedly.

"Urk," Rit said with a grimace.

I was sure I was making the exact same face.

Frank might have looked human, but he was definitely a demon.

"Hm? What's up, Mister Crawly Wawly?"

He was looking down at the ground, deep in thought.

"Are you wondering why the rat was underground like that?"

He nodded. Then he started gesturing to convey what was bothering him.

"You're saying those rats go underground to escape predators, and that if it was a fire, they would've just run across the ground to get away…?"

Mister Crawly Wawly was right to be suspicious.

Firewood and the rat… There must be some explanation.

Thinking about it a bit…

"…Ah!"

I thought of one possibility.

“Did you discover something, Sir Red?”

“Yeah, probably. We need to hurry to the closest village.”

“Huh? You wish to leave the forest?!” Habotan asked.

I smiled at her.

“I don’t know where the next fire will happen, but I’m sure the arsonist will go to that village.”

* * *

The closest village turned out to be about a kilometer away from the woods, and judging by the number of houses, there were maybe twenty people who lived here.

It was already late in the night, so all the villagers seemed to be asleep.

A light shone in the center of the village.

Small settlements like this usually had a fire burning all through the night, to make sure they could see any monsters or bandits in case of an attack.

“Is the arsonist in this village, Red?” Rit asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It looks like they’re not here yet.”

“They’re not?”

“Let’s hide and wait for now.”

We hid in the shadows cast by the light.

The sound of insects was all that filled the air as we waited.

After an hour or so had passed…

“!!”

A dark shadow cut across the moon.

It’s here!

“…!”

I signaled for everyone to keep waiting.

I was sure that was the culprit, but we had to catch them in the act.

The shadow flew through the sky…and the fire hawk swiftly descended without a sound.

Sticking its feet into the burning fire, it clutched one of the logs in its talons and started to fly back up into the sky.

“It was hunting using that!”

I leaped out, drawing my sword.

Fire hawks were birdlike monsters that stole from manmade fires and used the flames to hunt, causing forest fires and preying on the fleeing animals.

“…!”

It reacted immediately.

Kicking the flaming logs to scatter them, it immediately spread its wings and took off.

The sky was its domain. No matter how sharp their sword was, a person couldn’t reach them from the ground.

That was probably what it was thinking…but it was underestimating us.

“…!”

Its eyes filled with shock.

“Too bad, but we can fly, too!”

Rit, Habotan, and I all closed in on the fire hawk.

We leaped up to the height the bird was flying at using Mister Crawly Wawly’s threads, which he’d spun earlier for us to use as footholds.

I had the Acrobatics skill, Rit’s blessing was designed for light combat, and Habotan was a ninja.

All three of us could handle ourselves fighting in midair.

“Haaah!”

“Hiyaaah!”

“Prepare yourself!”

A combined attack by me, Rit, and Habotan.

Without even a chance to defend itself, the fire hawk was cut down and fell to the ground.

* * *

“Owww.”

Frank groaned and rubbed his forehead.

The log kicked by the fire hawk had hit him in the brow, leaving a bump and a burn.

Fire hawks had dangerously powerful legs, and their attacks were capable of breaking a normal person’s bones. But for the ax

demon Frank, it had just left a bump on the head.

He hadn't been sitting around doing nothing while we were in the air. He had gathered up the firewood with Mister Crawly Wawly to make sure none of the homes nearby caught fire.

It was a surprisingly thoughtful reaction for an ax demon, who normally specialized in destruction.

Was that just Frank's individual personality showing?

Thanks to that, the village hadn't suffered so much as a scorch mark, and everything was settled without incident.

"Fire hawks are weak to the cold. They migrate south for winter, but it's rare for them to come to Zoltan," I explained from memory.

It was a monster I'd never fought before. I'd never heard of them causing issues in Zoltan before, either. I thought they usually went farther west along the edge of the coast…so had it gotten separated from its flock?

"A fire hawk? So you have them here, too?" Frank asked.

He dipped the fire hawk's wing in blood, then sucked it.

Urk…

"We're in a village here."

At least try a bit harder to hide your identity.

But Frank just looked puzzled, not understanding what I was getting at.

I was amazed he'd made it this long without getting caught.

This wasn't something we should be talking about in the village, though, so we left.

"There are fire hawks on the dark continent?" Rit asked.

Frank nodded. "More than over here, I'd say. There's less farming and more nomadic herding, so it's probably easier for fire hawks to get by. I had to drive them away all the time."

Apparently, land in the dark continent was all-around less fertile. Because of that, they'd developed nomadic pastoralism aboveground, as well as agriculture belowground, using specialized crops. Some races had also established kingdoms underground.

"So you know a lot about fire hawks?"

"I suppose so. And it's pretty normal for them to go off their migration route."

"Really? Is there a reason why?"

“Yeah, they’re migratory, but their sense of direction isn’t as good as a bird’s.”

“Huh.”

“So whenever they migrate, they mix in with flocks of normal hawks.”

“Interesting.”

It probably wasn’t that fire hawks lacked a sense of direction but that the direction sense of actual migratory birds was exceptional. Their ability to accurately navigate the sky without a map went beyond the abilities of humans and most monsters.

“They blend into the flock and act like they’re normal hawks, but as big as they are, they sometimes get caught. When that happens, the hawks all fly away, leaving the fire hawk alone and lost, and they end up in the wrong place.”

“Right. So that’s how it ended up in Zoltan?”

“Probably. Which means there shouldn’t be any other fire hawks around. I think by killing this one, the issue’s most likely resolved.”

Fire hawks are monster arsonists. They don’t just attack animals, either, but also children. Their hunting posed a danger to both the animals of the forest and people nearby.

Mister Crawly Wawly looked at me, as if trying to convey something.

We’d had no choice but to kill it…but I decided to bury it in the woods rather than hand the corpse over to the guild.

I’m sure it wouldn’t feel lonely that way, becoming a part of the lively forest.

* * *

A dungeon deep in a forest of the Kingdom of Avalonia.

Harmon held up a lantern and continued through the expansive labyrinth sprawling out beneath the earth.

It had been quite some time since they’d entered, and he could no longer tell whether it was day or night. Having only ever fought as a soldier, exploring an underground dungeon was a new experience for him.

“It’s hard to believe there’s such a massive tomb down here

that no one knew about," Harmon said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"That which is underground cannot be seen, which is why the dead are buried beneath the earth," Taraxon responded.

Harmon shook his head. "I don't get it. This is the tomb of the previous Hero, right? The great Hero who saved the world. Why hide it from people?"

This underground facility hidden by cloaking magic was called the Hero's Tomb. It was the final resting place of the previous Hero who'd fought the demon lord several hundred years ago, bringing about the age of mankind.

"There are three ahead," Bui warned.

The three of them raised their swords and advanced.

Three giants soon appeared. They were painful to look at, crawling across the ground with staves sticking out all over their bodies. Blood vessels the size of a human fist throbbed on their skin.

"No matter how many times I see them, I can't believe the legendary Sage Lilith made this sort of a monster."

Sage Lilith had been a comrade of the previous Hero and the founding mother of Gaiapolis, the first human kingdom.

According to Taraxon, the monsters crawling around the Hero's Tomb were giants that had been modified while still alive. Taking advantage of their nature to draw energy from their environment, the giants had been set as nigh-eternal guardians for the sealed tomb.

"Lilith was a great woman who both saved and dominated the world. We can leave it at that," Bui said with a faint smile.

Harmon raised his eyebrows, dodging a giant's attack and calmly breaking its defense. Bui used the opening to attack, dealing a wound deep enough to make Lilith's modified giant recoil.

The monsters in the Hero's Tomb were by no means weak. Even an A-rank adventurer's party would have struggled… meaning that these monsters required a strength greater even than that of Rit the hero to defeat. They were monsters far beyond Harmon, who was just a simple soldier.

And yet he fearlessly supported Taraxon and Bui in their fight.

From his experience surviving battles against a superior

opponent like the demon lord's army, Harmon had gained a strength that surpassed Divine Blessings.

"Truly wonderful."

The most powerful Demon Lord Taraxon and the great swordsman Bui, who'd crossed swords with the Hero and Danan, found Harmon's support reassuring.

They couldn't use large-scale attacks that might cause the dungeon to collapse around them, and the giants had been modified to be able to fight at their best in this terrain. Fighting in a situation like this, where the opponent had such an advantage, was stressful—even for the demon lord.

The two of them both valued Harmon and considered him their comrade.

The battle ended with none of them injured.

"*Haah*, I'm exhausted," Harmon said, dropping his sword limply to his side.

He'd been fighting so hard that any ordinary soldier would've collapsed long ago from fatigue.

Taraxon was impressed, wondering if Harmon had learned how to manage his stamina like that on the battlefield.

"Sorry, can we take a little rest?"

"Of course. You joining us has been a great help."

"Really? That's nice of you to say… Still, though, a comrade of the previous Hero, huh?"

"Are you still having trouble accepting it?"

"Well, I fought behind the Hero on the battlefield before. She even saved my life. So the Hero's something special to me."

"You've fought with the Hero before?"

"Lady Ruti. She kept on fighting without ever getting tired. I learned how to fight longer so I could keep up with her even just a little more."

"Hero Ruti? Apparently, she made quite an impact during the war."

"Yeah, I doubt she'd remember a lowly grunt like me…but I really looked up to her. If I'm any help to you now, it's because I saw Ruti the Hero back then," Harmon said with a wistful smile. "She went missing, though. They say she died in battle."

"In a war, even great heroes can fall."

"She stood out in front, fighting, being hurt for everyone's

sake…to die without any reward… Don’t you think that’s too cruel?”

“…I’m sure the Hero is able to fight because there are people who feel that way.”

Just then, a monster’s roar and a woman’s voice rang out.

“What?”

Even Taraxon was surprised.

There was someone else other than them in this hidden Hero’s Tomb.

“They’re fighting. What shall we do?” asked Bui.

“We don’t know the situation, but we can’t just leave it be. Harmon, can you keep going?”

“If someone’s in danger, then I can fight. I’m one of the Hero’s soldiers!”

Harmon thumped the armor he was wearing.

Seeing that, Bui smiled a genuine smile.

The three of them ran toward the sounds of combat and dropped down a ladder into a shaft. There, they saw a high elf woman with a quarterstaff and a witch wearing a big hat fighting five giants.

“We’ll help!”

Taraxon leaped out, and Bui and Harmon followed.

“I don’t know who you are, but thanks!”

The high elf deflected a giant’s attack and formed a seal.

“Thorn Bind!”

Green vines sprouted from the stone floor, wrapping around three of the giants’ bodies.

“Oh, a Singer of the Trees?”

In that opening, Taraxon and Bui removed the giants’ heads.

Furious at seeing its comrades slain, a giant swung its arm at the high elf.

“Watch out!”

Harmon leaped out from behind her, his sword thrust forward. The giant flailed around, knocking Harmon across the floor with his sword still stuck in the monster. A chill ran down his back as Harmon realized he was defenseless and surrounded by enemies.

“Polar Ray.”

A silver light erupted from the witch’s finger, piercing the giant

and freezing it.

The last remaining giant tried to attack Harmon, wanting to take at least one enemy down with it, but Taraxon and the high elf had already moved to cover him. The elf's quarterstaff shattered the monster's knee and rendered it unable to move, and Taraxon's katana sliced through it.

"Phew."

Harmon exhaled, sitting there with his heart still racing.

"Are you all right?" the high elf asked.

She was a beautiful woman, with silver hair and distinctive earrings dangling from her leaflike ears.

"Guess I didn't make a great impression there."

Harmon had intended to help and had ended up having to be saved instead.

"No, your attack was very brave. Thank you."

The woman bowed, and Harmon got up in a fluster at seeing a noble high elf lower her head.

"You should thank Taraxon and Bui if you're gonna thank anyone! I'm Harmon Pearlman, a simple soldier."

"Taraxon…?"

The high elf's expression clouded over for just a moment, but her cheerful smile quickly returned.

"I'm Yarandrala. Nice to meet you."

Yarandrala beckoned to her witch comrade, who was farther back.

"I am the Winter Witch Baba Yaga," she said with a bewitching smile. "It's good to meet you, brave soldier."

An encounter with heroes inside the Hero's Tomb.

Yet Harmon knew nothing of its significance.

* * *

Yarandrala set a barrier that covered the area.

"We should be able to rest a bit now."

"I see. A spirit magic barrier works well for monsters created by a sage," Taraxon said with a nod.

Sages could use both the arcane arts of a mage and a clerical magic of a priest, but not spirit magic.

“Uh, Ms. Yarandrala,” Harmon said nervously. “Yarandrala, a high elf Singer of the Trees… You wouldn’t happen to be the Yarandrala who was in the Hero’s party, would you?”

Yarandrala looked at Harmon as if sizing him up.

Their gazes clashed for a few seconds. Harmon’s stare was filled with curiosity and admiration, matching the elf’s without looking away.

She smiled.

“That’s right. It wasn’t for long, but I did fight alongside Ruti.”

Yarandrala had been in the Hero’s party from the battle in Loggervia until the defeat of Desmond of the Earth. When Gideon was kicked out of the party, Yarandrala had left as well.

Yet even then, as the woman who’d led the party through the bewitching woods to save the Duchy of Loggervia and one of the people who’d orchestrated the historic reconciliation between Avalonia and the Cataphract Kingdom, Yarandrala was a legend whose feats had given courage to the soldiers fighting on the battlefield.

“I-it’s such an honor to meet you!!”

Harmon stood up and started to salute, but Yarandrala stopped him with a wry smile.

“I’m just a regular adventurer now. The real question is, what’s a human doing here in the Hero’s Tomb? This place was concealed by magic. Without Baba Yaga’s help, I wouldn’t have found it myself.”

“I just came along, since my friends said they were going someplace dangerous,” Harmon said, glancing at Taraxon.

Yarandrala turned to face the other man.

“There is a relic of the previous Hero lying here in this tomb that I must find, so I came to investigate,” Taraxon explained. “…I would like to ask you as well.”

He looked at the smirking witch beside Yarandrala.

“Am I correct in assuming you to be the revered Winter Witch Baba Yaga, a member of the previous Hero’s party?”

“You are, indeed,” the witch replied calmly. “I was a comrade of the previous Hero, who saw his journey to its end.”

The Winter Witch Baba Yaga.

A legendary figure of Avalonia and the leader of the Overseer Alliance, one of only three S-rank parties in the world.

“A comrade of the previous Hero?! But that was hundreds of years ago!” Harmon exclaimed.

“Compared to saving the world, overcoming time is not so difficult. Sage Lilith granted these giants eternal life, did she not?” Baba Yaga said.

Harmon looked confused, and the witch snickered at the simple soldier.

“Comrades of the previous generation’s Hero and the current generation’s Hero together. How interesting.”

“Hehe, yes, indeed it is. It seems fate alone is beyond the grasp of God.”

Taraxon and Baba Yaga chuckled, but Yarandrala openly scowled.

“It’s a bad habit of strong people to just laugh things off. You should share your knowledge with your comrades.”

Taraxon and Bui both laughed out loud.

“Sorry, you’re right.”

“I do it, too, so let’s all be careful going forward.”

Taraxon roared with laughter, finding it especially funny for some reason, then turned serious again.

“Bui and I have need of the Hero’s relic, but why are you here?” he asked Yarandrala.

“To investigate the demon lord.”

“The war is over, is it not?”

“I’m not investigating for the sake of the world, but for my dear friend.”

“Oh,” said Taraxon, looking impressed.

“My investigations led me to Baba Yaga.”

“I saw the Hero’s journey all the way to the end, crossing the dark continent and battling the demon lord,” said the witch.

“Yet this is the previous Hero’s Tomb. I would think there’s very little to find here related to the demon lord,” commented Bui.

Baba Yaga shook her head.

“Lilith understood the demon lord. However, having that knowledge would be dangerous, so she sealed it away in this tomb without passing it on to anyone.”

“Hmm.”

“I want what she tried to monopolize. I am here because I

judged that with Yarandrala's power, it would be possible to reach the end of this dungeon."

Taraxon stroked his chin in thought.

"In that case, our goals are not in conflict."

"So it seems," Yarandrala agreed.

"I suggest we form an impromptu party until we clear this dungeon. What do you say?"

"Fine by me. It's clear from the earlier battle that both sides are quite capable."

"Our party was lacking in spell casters, so that is reassuring," said Bui.

"Really? Both of you seem like you can also use a considerable amount of magic."

Taraxon and Bui smiled beneath Yarandrala's sharp gaze.

They would cooperate, but they didn't trust each other.

Both sides understood that.

"*Haah*, I don't really get how strong people think," Harmon said. "All of you are just beating around the bush."

Although their goals aligned, none of them were willing to reveal what they'd do once they got their hands on what they wanted.

Feeling awkward in the moment, Harmon just shrugged.

"Ms. Baba Yaga, can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"It wasn't like this in the Hero's party, was it? You, Sage Lilith, and the Hero must've gotten along while you were traveling, right?"

Harmon's words were filled with the hope that they'd shared a deep level of trust.

But Baba Yaga shook her head.

"It may have been that way at first; however, when we realized that the Hero we believed in was an empty puppet being manipulated by his blessing, we also realized that we had never been true comrades."

It didn't really make sense to Harmon, but he felt like there was despair lurking behind her smile and in the depths of her eyes.

After an hour's nap, the party resumed their exploration.

Overcoming furious battles and terrifying traps, the party

eventually reached the previous Hero's final resting place.

Taraxon and Bui took the proof of the Hero.

Yarandrala took Lilith's sealed notes.

Baba Yaga took the Hero's corpse.

And Harmon took the simple compass that had been used by the Hero.

By the time they got what they'd come for and exited the Hero's Tomb, it was already starting to get light outside.

* * *

Noon, at Red & Rit's Apothecary.

With last night's adventure done, I found myself peacefully making medicines in the workroom, accompanied by a rhythmic grinding sound.

Our stock of medicinal herbs was getting low, but Ruti was planning to come by later with more.

The quality of the herbs from her plantation had improved quite a lot. They were getting to be even more effective than what I could gather up in the mountains. Ruti seemed to be struggling to turn a profit, but the plantation was gaining a reputation among the apothecaries and doctors in Zoltan, so I imagined the number of orders would increase.

"All right, this should be enough for a week."

I felt satisfied looking at all the medicines lined up.

"I've got the cosmetics Storm wanted, too, so I'll deliver those once I take Ruti's delivery."

I looked out the window and let out a yawn.

It must be because I was up late last night.

In the past, even if I hadn't slept, I'd been trained not to let it show. My skills from fighting in the war must have gotten rusty…

"I've only been training my sword techniques at a hobby level as well. At this rate, I'll turn into an old man apothecary in no time."

I could already imagine myself with a beard and a bit of a paunch, standing behind the counter.

"Mmm, I'd like to stay handsome for Rit."

Maybe I should ask Mister Crawly Wawly to invite me along

when he goes on another adventure.

Just as I was putting the freshly made medicine away on the shelves…

“Big Brother.”

I heard Ruti’s voice from the shop.

I left the back room and came out to meet her. She was standing in the store with a bag on her back.

“I came to deliver the herbs.”

“Thanks, I was waiting for those.”

We went straight to the workroom so I could inspect the delivery.

“Yeah, these are all good.”

“Yay!”

They were proof of Ruti’s growth. Filled with joy, I paid her for the herbs.

“I’m planning to go make a delivery after this, but what are you up to? Wanna have some tea before you go?” I asked.

“You’re going out?” responded Ruti.

“Yeah, I’m going to deliver the makeup Storm asked for.”

“How long will that take?”

“Hm? I’m just going to drop it off, so not long. I’m sure he’s busy making the bottles we’re going to use for the Harvest Festival, so I was planning on coming straight back so I didn’t get in his way.”

Right, maybe I should make him a sandwich, too. The last time I saw him, it seemed like he’d been cutting back on time spent making food to work.

“In that case, Big Brother, I have a request.”

“You do?”

“You went on an adventure with Mister Crawly Wawly last night.”

“Yeah, it was an unusual experience.”

“No fair. I want to have an adventure with you, too.”

“Huh?”

“We haven’t had many adventures together since I came to Zoltan. It’s not fair.”

“We haven’t?”

“I’m losing to Mister Crawly Wawly.”

“…Now that you mention it, I have done things with him pretty

often.”

Well, if Ruti’s around, she can resolve pretty much everything without needing my help.

“I got a request from the Adventurers Guild today. A simple quest that should only take half a day. I want you to give me a hand. We’ll split the reward evenly.”

If you asked me whether Ruti needed my help on an adventure, then the answer would obviously be not at all, but…

“Tisse needs to watch over the plantation, and it’ll be annoying for me to go alone.”

It was endearing to see her try to convince me like that.

It was a request from my adorable little sister. If she says she needs me, then she does.

“Okay. You don’t mind if I join the party?”

“Of course not! You’re always welcome.”

She took my hands, and her expression softened into a smile.

* * *

After that, I went to Stormthunder’s furniture store with Ruti, carrying a bag filled with the makeup he’d asked for and a sandwich.

“He’s open for business?”

It looked like Storm wasn’t in such a rush that he’d had to close for the day to focus on work.

“Welcome in! Oh, it’s you.”

But it took Storm longer than usual to come out after the doorbell rang.

He really must have been pushing himself harder than normal with work. That was why I didn’t bother getting annoyed by the gruff way he’d greeted me when I’d come to make a delivery he’d asked for.

“Thanks for coming right when I’m working my ass off,” Storm said.

“I brought the makeup you asked for, but I can come back if you’re busy.”

“Wait, wait!!” he said, hurriedly stopping me. “Sorry, it was just a little joke, same as always.”

“I promised to go on an adventure with my little sister after this, so I’ll gladly put any requests from an old half-orc aside for later.”

“I said I’m sorry… You’re spending today with Ruti?”

“Yep! Big Brother and I are going on a grand adventure,” Ruti said, puffing out her chest.

She’s so adorable.

“So let’s get the product check over quickly.”

“Yeah, okay. Just whose request do you think it is that’s got me so busy?”

We bantered back and forth a bit while conducting our business.

It was coming to Zoltan that had allowed me to make friends like this. Honestly, I couldn’t help but feel a little touched.

“This is a cream, and this is a lipstick. The cream can be used for sensitive skin and will work for pretty much anyone. I made the lipstick a color that will stand out in the evening light.”

“Oh, I don’t know a thing about makeup, but you seem to know your stuff.”

“I have Rit to help. She talked it over with me.”

“Always talking up your sweetheart whenever the opportunity presents itself.”

Storm gave me an exasperated look. All I’d done, though, was tell the truth.

There’s nothing wrong with that.

“I threw in a lipstick brush for free.”

“Oh, thanks. People’d probably get mad if I gave ’em one of my furniture-making brushes, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, you’d get your butt kicked. You owe me your life.”

Storm laughed at that.

It was a relief to see him in such good spirits after how exhausted he’d been yesterday.

“All right, Ruti and I are gonna head off to take care of the guild’s quest.”

“Sure. What sort of job is it?”

“I haven’t heard yet.” Turning to Ruti, I asked, “Is it something you can say here?”

She nodded. “It’s not a secret. There have been loud noises and a foul stench reported by a nearby village, so we have to solve it.”

“A neighbor dispute?”

“Mhm. It’s the house of a man who moved in about six years ago. He has a history of causing trouble, but lately it’s gotten particularly bad. We’re going to give him a warning.”

It was a lot different from the adventure I’d been expecting.

“Zoltan’s really peaceful if that’s the only quest left to be done.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Zoltan’s strongest adventurer heading out to handle a neighbor dispute. It was so peaceful, I couldn’t help smiling.

“Is it Davis in Northmarsh?”

“Yeah… Is he a friend of yours, Stormthunder?”

“No, he bought some furniture from me when he moved in. I offered delivery, thinking he was inside Zoltan city, but the address turned out to be in Northmarsh, outside the wall, and it turned into a big mess.”

Northmarsh was on the opposite side of a swamp from Southmarsh.

It was a long way to carry something like heavy furniture.

“That’s rough.”

“You got that right. When I found out where he lived, I told him it was outside the area I delivered to, but he wouldn’t listen at all. I quoted him a heavily inflated price to get him to try and give up, but he still insisted on delivery. He was really stubborn.”

Huh. So he was the type of person to hold fast to something once he’d made up his mind.

“He’s a gloomy guy, but weirdly excitable. He paid well, but I couldn’t see myself being friends with him,” Storm said with a shrug.

Davis, huh…? I had a bad feeling about this.

* * *

“I truly am a genius! With this power, I will have vengeance on the royal court for banishing me!”

The shrill voice was audible even outside the Northmarsh house.

“This guy’s a lost cause,” I muttered to myself.

His voice was audible through the thin walls, and the smell of

some sort of medicine wafted from a heap of trash piled up outside. Even though I was barely an apothecary, the needles and bucket filled with a toxic-looking medicine just sitting around outside was incredibly unpleasant.

“I’m sure he’s a bad guy. Let’s teach him a lesson.”

“You can’t judge a book by its cover, Big Brother.”

Ruti’s expression was calm as she walked toward the front door.

“I’m telling you, he’s no good,” I said, following behind her.

“Let’s talk to him first. He probably just doesn’t know how to get along with his neighbors.”

“…Sure.”

Ruti knocked on the door.

“Who’s there?!”

The voice had sounded shrill earlier, but now it was a low, bestial growl.

It almost seemed like a different person…but it wasn’t.

“I’m an adventurer,” Ruti called out. “We’ve had noise and smell complaints. Please stop shouting at night and follow the proper rules for the disposal of garbage.”

“Complaints?! You should be sentenced to death for wasting the time of a great alchemist such as I!”

“Please open the door. I wish to speak face-to-face.”

“Stop! You’ll regret it if you open that door!”

Not listening to his warning, Ruti tried to open the door, but it made a rattling noise.

“It’s futile. No one can open this door—it’s fastened with the ultimate invincible dark lock I invented. You should be grateful for my genius. You’re lucky to escape with your life!”

Crack!

There was a loud sound of metal snapping.

“It’s open.”

“What?!”

Ruti unhesitatingly opened the door, and I rested my hand on the hilt of my sword, just in case.

What was going to appear?

“Yooou saaaw iiit!”

“A demon?!”

A three-meter-tall monster with a goat’s head came into view.

It looked a lot like a demon, but I'd never seen a species like it.

"You must be surprised. However, this is the evolved form of humanity. If we are going to be victorious against the demon lord's army, we must become devils ourselves. Unable to comprehend that, the accursed fools in the royal palace of Avalonia banished me… I'd like to see them try to laugh at me now!"

"You're a bit loud. It'll disturb the neighborhood."

"Atone for the sin of ignoring me with your blood! Know the power of my ultimate invincible dark demon elixir!!"

The man who'd become a demon picked up an ax that had been leaning against the wall in the entranceway and swung it down at Ruti.

"Ruti!!"



But it stopped before touching her skin.

“Wha?”

Davis’s goat eyes widened, and a foolish, human sound passed his lips.

Ruti hadn’t used a sword to protect herself from the ax. Not armor, nor even the palm of her hand. She’d just pinched it between the pointer and middle fingers of her left hand.

Those two fingers alone had stopped the ax swung with the muscles of a demon.

“Someone could get hurt if you swing a weapon around,” Ruti said reprovingly.

“Gah, damn you… Hrrrn!”

Davis held the ax in both hands, his face turning red as he dug in and tried to pull it back. But it didn’t budge in the slightest from between Ruti’s fingers.

“I’m confiscating this.”

With just those two fingers, Ruti lifted the ax and Davis’s body along with it, then spun him around over her head.

“Eeeek!”

Letting out a pitiful shriek, Davis flew toward the back of the house.

He stood up, eyes wide, and then…

“…I’m so sorry,” he apologized, kneeling on the ground.

* * *

“I can understand things around you getting put off when you’re busy, but it’s important to understand and engage with your neighbors.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ruti was giving him a talking-to.

What she was saying was entirely reasonable, but a three-meter-tall goat-headed creature kneeling and slumped over in front of a girl like that was a pretty surreal scene.

“Please be careful in the future. This man here’s a professional when it comes to medicine, so he’ll teach you how to dispose of any waste,” Ruti said, pointing to me.

“Thank you very much,” he said, politely greeting me.

In terms of blessings, though, he seemed to be the real professional. Still, a blessing can't teach you how to clean up after yourself.

"As long as you understand, then this matter's settled."

"Wait just a second there."

There was a lot more that needed to be said here.

But Ruti just cocked her head.

So cute.

Instead, I decided to pick up the thread of the conversation.

"Umm, you're Davis, right? Why do you look like that?"

"Correct, I am the alchemist Davis. Six years ago, I was a researcher in the Kingdom of Avalonia, but I was banished when I suggested researching into the ultimate invincible dark demon elixir after the demon lord's armies began their invasion."

"Ah, so the reason you look like that is because of that ultimate whatever-you-called-it elixir?"

"The *ultimate invincible dark demon elixir*. By drinking it, one can gain the strength of a devil. With this, we can fight on equal terms with the demons of the demon lord's army."

"Oh wow."

"However, its success rate is just ten percent. Nine out of ten people who drink it die."

"I'm amazed you took such a dangerous elixir!"

Did that mean nine people had already died?

"I am very sorry for causing any trouble. Six years after being banished and ending up here in Zoltan, I was simply excited to finally complete my elixir. However, I will be going to report the success of my research to the palace, so I shan't be causing any more problems."

"…If you report that elixir, won't they hang you?"

"Hehehe, by my calculations, the demon lord's army should be closing in on the castle right about now. They'll have no choice but to rely on my elixir."

Davis smirked devilishly with his goat's head.

It was just so sad to see.

"This is hard to say, but…"

"Yes?"

"The war with the demon lord's army is over. The alliance of humanity was victorious, and the demon lord's forces have been

crushed.”

“…Really?”

“Really.”

“What about the fruit of my six years of research, my ultimate invincible dark demon elixir?”

“I imagine it won’t be needed in an era of peace.”

Honestly, even during wartime, I doubt anyone would use something with a 90 percent death rate.

Davis slumped over.

What should I do?

“It’s all right,” Ruti said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “You’re strong, so you should try farming.”

“Huh?”

“I’m running a medicinal herb plantation. When you’re working in the fields, strength is must.”

“You’d have me out there plowing when I look like…like this?!”

“Mhm. I think you’d be perfect for it.”

Ruti gave a thumbs-up, her emotions fleetingly showing across her face.

“……”

Davis stared quietly at his furry arms.

“Plowing fields, huh?” he murmured.

This…had turned out to be an interesting little adventure!

* * *

Night, two days later, in a village near the border of the Republic of Zoltan.

The town was half a day’s walk from Zoltan itself, and travelers and merchants spent the night there on their way to the city. It was in a nice location along the road. If it were anywhere else, it might have become a prosperous town for lodging, but with only Zoltan at the end of the road, it couldn’t expect to get enough guests to build much of an economy around lodging.

As such, there was only one inn.

Ordinarily, it housed just a few traveling merchants and donkeys, but right now, it was bustling with some twenty guests.

Of course, there weren’t enough rooms for everyone. The inn

had set out blankets on the floor in the hall for people to sleep on, but none of the guests looked unsatisfied.

Everyone was filled with joy now that home was in sight.

They were members of Zoltan's volunteer force who had joined the war against the demon lord's army. They raucously drank cheap ale and apple cider, sitting on the floor because there weren't enough seats.

The innkeeper didn't tell them off for being so loud; instead, he generously served alcohol and food to everyone. He stood up to change the candles, seeing the light starting to fade.

Just then, the door to the inn opened, and the wind blew in.

The candlelight flickered.

"Welcome. I'm sorry, but as you can see, we're quite crowded today," the innkeeper said, looking at the new arrival.

It was a soldier with a sword at his hip, wearing light traveling armor. On his forehead was a distinctive scar from an arrow.

"Harmon! You're Harmon Pearlman!!"

The other volunteers rushed over.

"You're alive! Thank God!"

Hands thumped him on the back and shoulders as Harmon was drawn inside, and a big mug of ale was placed in front of him.

"You were a volunteer, too, right? You did well to make it back! First drink's on the house," the innkeeper said with a smile, before going to change the candles.

Harmon looked down at the ale, then grabbed the mug and downed it in one big gulp.

"Look at you, all grown up!"

There was laughter and applause.

Harmon pulled out a silver from his pocket and put it on the counter, then poured himself a second ale from the cask.

"Where'd you spring up from? There's only one road into town, so how'd you not run into any of us this whole time?"

The man who'd struck up the conversation with him looked around the room.

No one there had seen Harmon on the way.

"I flew in," Harmon said with a smirk.

Even if he told them Taraxon had dropped him off nearby in a flying ship, no one would have believed him. Harmon could

barely believe something like that existed himself.

"C'mon, don't tell me you're a ghost who just popped up here."

"There'll be someone missing come tomorrow morning."

"That ain't funny!"

Raucous laughter echoed around the room.

The inn was filled with joy at being alive.

But Harmon looked depressed.

"Why the long face? Actually, what happened to the guys who went to fight with you…?"

"They died. I have to let their families know when I get back to Zoltan…but it's scary."

"Ah… Yeah, it is."

A solemn mood gripped the inn.

One of the biggest reasons why Harmon had taken the long way home with Taraxon and Bui was because he was scared of going back to Zoltan as the only survivor.

After leaving the previous Hero's Tomb, the impromptu party had shared a breakfast together before disbanding. Harmon had discussed his situation as they ate, feeling sentimental after exploring the tomb of a great man like the previous Hero.

He'd told them how he didn't have the courage to go home and that he was running away from his friends' deaths…sharing these small, pathetic emotions he'd been hiding with four heroes.

They'd had nothing but words of encouragement for him.

"We all know you're a brave man," Taraxon had said, firmly gripping Harmon's shoulders.

Bui, Yarandrala, and Baba Yaga all agreed.

The heroes had listened quietly without rejecting his feeble whining.

When he asked them for advice, they had thought about it seriously.

At Yarandrala's suggestion, they'd given Harmon the compass used by the Hero, which they'd taken from the tomb.

"This compass doesn't have any special magic power, yet it guided the Hero on his journey. That's why I'm sure it will guide you home without fail."

Looking at the hefty, old-timey compass Yarandrala had given him, Harmon felt courage well up inside himself.

Those heroes had called a man like him "brave."

Harmon drank in moderation, knowing he would reach Zoltan tomorrow.

The man they believed in wouldn't flee into his cups.

So he decided that's who he'd be.

* * *

First thing the next morning, a soldier had come on a riding drake to spread the word that the volunteers were coming home, and people had gathered at the gate.

"We got the banner ready in time!!" Galatine from the Adventurers Guild shouted.

I was running behind him, holding up the other end of the banner.

"I can see people in the distance! Hurry!!" the captain of the guard, Moen, yelled from atop the watchtower.

"Red, we need to do this fast!"

"Got it!!"

Not slowing down, Galatine and I unfurled the banner and ran up a couple of trees near the gate. I quickly tied the banner to the tree, not forgetting to make eye contact with Galatine to adjust the banner so it didn't droop.

"Perfect!"

Looking up from the ground, Mayor Tornado gave us a two-handed thumbs-up, and Galatine and I returned the gesture.

The banner was filled with kindness and joy, and simply said WELCOME HOME.

""Raaaah!!!""

A cheer rose, as even people at ground level started to see the figures walking toward the town.

"I can see him! Camus! I see my son!"

"Emilia! Thank God! Thank God she's alive!"

"Big Bro!! Big Bro!!!"

The noise must have reached them, because the people walking in the distance started cheering and running.

It was an emotional reunion.

I quietly moved toward the back of the crowd.

I didn't know any of the volunteers, but even so, I was glad to

have been able to help set the stage for that reunion. Seeing the soldiers and their families hugging and crying made it sink in that the war was actually over.

“Harmon.”

Mrs. Cotton called out upon seeing one of the soldiers.

The man with an arrow scar on his forehead appeared visibly surprised, but he looked straight at the woman without averting his eyes. He slowly walked over to Mrs. Cotton and her husband, Lonsdale.

“Wh-what happened to your head?”

“An enemy arrow on the battlefield… I was badly injured, but fortunately I was saved by a nearby comrade.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

For a moment, the two fell silent, as if afraid of their next words.

“Harmon… Is Thomas not with you?”

The man handed her something wrapped in cloth.

Mrs. Cotton unfolded it with trembling hands.

Inside was a lock of hair and a silver ring.

“Thomas died four years ago.”

“Ah… Aaahhh…”

Lonsdale quickly supported Mrs. Cotton as she collapsed, but his face was also a mess of tears.

Thomas Pearlman was the name of their son.

Harmon was a cousin who’d looked up to Thomas.

“I’m sorry. I—I was the only one…”

“Thank you.”

“Uh, wh…?”

“Thank you for telling us. Thank you for surviving.”

“B-but I didn’t…”

They both hugged Harmon.

“Thank you for bringing our son back.”

Harmon gritted his teeth at hearing that. He squeezed his eyes shut, but even then, he couldn’t stop the tears from flowing.

Everyone was crying.

I watched from a little distance away.

Their homecoming was filled with joy and grief…but there would be no more tragedies.

The war was over.

Chapter 5

An Unhealing Wound

“Thanks for your help, Red.”

“You too, Megria. I’ll be going now.”

I squinted in the dazzling sunlight as I left the Adventurers Guild.

The weather was nice today.

After the homecoming, I’d joined Galatine and other prominent figures in Zoltan, as well as everyone running a stall at the Harvest Festival, for a meeting at the Adventurers Guild.

The Harvest Festival would also serve as a celebration of those who’d returned home and as a memorial for everyone who had died in the war. Although there were only two days to go and we had no time, the Adventurers Guild, who were sponsoring the event, had wanted to celebrate as many things as possible.

Galatine and Moen had been particularly vocal about wanting to do something for the returning soldiers. And really, everyone wanted to do something for them.

“It’s a pretty big schedule change. A medal ceremony, a memorial service for the dead, a gifting event with children, free tickets to use at stalls, and rearranging some stalls that don’t have much to do with us… It’s a lot to deal with.”

During the meeting, though, no one had thought it impossible. They’d just focused on how to deal with it.

At seeing how thoughtful everyone was, there was no way I wouldn’t pitch in, too.

“Security and directing guests, huh? Reminds me of back when I was a knight in training.”

I had volunteered to help out with an event in the middle of the day.

The head of Zoltan’s church, Bishop Shien, was personally directing everyone involved in the gifting event, so they were

really using everyone they could.

There was talk of having Rit or Ruti take part in the events, but both of them had only come to Zoltan after the volunteers left. I pointed out that it probably wouldn't mean much to them, being celebrated by a bunch of adventurers they didn't know, so the idea was dropped.

"Oh yeah, I might as well go by Ruti's place, seeing as I'm already here in the northern district."

I had the seeds I'd been planning on giving her later with me, so it was a perfect opportunity.

Taking a bit of a detour, I headed toward Ruti's plantation.

I walked through the fields of grain beneath the clear fall sky.

Just as the plantation came into view…

"Looks like there's some sort of argument."

A woman was talking to Ruti in a forceful tone of voice.

She was one of the volunteer soldiers I'd seen earlier.

"I'm begging you, just sell me some rubercanis. I can't handle it without that."

"No, that's used for anesthesia; it's not for general sale. Especially not if you're going to smoke it."

"They let us smoke it on the battlefield. Just one pipe of that, and I can sleep in peace."

"No."

Ruti was firm in her refusal, but the woman kept desperately pleading.

"Ah, Red," Tisse called out, having noticed me while she worked.

Mister Crawly Wawly swayed on her head, looking troubled.

"Morning, Tisse. Is there some sort of disagreement?"

"Yes, it seems this woman has become dependent on a medicine she used on the battlefield. It's terrible that they gave her rubercanis for something like that. There are much better sedatives."

"The good medicines probably weren't given to less vital divisions, due to lack of supplies."

The order of priority for receiving supplies differed for elite squads and for divisions that—for lack of a better phrase—had just been thrown together from everyone else. If there weren't enough supplies for everyone, then they were distributed in the

most efficient manner. It didn't feel good to weigh the lives of soldiers against one another, but it was a reality of war.

"We can't sell her the herb, but it seems like convincing her will be difficult."

"Yeah… All right, I'll take care of it."

"You will?"

"That's why I came here in the first place."

"What do you mean?" Tisse asked, visibly confused.

I gave her a reassuring smile, then walked over to Ruti.

"Big Brother."

"Hey, Ruti. I'll take over."

I stepped in front of her and faced the woman.

"You're her brother? Please, I'm begging you. Just think of it as helping a poor soldier who suffered during the battle."

"Rubercanis is highly addictive and toxic when smoked. If you keep using it, your internal organs will break down."

"I know that already! But my anxiety's killing me!"

"Ruti." I handed her three of the seeds I'd brought. "Can you crush these in your hands for me?"

"Sure."

You're supposed to grind them to make medicine, but with Ruti's strength, she could squeeze out the extract.

"What are you doing?" the woman snapped in annoyance.

I took Ruti's hand and held it up to the annoyed woman's face. A pleasant smell wafted through the air as Ruti opened her fist.

"…Huh? My anxiety doesn't feel so bad."

She looked at Ruti's hand in a daze.

"This is a sedative without any dependency issues. Smelling it like this has a calming effect. As you've just experienced, it's both fast-acting and effective."

"Who are you?"

"I'm an apothecary. I even have medicine that can help with the psychological scars of war. The reason I came here today was to give Ruti these seeds, which are used to make the sedative, so she could grow them for me."

"I understand. Leave it to me," Ruti said.

She put a hand to her chest and nodded.

With how her plantation was now, Ruti wouldn't have any trouble growing them.

“So if you ever need to talk about psychological scars from the battlefield, please come to my shop. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Ha, haha, thanks… Sorry for all the trouble I caused your sister.”

With her anxiety fading, the woman was coming back to her senses. She looked depressed, having realized what she’d done.

“It’s pathetic. I’m back in my peaceful hometown, but the anxiety and fear just won’t go away. I didn’t even really fight, just carted stuff around… A shameful, no-name grunt.”

“You’re not pathetic at all,” I said firmly. “You volunteered to fight for the sake of people you don’t even know. That’s an incredibly brave thing to do, and I respect that from the bottom of my heart. Thank you.”

“…Maybe I won’t regret my choice if there are people who say that.”

She smiled awkwardly and then left.

* * *

I understood the psychological trauma of the battlefield.

During my travels, I reached a point where the anxiety of not having a sword within arm’s reach was painful. I hadn’t even been able to sleep without a weapon nearby. No matter how tired I was, my brain wouldn’t accept that it was safe to sleep.

That was why I’d always had a sword with me when I first came to Zoltan.

It was only after my battle with Ares and Shisandan that those scars had started to fade. Realizing that my journey hadn’t been pointless but was instead the reason I was able to be with Rit and also was what had freed Ruti of the Hero blessing, I could finally let go of my sword.

“There are things I can do now because of that.”

There were hardly any doctors in Zoltan who dealt with psychological trauma, and almost none who had any military experience. I doubted that many of Zoltan’s medical experts could understand a soldier’s psychological scars or know how to effectively treat them.

Fortunately, I had both the knowledge and the experience.

I wanted to do what I could for the soldiers.

"I…didn't understand the feeling of fear when I was fighting," Ruti murmured.

"You had Immunity to Fear."

"So many soldiers followed me and fought…and I didn't understand anything about the pain they were feeling."

The Hero was different from normal people, but they had been created to fight alongside people and give them courage.

I wondered what Demis thought of that contradiction.

Now that Ruti was able to control the Hero's skills, she'd become able to understand the soldiers' anguish.

If that isn't growth, I don't know what is.

* * *

That evening, Harmon had dinner with his family for the first time in six years.

There was so much about the lost time they must've wanted to make up for, but the conversation was awkward and stilted, with long periods of silence.

I've changed…

The main reason the discussion faltered was because of Harmon's changed perspective. After six years at war, his values were just too different from those of his parents living in peace in Zoltan.

He went back to his bedroom. Looking around the room he'd had as an eighteen-year-old, he laughed a little at the childishness of it.

And then, finally, Harmon took off his traveling clothes.

Starting tomorrow, he'd be wearing light, comfortable, everyday sorts of clothes. Realizing that, he felt anxiety swell in his heart.

I can't remember what days were like when I wasn't fighting.

When he looked out the window, he saw flying demons trying to get into the room. He needed to block it with the table to stall for time. In the hallway, spear-wielding demons were closing in.

There was no way to protect the house.

Why had he rested in such an indefensible place?

He was filled with regret.

Harmon picked up his sword and was about to rush out of the room to join up with his fellow soldiers, when…

He snapped out of it.

"*Haah, haah.*"

There wasn't anything.

Just a simple room in peaceful Zoltan.

Covered in sweat, he wiped away the unpleasant dampness.

Harmon realized he was still clutching his sword in his hand.

"Yeah, I really am broken."

Letting go of the weapon, he covered his face with a hand.

He looked closely at the sword he'd survived the battlefield with and saw the blade was chipped and cracked.

* * *

The next morning, at Red & Rit's Apothecary.

The Harvest Festival was tomorrow.

Before Rit and I opened the store, we double-checked our plans for the day.

"I'm going to make deliveries to three clinics this morning," she said.

"Thanks. People from the Adventurers Guild and the colosseum will come by the store to pick up disinfectants and salves for wounds, but I'll take care of that."

"Must be for any incidents that happen at the festival. I can't wait to see our books for this month!"

"Yeah, our sales are looking pretty good."

"Oh, right," Rit said, suddenly remembering something. "There might be a lot of people coming by to get medicinal cookies today."

"Cookies?"

"Yes, there were some people talking about wanting to use them as prizes or freebies during the festival."

"Ahh, if it looks like we'll run out, I'll bake some extras while watching the store."

"Hehe, people really love your cookies."

“I’ll close the store at noon and start setting up the stall for the festival in the afternoon.”

“It’s a plan!”

Rit and I high-fived.

We’d do our best and enjoy ourselves again today.

* * *

You’ll hurt yourself if you get too excited at a festival.

It was something that even children understood, but getting excited and running around was part of the fun.

That’s why there were lots of customers looking to restock on medicine before the festival started, and inside the shop was livelier than usual.

“Gimme three days’ worth of this!”

Plenty of people were also buying hangover medicine, just like Gonz was now.

“Wait, you’re planning to be drunk for three days?”

“It’s gonna be an even bigger celebration than normal, with everyone coming home, right? So I’ve gotta drink my share, too!”

“You always drink as much as you can…”

“Listen here, Red, there comes a day where every man has to overcome his limits, and tomorrow’s that day for me.”

“That’s a limit that doesn’t need to be overcome.”

“There’s no way I can work the day after I’ve overcome my limits, so I’ll take that day off. And with this year’s festival being such a happy occasion, it’d be rude not to drink the day after it if I’m off.”

“*Haah*.”

“And I need some hangover medicine for the day after *that* because of course I’ll drink some, reminiscing in the afterglow of the festival.”

“You sure are something.”

Gonz really was hopeless.

I’d heard he’d just finished up a big job and his schedule was free, but still…

I should tell Nao to switch out his drinks for water partway through.

I was sure he'd be too drunk to tell the difference anyway.

"Big Brother."

Ruti had come by while I'd been listening to Gonz's nonsensical story.

"Welcome."

She had a big bag on her back.

"What's in there?"

"Medicinal herbs."

All the customers in the shop watched as Ruti set the bag down.

I looked into the bag…

"These are the ones I talked to you about yesterday!"

They were the herbs I'd given her the seeds to grow the day before. There were also others that could be used for sleep medicine and to help with psychological trauma.

"I went to the mountain to gather them last night."

"You did?"

"Mhm. It takes time to grow the plants, and I wanted to avoid not having enough for the people who need the medicine."

"And you gathered this much? Thanks!"

It was a relief to have all this.

I patted Ruti's head and thanked her again.

"I'll check through it once things are a bit less busy in here, so can you take it into the back?"

"Sure."

"All right, I'm going to get some tea for my sister while she waits, so everyone just wait here."

"You're gonna make your customers wait as well?!"

Laughter filled the room.

Nobody there was mad.

This was just a normal day in Zoltan, where time flowed at a tranquil pace.

Clang.

The doorbell rang.

"Welcome."

It was the woman I'd met at Ruti's plantation yesterday.

“Thank you,” she said, a little embarrassed. “I was hoping maybe I could talk to you a bit…”

“Ah, of course. The herbs to make your medicine just arrived, so you don’t have to worry; I should have it whenever you come in.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“My sister went out to the mountain to gather them.”

“Really?!”

“I’m proud to have such a helpful little sister.”

The woman smiled. Her eyes were bright, unlike yesterday, when they’d been clouded by pain and self-loathing.

“Since you came by, we can talk in the back.”

“You look busy. Should we do it some other time?” she asked reticently.

“Don’t worry ’bout that. We’ll watch the shop.”

“We’re regulars here, so we know everything Red does.”

Gonz and another of the regulars chimed in.

“Whoa, now, don’t say it like it’s so easy. We’re dealing with medicine here.”

“And we’ve been using your medicine for over a year now.”

They were brimming with confidence, but still…

“Ruti, sorry, but can I ask you to watch the shop?”

“Mhm, leave it to me.”

“Aww, what?!”

The crowd started booing, but I ignored them.

“Now it *really* feels like I’m back in Zoltan,” the woman said, her voice trembling slightly.

The customers looked kindly at the local girl who’d come back home.

“Ah, right, a friend of mine is in pretty bad shape, too. Could you talk with him as well?”

“A friend?”

“C’mon, don’t just hang around outside. Come in already.”

The woman left the shop, then came back inside a moment later, dragging a man by the arm.

He had an arrow wound to his forehead and wore a padded doublet that normally went beneath his armor.

Standing there, his balance looked a little off. Most likely, it was because he’d spent so long wearing a sword at his hip every

day.

He was the man Mrs. Cotton and her husband had hugged… Harmon, I think his name was.

“Welcome in.”

I greeted him with a smile.

Harmon slowly looked around the room, and his eyes widened at seeing me and Ruti.

“Uh, uh…”

Seeing his eyes, I could tell what he was going to say.

I couldn’t stop him, and I’d expected this moment would come someday.

His mouth slowly opened.

“Hero Ruti and Sir Gideon! The twin wings of humanity’s hope are in Zoltan?!”

He said our names in a voice loud enough to be heard outside.

The air in the shop froze.

“Wh-what?”

A speechless Gonz looked back and forth from my face to Harmon’s.

“…Haha, you sure you’re not getting me confused with someone else? I’m Red, an apothecary.”

“I would know you anywhere! You saved my life!”

The culture of Zoltan was to not dive too deeply into the pasts people wanted to hide. Yet Harmon had been away from Zoltan, fighting for years now. The battlefield was an extreme place where you had to have the same values as the soldiers who stood beside you if you were going to survive without losing yourself.

I couldn’t just feign ignorance with Harmon. Not with something so important.

“Big Brother,” Ruti said, looking at me.

I could see concern in her red eyes, but also resolve. She was telling me she didn’t want to lie to a soldier who’d fought for the sake of the world.

Yeah, she’s right.

“Everyone, I’d like to tell you something, so can you stay here for just a little longer?”

“S-sure.”

Gonz and the others all looked nervous, but they nodded.

“Thank you.”

I took a deep breath.

“…My real name is Gideon Ragnason. And this is my little sister, Ruti Ragnason.”

“?!”

“I’m the former second-in-command of the Bahamut Knights and an ex-member of the Hero’s party.”

“And I,” Ruti continued softly, “was once called a hero and fought against the demon lord’s army… Ruti the Hero.”

We’d finally revealed our identities in Zoltan.

* * *

“R-right, it makes sense now why you’re so strong.”

Gonz nodded over and over in a mixture of confusion and acceptance.

“Still, isn’t Ruti Ruhr a bit too simple an alias?”

“Ruti isn’t that rare a name, but her name means a lot to her.”

“Haha, you really do love your little sister,” Gonz said with an awkward smile.

For a few moments, no one said anything.

But then…

“Excuse me!”

Harmon looked Ruti in the eye.

He hesitantly asked the obvious question.

“Why are you in Zoltan and not fighting the demon lord’s army?”

How should I answer that?

It would be simple enough to give a perfunctory excuse to convince him, but…

Looking at Ruti’s eyes, I understood it wasn’t my place to answer here.

This was something the ex-Hero, Ruti, needed to overcome herself.

“The reason I fought was because the Hero blessing forced me to, not because I wanted to.”

“…Huh?”

“I’m sorry, but that was Ruti the Hero. I believe the true heroes are brave people like Van, Escarlata, and Prince Salius, who chose

to fight of their own free will."

"But you were the ones who stood and fought in front of me. It was your backs that I followed while I fought."

It was probably the first time Ruti had come face-to-face like this with a soldier who'd fought on those battlefields.

She was silent, seemingly unsure of what to say.

"We soldiers were weak, but we fought because we wanted to support the Hero, even if we could only help a little…! I got my courage from you, and you're telling me it's fake?!"

"No, it isn't fake at all!" Ruti shouted desperately.

"I don't know what to think anymore…"

"Wait!" Ruti yelled at Harmon's turned back.

But he ran out of the shop without so much as a backward glance.

"Harmon!!"

The woman who'd brought him looked unsure of what to do, and her shoulders slumped.

"I was pretty much always at the back, so I don't know anything about the Hero's battles…but he was on the front lines the whole time. Even though everyone else was transferred to the back after half a year of fighting."

"Yeah, I know about that… I was one of the people who wrote the manual for maintaining morale," I said.

"You were, Mr. Gideon? Thanks to that, a lot of people managed to avoid getting totally broken…but not Harmon."

At the very start of the war, when I was still fighting as one of the Bahamut Knights, I had predicted that it would be harder and longer than any conflict up to that point. So to stop soldiers from feeling so worn down, I'd tried to put some distance between them and death.

There were some people with blessings like Soldier and Infantry who were able to handle it, but even then, they stopped being able to do anything more than obey the impulses of their blessings, and their own judgment would often dull.

That was why the manual on troop management given to a commander of the allied forces had a section about always gradually swapping soldiers at the front and back.

But apparently, Harmon's commander hadn't followed the book.

“Big Brother, I’m sorry.”

“Ruti…”

“There’s something we need to tell him, but I don’t know how to say it. Right now, I think he needs to hear those words.”

“Yeah. Can I leave things here to you?”

“Mhm… I’m counting on you.”

I nodded and smiled slightly to reassure Ruti.

“Got it.”

But even as I turned my back to Ruti and opened the door, I felt rattled.

Did someone like me, who’d given up the fight, really have any words that would reach a wounded soldier who’d kept going…?

Ruti’s and my identities had also been revealed.

The war was over, and Zoltan was excited about tomorrow’s Harvest Festival and the celebration for the returned soldiers… yet I guess the time had finally come for us to face our past, for the sake of our quiet life.

Unease and anxiety swirled inside me.

* * *

In a park in downtown Zoltan, Harmon was sitting in the shade of a tree, looking down at the ground.

“Harmon, right?”

I’d caught up with him along the way but had waited for him to stop and catch his breath before speaking to him.

“Sir Gideon…”

“Around here, I’m just the apothecary Red, and I don’t need the honorifics… I’m younger than you, after all.”

“Eh?”

“I’m twenty-two. I heard you’re twenty-four.”

He looked surprised.

“You’re so young.”

“Where was it that you fought with me and Ruti?”

“The west checkpoint of Avalonia’s capital.”

“Ahh, then I would have been eighteen at the time, and Ruti would’ve been fifteen.”

“Fifteen…”

“I’m sorry…but I want you to understand how I felt about my little sister having to bear the weight of the world on her shoulders because of the impulses of her blessing.”

“Yes, sir…”

If she didn’t fight, everyone would die.

If she lost, everyone would die.

It was her blessing that made such a young girl bear such a heavy burden.

I sat down next to Harmon.

“The reason I fought was to protect my little sister. I became a knight and built up my strength for the sake of my sister, who was destined to set out on her journey one day.”

“You did…? Even so, we…”

“…You can’t accept it. At the time, all we could do was ask people to fight alongside us because the Hero was fighting for the sake of the world. But still, I don’t think we ever chose a strategy that wasted the lives of soldiers.”

“I understand you did it to raise morale.”

“Thank you…but you don’t have to force yourself to say that.”

“…I’m sorry, I understand it in my head, but my heart just can’t accept it.”

“If we were on a battlefield, I could’ve said something I didn’t believe to convince you.”

“On a battlefield, if you can’t convince soldiers today, everyone will die tomorrow.”

“But this is Zoltan, and I’m just the neighborhood apothecary Red. You’re going to be living in Zoltan, too, right?”

“Yes, sir… Well, no…”

“What’s wrong?”

His expression changed, as if he’d remembered something, and Harmon shook his head.

“No, it’s nothing. I intend to live with my family now, but after a little while, I was thinking of going to see if I could work at a masonry place my uncle runs.”

“Lonsdale Pearlman’s shop.”

“You know him, sir?”

“Of course, I’ve been living in this neighborhood for over two years now. I’ve even been to his house to do some cooking experiments with the neighborhood women.”

“What?! You did, Sir Gideon?!”

“Ruti was there, too.”

I smiled at seeing his eyes widen.

“We’ve been living in peace…thanks to all of you who fought.”

“I was just a simple soldier; I didn’t do anything that determined whether we won or lost…”

“Infantry are the backbone of an army. I know that full well, since I was a commander.”

Harmon finally smiled, just slightly.

“If you’re going to be living here in Zoltan, we’ll get to talk plenty. Ruti and I both want to talk with you about lots of things, the important ones as well as the trivial.”

“You do?”

“You’ll be living in the same neighborhood as us, so we’ll be able to chat… We’ll talk as many times for as long as we need, without any lies or twisted words, until you’re able to accept it.”

Harmon slowly nodded. And finally, it looked like his shoulders untensed.

“With that said…”

“Hm?”

I continued in a cheerful tone, trying to change the mood. “We need to take care of today’s goal.”

“What’s that…?”

“You came to see me about getting some medicine, didn’t you?”

“Oh, right.”

He laughed a little. It had completely slipped his mind.

“You might need to talk about some difficult things, so shall we head back to the shop to talk?”

“Yes, sir… Please.”

The two of us stood up and started walking back.

“If you’re troubled by psychological trauma from the battlefield, then I’m sure I’ll be able to help.”

“You’re incredible, Sir Gideon. I can’t even manage to deal with my own problems.”

“Not at all,” I said cheerfully. “Until about a year ago, I couldn’t get a wink of sleep without a sword within arm’s reach.”

“You couldn’t…?”

“No matter how safe a place was, even here in the middle of Zoltan, I always had a sword at my hip. Not having one made me

incredibly anxious.”

“…”

“I’m the same as you.”

“And you got better, Sir Gideon?”

“It took over a year.”

“That’s…”

“I’m planning on living here in Zoltan from here on out…so you can rely on me for any matters related to sickness. And if there are any other wounded volunteers, please let them know about my shop.”



“Yes, sir… But are you sure? There might be others aside from me who know you.”

“We’re all living together here in Zoltan. Ruti and I have made up our minds…and we want to help.”

I want to do what I can as Zoltan’s apothecary, Red.

That hasn’t changed, and it isn’t going to.

* * *

“So that’s what happened…”

Ruti and I had lunch with Rit when she got back from the deliveries, and I told her about what had happened that morning.

“What about the people who were in the store?”

“Mm, they understood and said they’d keep it quiet,” Ruti said, lowering her gaze slightly. “Even though I should’ve been the reliable one, everyone encouraged me.”

“Our regulars are all good people,” Rit said with a kind smile.

Apparently, Ruti had tried to explain things to the people in the store afterward, but…

“You were keeping it a secret, right? Then there’s no need to explain. It must’ve been rough, but you still made it out here to Zoltan. Thank you. I’m sure things will work out with Harmon.”

After that, they told the woman who’d brought Harmon in—Eva was her name—about Ruti and me here in Zoltan.

Eva seemed to accept it as well, and she’d even looked happy to hear that Ruti was now an adventurer here in Zoltan, protecting the city.

“I want to explain things properly, though,” Ruti said seriously. “Back then, there were so many things I couldn’t see because I had my hands full dealing with my own issues… But now things are different.”

“Yeah.”

Ruti was growing. She could feel pain she hadn’t been able to as the Hero. That determination to overcome it was called courage.

“That aside…”

There were issues we needed to resolve, but we also had our everyday work to take care of.

“We need to set up our stall for the Harvest Festival tomorrow!”

“Right,” Rit said.

Ruti blinked in surprise.

“I left Tisse waiting at the plantation.”

“Oh yeah, you came to deliver the medicinal herbs.”

“Big Brother, Rit, I’m going back to Tisse. Let’s meet later where we’re going to set up the stalls.”

“‘“Okay!”’”

Rit and I both smiled.

It felt like she was back to her usual self.

* * *

Although I talked about setting up the stall, ours was just a table covered by a tablecloth, a little tent for a roof, and a sign out front.

Rit had arranged for the sign to be made. It had a bottle of medicine and a bronze shotel painted on it, with “Red & Rit’s Apothecary” written in cute, bouncy letters.

It was a pretty different vibe from the sign on our shop, but it fit the festival mood.

That’s my Rit.

“We’re done now, but…”

Habotan and Frank were working together, and they looked to be making adjustments to the shuriken throwing corner.

Frank was throwing a shuriken…but he was surprisingly bad at it.

“I-if they were throwing axes, I’d get bull’s-eyes with all of them.”

“Oh yeah?”

“If you’re saying that, why don’t you give it a go, Red?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Ooh! You are going to try, Sir Red?!”

I took the shuriken from Frank.

Am I right in thinking of using them like cross-shaped throwing knives?

“This is how one holds them.”

“I see.”

Gripping them like Habotan had said, I threw five in quick succession.

“All of them right in the middle. You really are incredible, Sir Red…!”

Habotan clapped excitedly.

Throwing is a common skill, but it’s rare for people to perfect it. There’s a limit to how well you can use bows and crossbows without an inherent skill, so I had attacked enemies at a distance by using Throwing with javelins and weapons I’d picked up off the ground.

At less than two meters, even with a weapon I didn’t know, I could hit a target as small as the eye of a needle.

“Let me try!”

Rit came over, too.

Habotan took the shuriken out of the target and handed them to Rit.

“I love my throwing knives, so I’m sure I’ll be great, too.”

“Oh?”

Rit held up a shuriken.

“Ah, that’s not how to hold them!”

Yet Rit still threw it, despite Habotan’s comment.

“Hngh?!”

She’d hit the target, but it had landed above and to the right of the bull’s-eye.

“Ahaha, close.”

“Don’t worry. You hit the target, so you still receive a prize!”

“But I can do so much better!”

After listening to Habotan’s advice and adjusting her grip and stance, Rit threw the rest of the shuriken carefully. By the third one, she started hitting precisely where she aimed.



“If even Rit missed her aim on the first throw, then this distance should be fine.”

“But if someone with a strength enhancing skill just lets it fly, it might go through the board behind the target,” Rit said, looking closely at the fifth shuriken.

This was the main street of the northern district. There were homes on the other side of the stalls.

Habotan had set up a big board to keep the shuriken from flying into the houses, but depending on the strength of someone’s blessing, there was the chance it would still go through.

“Hmm, but what should we do, then?”

“Just leave it to your old pal Rit!”

Rit hit the bull’s-eye with her last shuriken, then formed a seal with both hands.

“Spirit of earth, raise thy body and form a shield! Earth Wall!”

“Ohhh!”

A thick wall of earth formed behind the board.

“That should be fine now, right?”

“Thank you so much!”

And with that, Habotan’s stall was complete.

Only Ruti’s was left, but…

“There’s a problem with ventilating the smoke.”

“Hmm, but we rented a proper stall.”

Ruti and Tisse were looking at the cloud of smoke trapped by the ceiling of their stall.

“I thought they’d be better off borrowing a kitchenette if they were going to cook, but it looks like that was a mistake.”

I squinted at the smoke, which was dense enough that even I was having trouble seeing clearly. There was a single hole in the ceiling for ventilation, but it seemed poorly designed.

“If it’s like this…,” Ruti said, spreading her arms wide. Her expression became serious. “Hero blessing, release.”

A tremendous pressure swelled from Ruti’s body, and she started spinning her arms.

“Martial Art: Slow Life Great Whirlwind!”

“Wha?!”

She stirred up a powerful wind, dispersing the smoke trapped by the ceiling.

However, buffeted by the explosive wind, Rit and I staggered, Frank was blown over, and Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly hastily caught the shuriken that came flying out of the target.

Ruti stopped the wind and turned to me with a satisfied look.

“You’re banned from doing that again!”

“Aww,” Ruti said, dejected.

“It’d be better to use charcoal instead.”

“You think so?” Tisse asked, handing Habotan the shuriken.

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly had caught all of them safely. I’d expect nothing less of the two of them.

“The smoke is a problem with the stall itself. The better stalls were probably already taken by the time you rented this one out.”

“I think so, too. We paid full price for it, though…!”

Tisse’s eyes were burning with anger. Someone was going to be getting an earful once the festival was over.

“That means it’ll be difficult to do something with the stall to fix the smoke. Even if it’s more expensive, switching to charcoal, which has hardly any smoke, is probably the most realistic solution.”

“I see… That seems to be the only choice.” Tisse nodded. “Ms. Ruti, I am going to go and buy charcoal.”

“Oh, in that case, I’ll come, too,” said Rit.

“You will?” I asked.

“Loggervia’s known for its supply of high-quality timber. I wouldn’t be overstating things to say I’m pretty much an expert on charcoal!” she said confidently. “So I’ll be back in a bit, Red.”

“Okay. Be careful out there.”

Rit, Tisse, and Mister Crawly Wawly went off to get the charcoal.

With the work done for the time being, I took a seat at the stall.

Habotan and Frank sat down next to me, while Ruti stood in front of her stand with her head cocked, seemingly concerned about the angle of the sign.

Haha, it looks like she’s enjoying the preparations.

“How about you, Habotan? Having fun getting ready for the festival?”

“Yes, sir! Working together with one’s comrades, thinking about how to delight customers… It is fun to ponder all of these

things!”

“I’m glad. Is Torahime not coming?”

“Lady Torahime indicated that she would come during the festival, and that we would walk around together once things settled down here!”

Habotan’s eyes shone with excitement. They were the adorable eyes of a child looking forward to playing with their mother.

“It looks like things have been rough for you, too, Red,” remarked Frank. “Now that people know who you are, aren’t you afraid your whole quiet life here is going to get messed up?”

He probably was actually a bit concerned…so I guess that smirk was just a habit of his when he was in his human form?

“If it was going to turn out like this, wouldn’t it have been better just to drive off the volunteer soldiers before they got back to Zoltan?”

“You really are a demon.”

Even if he could live among people, Frank’s sense of right and wrong was still different from theirs. Still, we could find things we could compromise on and get along from a reasonable distance. It’s not like our two races had to hold hands and love each other.

However, I do hope that once Habotan leaves and reclaims her throne, our countries can at least remain on speaking terms.

“Oh yeah, I guess you’ve both experienced having your identity uncovered by us.”

“Yes! It was a big surprise!” replied Habotan cheerfully, but Frank shuddered.

“I didn’t think I’d make it out alive when you found me in the woods.”

“It was very difficult to continue lying to all of you after you saved us, so the relief outweighed the shock,” Habotan said.

“I thought I’d be killed if the Hero found me out, so I’ve been sleeping like a baby the past few days.”

“You always slept that soundly, Sir Frank!”

“I did?!”

We all laughed.

True, I was also feeling a bit anxious about what might happen now, but it also felt like something I’d been holding in had finally been set free.

Maybe it would go as well as things were going for Habotan and Frank now. I would do my best to make that happen.

Or so I thought.

“I’ve wanted to ask this for a while now, but…”

Before I knew it, Ruti was standing in front of me, looking at the smiling Frank.

“Who’s that next to Habotan?”

Frank’s expression froze.

“Red, don’t tell me you…?”

“Ah, right, I never explained things to Ruti.”

“Gyaaaaaah?!?!?!”

Frank screamed and fell out of his chair.

“Please, I’m not an evil demon…”

“That’s what they all say.”

“True,” I chimed in.

“Eeep!”

Frank clutched his head and trembled.

It didn’t look like he was going to be able to say anything, so Habotan and I explained things to Ruti instead.

“I see.”

Ruti looked down at Frank, who was prostrate in front of her.

“Would you like me to lick your shoes?”

“…Is that a hostile action?”

“I-it’s just a joke.”

Ruti furrowed her brow.

Yeah, she really wouldn’t want to have her shoes licked.

“I don’t really get it, but I’m not the Hero anymore. If you’re Habotan’s friend, then that makes you a friend of a friend of mine.”

“O-okay.”

“So I won’t hurt you. You can relax.”

“Th-thank goodness…!”

Frank let out a huge sigh of relief.

I bet he’d sleep soundly tonight.

* * *

That night, at Red & Rit’s Apothecary.

With the setup for the festival complete, everyone returned to their own homes.

We were planning to eat all sorts of things at the festival tomorrow, so dinner tonight was just a simple soup and bread.

And now Rit and I were in the bath.

““Ahhh.””

The bathtub Gonz made for us is really great.

Even after a year, the contentment I feel at getting into the bath still hasn’t faded in the slightest.

I’m starting to think a good bath is the key to a nice, quiet life.

“Nervous?” Rit asked.

Her fingers touched my chest, and her body leaned against mine.

“Yeah. If I’m being honest, I am nervous.”

I hugged Rit’s body. Feeling her warmth seemed to ease my anxieties.

“I think I’m nervous, too, which is why I want to stay like this.”

Rit hugged me back.

The strength I could feel in her arms wrapped around my back was so precious to me.

“Fighting the demon lord’s army is becoming just a memory now.”

“Mmm. Even with how awful the fighting was, it feels like the pain is fading.”

People’s brains were incredible things. Memories might remain, but details fade with time.

I wanted the soldiers who’d returned home to be able to experience the same thing.

“Let’s worry about tomorrow when it comes.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to give up this moment of bliss right now. This is our quiet life.”

I kissed Rit’s neck and slipped deeper into the bath.

We had a wonderful night.

Tomorrow was the Harvest Festival…a day for making fall memories.

Chapter 6

A Fun Festival

The Harvest Festival started early the next morning.

“Here you go.”

Hot soup was served to the people involved in the event, who’d gathered in the northern district plaza. It was the first event, the Zoltan Soup Meet, where each farm provided a few vegetables to make a soup for everyone helping out with the festival.

Normal guests couldn’t attend. It was something you could only enjoy by being involved.

“Delicious!”

“Yeah, and it’s nice and hot.”

Rit and I both sipped at the soup. We filled our cheeks with the floating bits of potato, and both of us made silly faces as we huffed and puffed, trying to endure the heat.

Unable to hold it in, we laughed at each other’s faces.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget that joy.

Once the soup meet finished, the stalls immediately opened for business.

The crowds at the festival differed in the morning, afternoon, and night, though some people really loved festivals and spent the whole day wandering around.

A lot of the guests in the morning were farmers from villages near Zoltan, who were more interested in the stalls selling food, supplies, and daily accessories.

At Red & Rit’s Apothecary stand, we did quite well selling medicines for dealing with snake and insect venom.

“Nobody’s commented on the medicine bottles yet, though.”

Rit looked a bit disappointed, but we’d expected as much. People who didn’t always buy medicine in Zoltan wouldn’t notice that the bottles were different from normal. Knowing that, I had stocked the farm-oriented medicine that would probably sell

better in the morning in the usual bottles and paper bags.

The main event would start in the afternoon.

As for Ruti's and Habotan's stalls on either side of us…

"Everything's going great."

"Nobody is stopping by at all…"

Ruti raised her arms happily in the air, while Habotan's slumped dejectedly.

Well, that was also what we expected.

There were a lot of people in the morning crowd looking for breakfast. And since they tended to want to try something a little different, given the festive mood, Ruti's medicinal cooking was the perfect choice. Her dishes made using food smoked with medicinal herbs were selling like hotcakes, and as a special morning bonus, they were offering a normal soup, which was a big draw.

The soup was one I'd made yesterday, so it was nice that people seemed to be enjoying it.

"Habotan, your stall is mainly targeted at people who've come to the festival for the games."

"Urgh."

Most of the farmers from outside Zoltan didn't know Habotan was a ninja from the Far East, or that she was selling authentic ninja gear. For people looking for practical goods, it was unlikely they'd stop at a stall selling tools where they didn't know if they were authentic or not.

"Whoops, it's almost time for my shift."

It was time for the ceremony celebrating the volunteer soldiers.

I had been asked to help with security and directing guests, so I put my bronze sword on my hip.

"I'll be back. I'm leaving the store in your hands."

"Got it! Be careful, Red."

"I'm gonna have to be careful not to get drawn into a fight and smacked around."

"Haha, there isn't anyone who could land a hit on your face."

As she said that, Rit closed the distance between us in one fluid motion and lightly kissed me on the forehead.

"Other than me, that is."

"You even used your skills."

“Hehe, I’m the only one who could do this to you.”
Rit giggled as she saw me off.
…Yeah, I’m ready to go!

* * *

In the plaza in the northern district, a little over twenty volunteer soldiers sat in chairs on a temporary stage.

They were all wearing formal dress. Several of them looked uncomfortable, and every once in a while, someone started fidgeting.

One seat was empty. It looked like someone was missing.

It wasn’t a ceremony where participation was mandatory, but the empty seat was for a son of one of the nobles living in the center of Zoltan. I’d thought he would take part even if just for the sake of his family’s reputation.

“Young men and women raised here in Zoltan, your efforts in fighting the fearsome demon lord’s army to the end shall be forever engraved in Zoltan’s history and passed down through the generations. We shall—”

The head of the Adventurers Guild, Harold, was famous for being long-winded.

Apparently, he was planning to retire next spring, and Galatine would take his place, so he was eager to make a show of the ceremony.

Galatine sat in a chair, averting his eyes with a grimace on his face. He preferred keeping things simple, with the key points easy to understand, so his speeches at times like this were also short.

When the head changed from Harold, who was so focused on preserving traditions, to Galatine, who was more workmanlike and knew how things functioned on the ground level, the Adventurers Guild would probably be reformed in all sorts of ways.

Zoltan was a place that prioritized seniority, and the occasional standout generation would reform the rules and balance things so that even ordinary folk in the next average generation to come could run the country.

There was a mountain of pointless rules, but Zoltan had still

somehow managed to make it from its founding to now without any major issues.

"…"

As for the volunteers listening to the long speech…most of them wore calm expressions.

Maybe the guild chief and his long-winded speeches just reminded them that they really were back home. A couple of them even nodded along, making it look like maybe the speech was surprisingly decent if you actually listened to it. It was pointlessly long, but the atmosphere actually felt quite peaceful.

The ceremony continued until after noon.

As the guests started increasing, it began to get crowded outside the plaza.

I wondered how Rit, Ruti, and the others were doing with all the customers.

Maybe I should've asked Tanta or Ademi to help out at the store, even if just to cover for me while I'm gone.

As that thought went through my mind, the gifting event drew to a close, with children singing a song and handing out bouquets of flowers.

Just then…

"Kyaaah!"

I heard a woman's shout from outside the plaza.

What should I do?

It was hard to imagine something happening in the plaza here, but I'd still been asked to serve as security. I had a duty not to leave the spot…

"Ah!!"

But one person moved faster than anyone else.

"Harmon!"

Even though he didn't have a weapon, Harmon leaped down from the stage and raced away.

I had to catch up to him. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to him.

He had to find the same Zoltan happiness as everyone else!

* * *

It was clear from the direction people were fleeing in where the incident was happening, and Harmon must have thought the same. He made his way through the waves of people without stopping until he reached the source of the scream.

“Red!” Galatine shouted from behind me. “What’s happening?!”

“I don’t know. You and the adventurers in the plaza should calm down the people! I’ll follow Harmon!”

“Got it, leave this place to us!”

But instead of moving through the people…

…I leaped onto the ceiling of a stall!

“H-hey!”

“Sorry! I’ll be careful not to damage anything!”

I ran across the roofs, chasing after Harmon.

With the added height, I could immediately see the cause of the panic.

“That’s the guy who was missing from the ceremony!”

A sloppily dressed man in a noble’s outfit was holding a bottle of strong alcohol in his left hand and a drawn saber loosely in his right. He’d caught a young woman and was holding her against him with his right arm.

“Eeek!”

The woman cried out as the saber dangled in front of her chest.

“What, you don’t wanna go out with me?”

“I—I have a husband…!”

“Liar!”

The man unleashed a ferocious shout, then suddenly started laughing. He took a swig of alcohol from the bottle in his left hand.

He was emotionally unstable. There was no telling what might happen!

“You! All of you! You’re the same as my parents!”

The man pointed the tip of his saber at the people watching from a distance.

“I can tell you’re laughing at me! It’s only because of me you can laugh like that! Whose fault do you think it is I ended up like this?!”

“Stop!!” Harmon shouted as he arrived at the scene.

The confused man was holding a saber, while Harmon was unarmed.

This could get ugly…!

* * *

“Stop!!” Harmon shouted.

Making his way through the crowd, he stood in front of a comrade from a different battlefield, whose name he didn’t know.

“Hey, that medal on your chest suits you,” his comrade said with a sneer.

“You had the right to receive one, too.”

“I want booze more.”

“Stop this already… The reason we fought was to protect a world where everyone could smile and laugh in peace like this, right? That’s why we chose to dive into hell.”

“I regret it.”

His comrade pushed the woman to the ground and pointed his saber at her.

“Eep…”

“Stop!!”

“Why am I the only one who’s unhappy…? I fought for a peaceful world, so why…?”

He started crying and staggered unsteadily, waving his saber around. It was a highly dangerous situation.

“Let her go. If you want a drinking buddy, I’ll drink with you.”

“Ha, haha… Aren’t you scared?”

“…”

“If you were on that battlefield, then you know how terrifying it is being unarmed when someone else has a sword. If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead.”

“I am scared. I know the fear of death better than anyone…but I’m not unarmed.”

“What, you got a knife on you?”

“No.”

Harmon pulled a compass out of his pocket.

His comrade looked dubiously at it.

“I have courage right here,” Harmon declared quietly.

For a moment, his comrade stared blankly, then raised his saber with a shout.

“Are you making fun of me?!”

As his pitiable comrade charged toward him, Harmon raised his arms.

All he could do was sacrifice his arms.

To keep his comrade from becoming a wretched criminal for killing an innocent woman, he had to restrain him without getting either of them killed.

The saber swung forcefully down on Harmon’s resolve.

But the pain didn’t come.

“Sir Gideon!!”

A black-haired swordsman stood before him.

The saber fell to the ground, knocked away by a bronze sword.

“Y-you’re…?!”

A fist hit his stunned comrade in the cheek.

“Guh!!”

The man was knocked back to the ground.

The alcohol seemed to have dulled his pain, because his comrade tried to stand up, but then stopped, stunned at seeing blood flowing from his nose.

“So you’re the guy who was called one of the wings of humanity’s hope… You really were here in Zoltan.”

“Yes. I’ve been living here for more than two years.”

Red sheathed his sword and walked over to look down at the man on the ground.

“Your nose is broken; we need to stop the bleeding. Luckily for you, I’m an apothecary. Come with me, and I’ll get you all the medicine you need.”

Harmon’s comrade held his nose, glaring at Gideon with bloodshot eyes.

“You have no right to punch me! You ran away from the fight!”

“I *do* have the right!”

Red knelt down so he could look the man in the eyes.

He grabbed Red by the chest. Blood trickled from his nose, and he glared at Red with a ghastly look on his face… His comrade was filled with such murderous intent that Harmon wondered whether he should put himself between them.

But Red gently touched the man’s hand and looked him in the

eye.

“As the apothecary Red who’s been living in peace in Zoltan, I have the right to save you, who fought for the sake of the world.”

“Don’t screw around with—!”

“You’re more hurt than anyone else here, and you’re the one in the most pain from what you’re doing.”

“…Dammit… It wasn’t…wasn’t supposed to be like this…”

The man gripped Red’s chest and wept feebly.

Seeing his comrade who’d fought for the sake of the world in such grief, Harmon looked up to the heavens.

Ahh…

Harmon’s thoughts raced as he looked up at the sky.

He thought it must be fate that Gideon and Ruti were in Zoltan.

Fate had guided them to save the volunteers like Harmon and his comrade, who’d been broken during the fighting.

Destiny had drawn them together. A destiny different from that which Demis had intended with Divine Blessings—one that was more conceptual, driven by the actions and decisions of people.

That was what Harmon believed.

Clutching the previous Hero’s compass, Harmon offered up a grateful prayer to whatever fate that was.

“I’m glad I’m alive.”

And in saying that, he finally laughed out loud from the bottom of his heart.

* * *

After taking care of the wounded soldier, I gave him medicine for both his body and his mind. He even agreed to come by the shop regularly in order to talk.

I would have to get some medicine for dealing with alcohol dependence and work with Dr. Newman to get even more medicines stocked.

By the time I got back to Rit, it was already after two—more than an hour later than planned.

“That sounds rough.”

“I should have gone, too.”

When I came back, Rit already had a spare set of clothes ready for me so I could change out of my bloody shirt.

Ruti and Tisse gave me some food, since I hadn't been able to eat any lunch. Apparently, the smoked meats and medicinal eggs at their shop had been really popular, and they'd had orders constantly flowing in. Ruti had been handling the customers, while Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly worked hard in the back to prepare the dishes.

Habotan's stall was also a big hit with adventurers and families with children. She'd had so many customers that the gear she had on hand was already sold out, and now she was only running the shuriken throwing experience.

And as for Rit's and my stall…

"What fancy medicine."

"Oh, this is medicine? Can I put something else in it after it's empty?"

"I had no idea Stormthunder could make something like this!"

…we were getting rave reviews, too!

All of the medicine we'd had out on display at the start of the day was sold out, and Rit had already put out more. At this rate, we might actually sell out of all our inventory by evening.

"Everyone is stopping by and checking out our shop!" Rit said excitedly.

Of course, I was just as glad.

Seeing something we'd worked on together turn out like this was a memory I'd treasure forever.

"Let's try to sell out of everything!"

"Yeah!"

"Ah, but…"

"What is it…?"

Thinking back about what I'd done, I felt my mood sink a little.

"No, it's just, during the commotion earlier, a guy shouted out about the 'twin wings of humanity's hope.' Between that and what happened yesterday, I was thinking some people might come by to ask about me and Ruti."

"Ah, I see."

Rit patted my head in consolation.

"You did what needed to be done. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I hope so."

“And if anything happens, we can overcome it together!”

“…That’s true!”

All my worries were blown away by Rit’s beautiful smile.

As long as I’m with Rit, I’m invincible.

“I’m here, too.”

“Mister Crawly Wawly and I will also help.”

I could rely on Ruti and Tisse, too.

And Mister Crawly Wawly on Tisse’s head made an appeal with a determined look.

“This one will also support you!” Habotan said with pride.

“I’ll try hard, too, I guess!” said Frank…

“I don’t know if our relationship’s at that stage yet, Frank,” I said.

“I just thought it’d be good to go with the flow,” Frank said, smiling and scratching the back of his head.

Seeing that, everyone laughed.

Thanks to them, my heavy heart became lighter.

I’d resolved myself to it happening yesterday, so there was no point in worrying about it now!

* * *

That was my intention, at least…but the Harvest Festival went smoothly, and we were able to have a great time.

By the time the lamplight started to look pretty in the dark evening, our shop was completely sold out of medicine.

“And that’s everything.”

I took down the sign in front of the shop.

It was unfortunate we hadn’t been able to show off our new bottles to the nighttime customers, but most of the people who’d come at that time were looking to play games and have fun, so noon to early evening had been the more important sales period.

“Still, though, no one asked about us at all.”

“It was nice and peaceful.”

Ruti and I were eating medicinal eggs, with a mixture of confusion and relief.

We’d hoped for things to be peaceful, but having nothing happen at all was also surprisingly anxiety-inducing.

“What’s this, sold out already?”

“See, I told you we’d need to go early to get Red’s medicines before they sold out.”

We heard voices behind us.

“Galatine and Mistorm!”

“It’s been a while,” the old mayor Mistorm said with an easy smile.

It felt like she’d gotten a bit older since we’d last met.

“I guess it can’t be helped. Maybe the shop next door will let us buy a couple of medicinal eggs.”

“Thank goodness they’re not sold out. Megria seemed quite taken by them and came to say they should be put on the menu at the Adventurers Guild.”

“Oh?”

“If possible, the guild would like to set up a regular order of medicinal herbs.”

“A big customer!” Ruti said happily. The emotion was clear in her voice.

Mistorm let out a whistle.

“I’m glad you seem to be enjoying yourself here in Zoltan.”

“Yeah. Ruti has been growing up a lot lately, and it’s all thanks to this town.”

Mistorm and I watched Ruti warmly.

“Also, I’m sorry if this brings down the mood, but given my position, there’s something I would like to confirm.” For once, Galatine’s voice was quiet. “Is it true that you two are the Hero and her brother?”

“…Yes. My real name is Gideon Ragnason. I’m a member of the former Hero’s party.”

“I’m Ruti Ragnason. Former Hero, current proprietor of a medicinal herb plantation in Zoltan.”

Galatine nodded and continued. “I see. That’s all. I’m sorry for probing into your past. I hope you understand that having some information gives us more options for protecting you.”

“No, it’s only natural for you to ask… If anything, I was surprised no one was talking about it while we were running our stalls today.”

“Oh? The word’s out?”

“You already knew, didn’t you, Mistorm?”

“I couldn’t help but hear during the fight with Leonor,” Mistorm said with a shrug. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m living proof.”

“…Proof of what?”

Ruti and I both were confused by what she was saying.

Galatine smirked. “We’ve been keeping Mistorm’s secret for fifty years now, haven’t we?”

Zoltan was a lazy, peaceful land.

The country’s nature was to never do today what could be put off until tomorrow.

It was a determination to believe that there would always be a tomorrow just like today.

If Ruti and I were happy today, then Zoltan would protect us so the same thing would happen tomorrow.

Apparently, there’d been no reason for me to worry.

Zoltan’s such a great town…

* * *

Rit, Ruti, and I walked around the plaza in the northern district, surrounded by the excited clamor of the festival. Now that our stalls had calmed down, it was time to make the rounds ourselves.

The sun had already set. Hanging lamps were set out, lighting up the dark plaza.

It was usually a tranquil place, but during the festival today, it had become the center of Zoltan. That was particularly true this year, celebrating the Harvest Festival right after the long war with the demon lord’s army had finally come to an end and the world was at peace.

The festival had been incredibly raucous.

The stage in the center of the plaza was being put away.

The plays and dances using the stage had finished by the evening, and the main thing now was for it to be a space that people could use freely.

Cheerful adventurers played a violin and an elven flute at the northern side of the plaza, raising the spirits of everyone enjoying themselves.

“Big Brother.”

Ruti had stopped in her tracks. She was staring at a croquette made from fried dough filled with pumpkin cream.

“A fried food stall?”

“It looks so good.”

“Oh, welcome. If it isn’t Ruti and Red, the talk of the town,” said the man at the stall.

Ruti’s shoulders tensed. She seemed a little nervous.

“They just came out of the fryer.”

But he didn’t say anything else about Ruti’s past.

“Wanna try one?”

“…Mhm!”

Ruti and I both nodded.

“Three pumpkin croquettes, please.”

“Comin’ right up!”

The fried croquettes glistened in the lamplight.

“They smell great.”

“I want to eat it straightaway, but it feels like I’ll burn my tongue if I bite into it.”

Ruti and Rit chatted happily, standing there with their croquettes.

I bit into mine.

Sure enough, I burned my tongue…but it really was delicious.

As we ate our food, we walked through starlight, lamplight, people, and music. Along the way, we tried our hand at a game of throwing rings at targets, and we also bought an accessory that looked like a toy.

After the croquettes were gone, we bought candied apples and some fruit juice.

There were all sorts of foods on offer using the fresh autumn harvest.

They were all simple street foods, but each one was delicious.

And now, Ruti was blowing on a round, glass toy. It was a whistle shaped like a flask, and it made a strange sound whenever she blew into it.

“Interesting.”

Ruti was fascinated by this new trinket.

“Was this brought in by someone who moved to Zoltan?”

“Yeah, the seller said it was a toy from a northern land.”

Ruti blew it again, making a low echoey sound.

“Red.” Rit called my name.

She was holding a glass of amber liquor.

When had she bought that? The stall next to us was selling drinks.

“It’s this year’s brandy!”

“Ooh.”

“And there’s grape juice for you, Ruti.”

“Mm, I like that better.”

Ruti preferred juice to alcohol.

The two of us went to the counter and received our drinks.

“It’s good.”

Rit’s cheeks had a red glow as she drank the brandy.

At seeing that, I felt my heart skip a beat.

I looked down at the cup in my hand, feeling a little bashful.

It was grape brandy.

Putting the grape juice Ruti was drinking in a cask and fermenting it would make wine. If that was then distilled and put back into the cask to age, it became brandy.

Thinking about how this alcohol had been made with grapes grown long before we’d come to Zoltan made me feel a little emotional.

“You’re thinking something strange again,” Rit said with a smile.

I guess I have a habit of letting my thoughts wander when I get shy.

I definitely hadn’t been like that when I was in the Hero’s party and had been focused on dealing with the situations right in front of our eyes. But now…

“You had to suppress that side of yourself because you were on a journey to save the world.”

“I guess so. It wasn’t a quest that would forgive indulging weaknesses.”

I raised the glass to my lips.

The brandy had a mellow scent, a faint sweetness, and a strong alcoholic taste.

It was good, but the festival wasn’t over yet, and if I had too much, I’d start to get drunk. My blessing didn’t have any poison resistance, so I wasn’t too good at holding my liquor.

“I love you as you are now the best,” Rit said, looking into my eyes.

She was already on her third glass.

Unlike me, her blessing has a strong resistance to alcohol.

“Your strengths and your weaknesses are all parts of the Red I love.”

Rit wasn’t drunk, but it looked like she’d had enough to get a little tipsy.

“I love everything about you, too, Big Brother.”

I downed the brandy left in my glass so that I would say it, too.

The glass let out a *thunk* as I put it down on the counter.

“Rit and Ruti, I love your strengths and weaknesses and everything about both of you… That’s what it means to be family, I think.”

Ruti squeezed my hand, and Rit broke into a big, happy smile.

Looking around, I saw all sorts of people enjoying themselves in their own ways.

Even with Ruti’s identity and mine revealed, normal days in Zoltan wouldn’t change.

It really is a great town.

“Tanta and his family are over there,” Ruti said.

A little ways away, Gonz, Tanta, Nao, and Mido were eating baked potatoes with butter. They were all smiles, a happy family spending time together.

It’s something so familiar, but people fight to protect that, don’t they?

Once Yarandrala’s back, we should…

“Rit, I’ve kept you waiting a long time, but…”

“I know. This will be our last fall like this.”

“Yeah.”

By next year’s Harvest Festival, we would be taking part as husband and wife.

It would be similar to now, yet different.

As the night grew long, the festival’s end drew near.

Epilogue

Onward to the Wedding

In a guest room on a ship heading toward Zoltan, the high elf Yarandrala looked over the notes she'd put together.

It wasn't her first time reading them. In fact, she'd read them so many times, she could recite them from memory, and she continued to ponder them in her head.

"The knowledge left behind by Sage Lilith, the knowledge we gained in the ancient human ruins…combined with what Red knows, that should be enough to discover the true nature of the demon lord residing within Ruti."

But Yarandrala was unsure whether or not she should tell Red.

If what she'd learned was true, then there was practically nothing they could do about the New Truth growing within Ruti.

All they could do was watch over her and trust in her.

Was there a reason in warning someone when there was nothing that could be done…?

In a few more days, she would reach Zoltan.

The time for searching was over; now was the time for decision.

"Still, the most likely outcome is for nothing to happen," Yarandrala murmured, closing the documents.

She took out a beautiful statue—an eternal crystal artifact she'd brought with her from Baba Yaga's castle. It had all sorts of incredible effects, but the one that mattered most to Yarandrala right now was…

"Tie a string around this part here and spin it—babies love it!"

It was a present for Red and Rit, who would be getting married and having children.

Thinking that this artifact that would never break would be perfect for a child's toy, Yarandrala had lightheartedly asked Baba Yaga for it.

“There’s no point worrying about it now, not with their wedding coming up!”

Yarandrala looked out the window.

The sea was vast and beautiful.

“I can’t wait!!” she exclaimed with hope.

* * *

At the same time, a small flying ship floated in the sky.

It was the ship Taraxon and Bui had flown from the dark continent.

It wasn’t as good as the former demon lord’s flying ship Ruti had once used, but because it was smaller, Bui was able to handle it smoothly even without a skill.

It had been built thirty years ago for reconnaissance.

“We have gathered the Hero’s artifacts,” Bui said.

Taraxon sat down, wearing a helmet and armor.

“All that remains is the Sacred Avenger.”

Taraxon clenched his fists.

“Unifying the world and challenging God… The Asura dream isn’t over yet.”

He stood and pointed far off into the distance.

“Our target is Zoltan.”

The flying ship flew straight ahead, with no obstacles in the sky to stop it.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book! This is the author, Zappon.

The seasons change, and it's time for the Harvest Festival at the end of Zoltan's short fall. In the world outside Zoltan, the war with the demon lord's army has ended, ushering in a period of peace and reconstruction.

The main story revolves around Red and friends making fall memories by taking part in the festival, but one of the themes in this series focuses on "stories about saving heroes."

Rather than saving a hero like Ruti, who fought during humanity's most difficult moments to create a chance to strike back, or a hero like Van, who acted as a symbol of hope fighting at the vanguard of the counterattack, Red and friends are saving the heroic soldiers who volunteered to fight for the world of their own free will. I wrote it as an affirmation of those who fought, and of those who lived in peace, in the hopes that they can both find happiness.

A major turning point is coming for Red and Rit. Will Red be able to fulfill his promise to have the wedding once Yarandrala returns?

I really hope you look forward to the next book.

There's so much I want to say about this volume, but first, an important announcement.

This book should be going on sale just before the second season of the anime airs!

Hoshino, who was director for the first season, is the supervising director, and Takatou, who helped direct the first season and created the amazing end credits, will be directing.

There were discussions with story editor Shimizu and others about how to deliver an entertaining second season, and I believe it's taken on the best possible form.

I can't wait for it to air, and I hope you're all looking forward to it as well!

The complete version of the *Slow living with Princess* game is available on Steam, so I hope you have fun with that, too!

The newest volume of Masahiro Ikeno's manga adaptation of the series is also on sale, which wonderfully depicts the climax of the fourth novel!

As always, it takes a lot of work from many different people to bring this book to completion, so allow me to take this moment to express my gratitude.

And a book is only complete with readers who pick it up, so thank you all very much, too!

Zappon

Listening to the song from the anime a little bit before everyone else, 2023


This is Yasumo!
The second season of the anime
is starting, so I hope you enjoy it!

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