ZAPPON

Illustration by
Yasumo



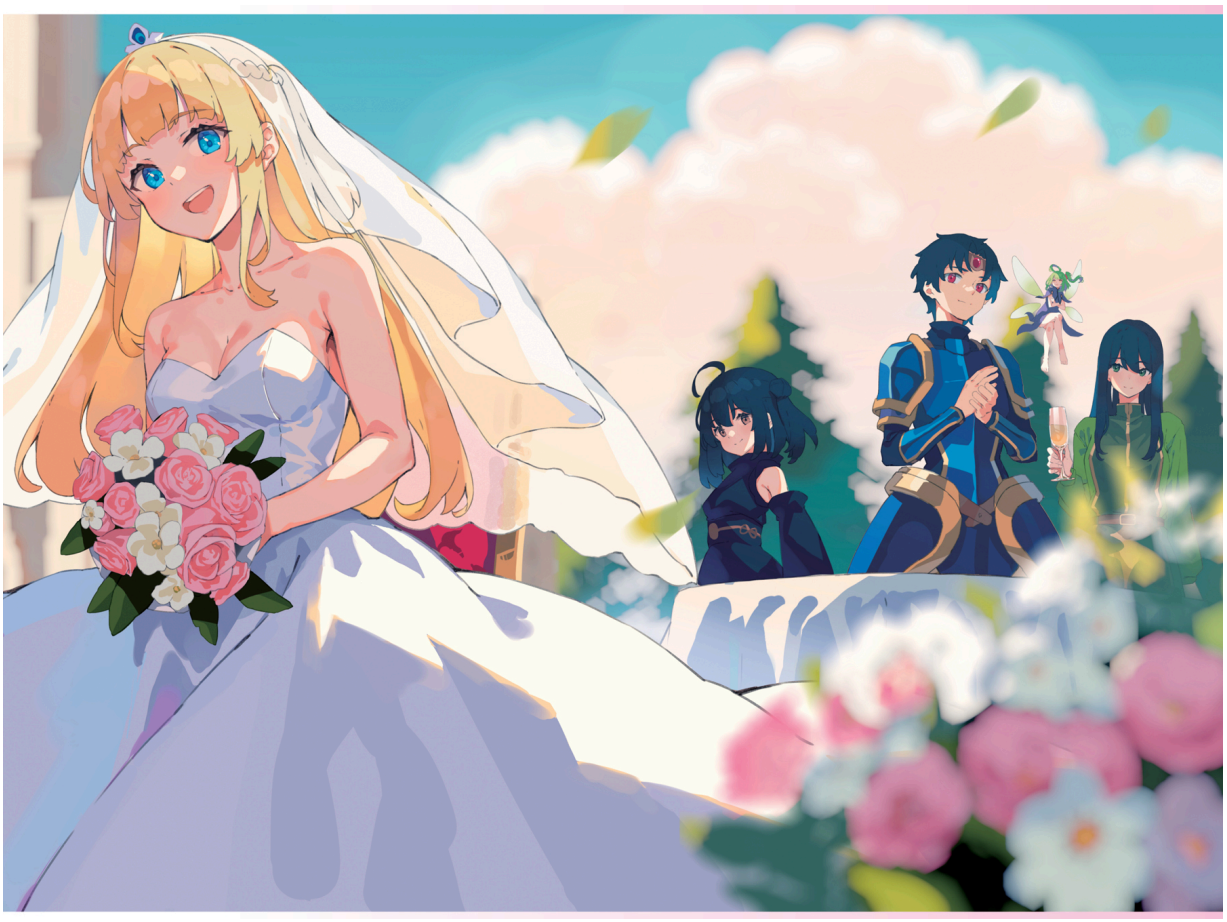
BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY, I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside

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Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha

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Yasumo

YEN ON
New York

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Zappon

Translation by Dale DeLucia Cover art by Yasumo

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CHARACTERS



Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

Kicked out of the Hero's party, he headed to the frontier to live a slow life. Closing in on a major goal of his second life.



Rit
(Rizlet of Loggervia)

A truly happy young woman who has grown out of her combative phase and is about to reach another goal with the man she loves.



Ruti Ragnason

A former Hero who now runs a medicinal herb plantation. She has fully recovered her stolen humanity and is adored by many people in Zoltan.



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. Although he doesn't really understand the concept of marriage, he can tell his friends are happy, which fills him with an equal amount of joy.

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

A Letter

To my dearest Red and Rizlet,

I am currently in the harbor of Bias.

They have a mail service using carrier pigeons here, which is what I'm using to send you this letter. It is a dangerous town with a powerful Thieves Guild, but their techniques for rearing carrier pigeons are exceptional. I find it fascinating they have developed such a safe and swift method of letter delivery for the very reason that it is such an immoral town.

As to the main reason for my letter, I am writing because there is something I wished to let you, my beloved friends, know in advance: From here, I will be heading back to Zoltan by boat. In all likelihood, the ship will arrive in Zoltan six days after this letter reaches you. There is so much I wish to tell you two and Ruti about what I have seen and learned on this journey.

But what's more important than any of that is your wedding ceremony! You didn't forget what you said about getting married once I returned, did you? You can look forward to the gift I've prepared for you. I could go on endlessly, but I shall set aside my pen so this letter doesn't weigh down the pigeon too much.

I look forward to the day when we all meet again.

Your truest friend,
Yarandrala

Chapter 1

The Day Approaches

The day Yarandrala's letter arrived, a cold wind was blowing.

It was the middle of winter in Zoltan, and tree limbs bare of leaves shivered in the chill.

"Yarandrala will be back soon!" Rit said happily, setting the letter down on the table.

Yarandrala was a high elf Singer of the Trees, a former member of the Hero's party, and our dear friend.

It was a little strange to think that until a short while ago, our comrades—some of humanity's greatest heroes—had all been in this remote frontier town of Zoltan. However, they had all since left it far behind.

"I wonder what they're all doing now."

"Danan and Esta and everyone?"

"Yeah."

They had been fighting against the demon lord's armies, but now the war was over. Maybe there would come a day when we could meet again.

"It'd be nice if we could invite them to our wedding."

"…Yeah, but we don't have any way of getting in contact with them."

Zoltan was on the frontier, so even carrier pigeons only delivered one way out here. To send a letter out, you had to rely on the occasional trade ship that would stop in port. That worked fine if you were sending it to a neighboring country, but the odds weren't great if we were trying to reach Esta and the others wherever they were on the continent. The chances were about as good as getting a goblin to make a fashionable outfit for a noble ball. In other words, zero.

…The wedding.

Yarandrala had said she wanted to be here for our wedding, so when she'd left, we'd promised to have it after she got back.

"It's finally time…"

I was filled with a mixture of anticipation, joy, and just a few nerves.

"…Mhm."

Rit's face turned bright red, and she covered her mouth with the red bandana around her neck. I'm sure my face had turned the same shade.

Realizing we were both blushing, Rit and I started to chuckle.

"Do you think this part of our relationship will end soon, too?" Rit asked after we'd laughed together for a little while.

"I dunno. I've never been married, so I couldn't say."

"This is my first time, too, so I don't know, either."

As a knight and as an adventurer, we'd both seen all manner of sights no one else had ever witnessed before—yet neither of us knew anything about something as common as marriage.

That was the source of my tumultuous emotions.

Right now, I found the thought of our future after getting married more exciting than any adventure.

"Why don't we take a break from the shop tomorrow and start getting things ready for the wedding instead?"

"Really?! That sounds great!" Rit exclaimed, leaning forward excitedly. "I've been waiting so long for this… I knew this day would come as long as we were together, but it still makes me so happy!"

"It's been about a year and a half since we reunited… I don't know if that's slow or fast for people to get married."

"There's no other Red and Rit, so there's no point in comparing us with others, is there?"

"That's true!"

Our happiness was ours alone. I could confidently say getting married now was the perfect timing for us.

"If we're going to be discussing the wedding tomorrow…then we should also think about the other meaning in this letter," I said.

"Right."

The reason Yarandrala had gone to her homeland, the Kingdom of Kiramin, was to research the true nature of the Demon Lord blessing and its relationship with Ruti's New Truth blessing.

Yarandrala had addressed her letter "To my dearest Red and Rizlet," but not to Ruti. That could only mean she wanted to talk with us before telling Ruti about what she'd learned.

"Just what did Yarandrala find out?" I wondered aloud.

"If it were good news, there would be no reason not to let Ruti know right away…"

"Yeah. We should probably assume there's a clear connection between Demon Lord and New Truth."

Yarandrala was the sort of person who would make decisions when the moment called for it. While we'd been traveling together, she had decided by herself whether to let Ruti know when issues came up. If she wanted to talk with us before deciding, then that meant there was a chance something bad might happen if Ruti knew about New Truth.

"The New Truth blessing that freed Ruti from the Hero was born from her own will… I don't want to think it might be something bad, but…"

"I feel the same way… However, whatever its true nature is, Ruti is strong enough not to lose to the Hero blessing, so I'm sure she will be fine," Rit said, putting her hand on top of mine.

"That's right. And she has all of us, too."

It would come down to what Yarandrala told us…but even so, no one could sully Ruti's happiness. Not when there were so many people here in Zoltan wishing for her to be happy.

* * *

The next day, a grave fact was brought to light.

"This letter reached Zoltan four days ago?!"

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that. We hardly ever get carrier pigeons, so it was a big mess gettin' things cleaned up," Eugene, the vice-chief of Zoltan's Post Guild apologized, scratching the white hair on his head.

Unlike the Adventurers Guild, which was a big group with serious international connections, the Post Guild was a small, town-level institution. The only connection it had with Post Guilds in other cities came from sending and receiving letters in the care of traveling merchants and trade ships. The majority of its work focused on handling the post inside the city, and for anything going outside, its job ended when the letter was handed off to a trade ship.

Given that structure, a carrier pigeon was a fast but expensive means of communication. Zoltan was on the periphery of the continent, so carrier pigeons almost never came here. Naturally, the laid-back people of Zoltan had slacked off maintaining the coop where they could rest after a trip.

Surprised by the sudden arrival of a pigeon, it sounded like they'd had to hurry to get the coop cleaned and buy some feed…and in all the commotion, they had completely forgotten about Yarandrala's letter, which they'd set aside after taking it off the pigeon's leg.

"There's been a cold going 'round among the staff, and what with having to do something we usually never need to, it just sorta slipped our minds," Eugene explained.

Sure enough, looking around at the number of people working in the Post Guild, it seemed there were fewer staff than normal.

"Well…that's just how it goes, I guess. If you need some cold medicine, come and buy some at our place."

"I'll let the sick folks know."

That's just how things were in Zoltan.

We had taken sudden breaks from the shop in the past as well, but our customers hadn't cared and kept coming anyway. Everyone just smiled and laughed it off, saying that sort of thing happened to everyone. I'd grown to be able to think like that, too.

Still, though…if it had been four days since the letter had arrived, Yarandrala would be arriving in Zoltan in just two days. There probably wasn't enough time to put together a big party, but I wanted to at least do something.

Preparations for a little celebration at home had just gotten added to today's to-do list.

"If a cold is going around, then we can't keep the store closed for

too long," Rit said behind me.

She was right. If possible, I only wanted to keep the shop closed today. But Yarandrala's letter wasn't why we'd come to the Post Guild.

"Putting all that aside for now, we should get to the main reason we're here."

"What's that?"

It was just a coincidence that we'd found out about the letter having been delayed. We were actually here for something else.

"We don't need to do it just yet, but I was hoping you could tell us about sending out invitations."

"Invitations, huh?"

"Yeah. We'll be sending them to a lot of people at once, and we need to be able to receive responses about whether they're going to attend, so we wanted to talk over how to do that."

"That sounds like a pretty formal sort of invitation. You plannin' some big event?"

"Something like that," I answered with an evasive smile.

We probably didn't need to keep it a secret, but the Post Guild's job took them all around town. If the news slipped out here, it would spread everywhere. The people of Zoltan would keep your secret for decades if you were trying to hide your past—but if it was something joyous like a wedding, they were all too quick to gossip. I'd pretty much adapted to Zoltan, so I could guess how people here thought.

But even with that, reality just didn't seem to want to cooperate lately…

A woman working at a desk suddenly bolted to her feet.

"Are you and Ms. Rit finally getting married?!"

"Mina!" Rit put her elbows on the counter and leaned forward to talk to her. I guess they knew each other.

"If you're sending out formal invitations, Ms. Rit, then a wedding is the only explanation!"

"Is it really?"

"Yep, it has to be!"

Seeing the two of them so excited, Eugene gave a wry smile.

"Back when Ms. Rit was adventuring, we relied on her for some jobs, and Mina here accompanied her a number of times."

"Ah, so that's why."

From the looks of it, she was totally convinced it was a wedding… and it was pretty hard to deny it.

Eugene patted my shoulder amiably.

"Don't worry about it. And congratulations!"

"Haha…"

All I could do was muster another unconvincing, evasive laugh.

* * *

The war with the demon lord's armies was over, and the soldiers had returned from the battlefield to their homes.

Zoltan had sent financial support to the Kingdom of Avalonia, but it hadn't mustered any forces for the front lines. It was a small country on the periphery and far from the fighting. Even if Zoltan had sent an army, it wouldn't have had much of an impact on the war, hence why none of the allied countries had complained. However, there were still those who'd wished to fight when the fate of the world was at stake, so some volunteers had left Zoltan to join the war effort.

Now that they had returned, I recognized some among them who'd fought with Ruti and me. Just recently, before the Harvest Festival, it had come out that we were Ruti the Hero and the knight Gideon.

"Medicinal *chikuwa* bread! Anyone want some medicinal *chikuwa* bread?"

Right now, that very same former Hero was pulling a cart and making a very odd sales pitch. In between yells, she blew on a little horn, drawing attention.

"M-medicinal *chikuwa* bread?"

"Oh, Big Brother!"

Ruti smiled happily when she saw me and pulled the rattling cart over to us.

“Good morning! Today’s bound to be a good day if I’m running into you and Rit here.”

“Hi, Ruti. What’s all this about?”

She was pulling a cart loaded with pieces of bread that contained green sticks of *chikuwa*.

“It’s a new product from our herbal plantation. A collaboration with Tisse’s *chikuwa* bread,” Ruti said, brimming with confidence.

“Oh, can I buy one?”

“I’d like to try one, too!”

“Mhm, there are plenty!”

They were five coppers each. Cheap enough for the masses.

“Here you go.”

Ruti gave me one. The white bread was nicely baked and had a stretchy piece of *chikuwa* through the middle. It was the product Tisse had come up with, but it was clear from a glance that this *chikuwa* wasn’t normal.

“It’s green,” Rit said.

The *chikuwa* sticking out of the bread was a pretty green color. They must have mixed medicinal herbs into the fish paste. Was this a new-and-improved recipe based on the medicinal *oden* Tisse had experimented with for the festival?





Let's give it a taste… Ooh.

"That's good!"

"Yeah. It's a little more bitter than normal *chikuwa*, but it has a refreshing bite to it. It goes well with the bread's simple sweetness!"

Both of us found it surprisingly tasty and were shocked by the high level to which it had been perfected. The medicinal *oden* had an interesting, fresh flavor, but it didn't have the sort of appeal to become a staple for the store. This medicinal *chikuwa* bread, on the other hand, was something I could eat every morning without getting tired of it.

Seeing our reactions, Ruti smiled happily.

"Sounds like you like it."

"Yeah, no complaints. This is definitely a flavor lots of people could love."

Tisse and Ruti had surely gone through all sorts of trial and error to make this bread. I patted Ruti's head, and her cheeks flushed with joy.

"But why are you going around town selling it?"

"Our herbal plantation doesn't have a shop… We built a little rack next to our toolshed to sell medicinal eggs and herbal tea, and the number of customers *is* increasing, but it's more like a hidden gem only a few people know about."

"Ah. I'm sure a lot of people learned about your plantation from the stall at the festival. That said, it's out in the fields north of town, so it isn't really a place you can stop by while out shopping."

"And even the people working in the nearby fields generally bring their own lunches," added Rit.

"So Tisse and I thought about it and came up with this medicinal *chikuwa* bread plan," Ruti explained, stern-faced. "Tisse's *chikuwa* bread is famous at Zoltan's colosseum, so we put a twist on it to make it medicinal. If it's a new take on something familiar, then people should be willing to try it."

"Oh!"

"And if I go around selling it, that will spark demand for more. The final stage of the plan is selling medicinal *chikuwa* bread to bakers in every part of Zoltan. With the demand already built in, the

bakers will want to start making it themselves."

"I see."

"That way, people will be able to eat it without going all the way out to our plantation. They can just go to their usual baker. Then everyone in town will be a customer of our plantation indirectly through the bakeries."

Ruti smirked, looking as if she'd just let us in on a big secret.

Granted, that is pretty amazing.

"It's a good plan. With this, I think it'll go well."

"It's a relief to hear you say that, Big Brother."

Seeing her excitement, I was both happy at how much my little sister had grown and also a little sad. Up until now, I'd been helping them out as the person with the most experience in business, but Ruti and Tisse had both grown a lot as salespeople.

A year ago, when they had first been setting up their plantation, the two of them had come to talk with me about all sorts of things. Now, however, all they had to share was good news, and they'd stopped coming to ask me for advice.

Their farm was developing a good reputation, too. The Merchants Guild had started to keep an eye on Ruti not because she was Zoltan's strongest adventurer, but because of her success running the plantation.

It really didn't look like she'd be needing advice from me anymore.

"Big Brother?"

"I was just thinking this bread is really delicious. I'm sure people all around Zoltan will want this."

"Yeah!" Ruti said, a look of joy across her face.

It was a smile anyone would recognize. A year had passed since Ruti had first moved to Zoltan, and the changes in her expressions had become obvious to anyone. She and Tisse had been quite the expressionless pair, but lately, Tisse was the only one still like that. The way Ruti's eyes narrowed a bit when she smiled; the way the corners of her mouth curled when she was angry; the way her lips quivered and she cast her gaze slightly down when she was sad… Her emotions came through to everyone now, and I wasn't the only

one who could understand her.

A quiet life in Zoltan had restored the humanity that the Hero blessing had robbed Ruti of. That was the most wonderful thing of all.

"What about you two? Did you close your shop for the day?"

"Yeah. Actually, Yarandrala should be coming back the day after tomorrow."

"Really?!"

"Yep. I was thinking of inviting Habotan and everyone for a little party once she gets back. Would you be interested in coming?"

"Absolutely! It's okay if Tisse comes too, right?"

"Of course. We'd love it if Tisse came."

"Yeah!" Rit agreed.

An old man sitting a little way away smiled hearing Ruti's cheerful voice. He stood up and walked over to her.

"You look like you're having fun, Ms. Ruti. What is this you're selling?"

"Medicinal *chikuwa* bread. It's really good."

"Oh? May I try one?"

It sounded like Ruti often chatted with this man. I hadn't even noticed, but she'd made lots of friends even without my help.

The old man ended up buying five pieces of bread to take home to his family.

Ruti's world had grown so much bigger.

* * *

We said good-bye to Ruti and started walking toward the church.

"Things really haven't changed at all since people found out about you and Ruti," Rit said.

"Yeah. Zoltan's a good town."

The Hero retiring from battle to a frontier town and going around blowing a horn while selling bread wasn't a story you'd find in any of the legends.

The people of Zoltan didn't demand that Ruti be the Hero. It was

a small country far away from Avalonia, on the outskirts of the continent where no one with any ambition would bother to go. It was in the path of storms during the summer, and the fields and buildings people had put effort into making were destroyed at the whim of nature. People here knew there were some things you couldn't do anything about no matter how hard you tried. And they also knew that in those helpless moments, in this frontier region that was considered worthless, there was nobody who would miraculously show up to save them.

They wouldn't work harder than necessary, but nor would they give up. And it was up to everyone individually to stay strong. People here didn't just leave everything to someone else to take care of.

"Even when Queen Consort Leonor attacked, Zoltan rose and fought to protect Mistorm," I said.

"Yeah. That made me like this country even more than before."

"Me too."

Zoltan's willingness to fight had likely saved Prince Salius and Admiral Lilinrala—the current King of Veronia and Dowager Queen.

"Even Ruti can happily live her own life here in Zoltan."

"The same goes for you, Red." Rit slipped her arm around mine.

Walking arm in arm, we continued down the road.

Next stop…the church!

* * *

It was normal for a marriage to be witnessed by a member of the church, so many people borrowed the space there to hold the ceremony.

The witnessing cleric would report the couple's new bond to Demis's three disciples—Larael, guardian of hope; Victy, guardian of martyrs; and Kyutie, guardian of love—and pray for their happiness. However, during a wedding, there was no direct prayer to Demis. It was a bit strange, but a marriage had no connection to Divine Blessings, meaning the disciples were responsible for it rather than God.

"The three disciples…"

In the battles involving the Hero blessing, we had even stood against the almighty God himself. It was Demis who had changed Van's blessing to the Hero, and it was he who had destroyed the ancient people. It seemed the first Hero had spoken with Demis as well.

But the three disciples? I felt like I'd delved pretty deep into the secrets of the world, but not once had I felt their presence. That was strange, particularly seeing as their role was to receive more personal prayers than Demis.

"Red?"

"I was just thinking… Since I'm not exactly a devout follower of Demis, should we really be having our wedding at the church?"

"Hehe, it would be pretty bad if we talked to any important people in the church about our adventures, wouldn't it?" Rit said with a nostalgic smile. "You don't really need a church to pray to God, but we can't perceive beautiful things in places that aren't beautiful."

"That's what Ruti said before, isn't it?"

"Mhm. The church's beauty is for the sake of the people…so I'm sure Demis won't mind if we borrow it to hold our wedding ceremony. Marriage doesn't have anything to do with blessings anyway."

"Yeah, true."

"And besides, we're going to make a donation, so it's a good deal for the church, too!"

The prayer I'd had for so long, for Ruti to be happy, had never been answered by Demis. So he shouldn't mind if I prayed for something I could make come true myself: to live a happy life with Rit.

You don't have to answer, but just let me pray for it.

As that thought went through my mind, we reached the church.

"I know I asked before, but are you sure you want to get married here rather than at the one in central Zoltan?"

"Mhm, here is good… I really like the atmosphere."

It was the church in our downtown neighborhood, a cozy little

wooden building. Even though it was small, it still had a proper bell tower to ring the time, a community cemetery, and a small building connected to the church by a roofed walkway that had been built there to care for the sick and homeless. The stone fence surrounding the church seemed to have been there for a long time, standing strong against the elements, because it was completely covered in moss.

In other words, it was the very picture of a small local chapel that had long been a part of the neighborhood.

"There were churches like this in Loggervia, too."

"Same with my home village…though the cemetery there wasn't as well kept as this one."

"Don't you think it makes the most sense for the owners of Red & Rit's Apothecary to get married at a normal church like you'd find in any town or village?" Rit asked, and I nodded.

It was easier to picture us getting married here in this small little chapel, surrounded by a few of our close friends, than holding a ceremony at a large cathedral.

As usual, Rit really gets me.

Stepping inside, I saw Father Talin, the priest who managed the church, sweeping up.

The chapel had only one priest and one deacon. When they needed extra help, they would hire a youngster from the neighborhood as a part-timer.

It looked like the deacon wasn't there. A cold had been going around, so he might have been off sick or recuperating.

"Oh, if it isn't Ms. Rit and Mr. Red. Good day to you."

Father Talin was turning sixty-nine this year, and he'd been born and raised in Zoltan. He had completed his studies here without ever leaving the country. It seemed he regularly visited the villages outside the city, but he had never once gone past the Zoltan border.

His blessing was Adept, which was level 6. It was clear he'd lived a life removed from battle. Although he didn't have any particular achievements of note, Father Talin had become the priest of this chapel by right of seniority when his predecessor had retired due to poor health.

"Good day, Father Talin. There is something we would like to discuss with you."

"It is rare for the two of you to come speak with me, but I would be happy to help in any way I am able."

"No, I think anyone living in this neighborhood would come to you for this."

"Oh… Do you mean…?"

"We would like to hold our wedding ceremony at this church."

Father Talin's wrinkled face broke into a smile.

He was by no means what you would call an outstanding priest, but he was well liked in this part of town and had won both affection and respect from most everyone. The reason for that was likely his smile.

Seeing his wrinkled face scrunched up in delight, it was clear for anyone to see that he was happy from the bottom of his heart. His personality and the ease with which he shared in the joy of others was what drew the people here to him.

* * *

Father Talin warmly listened to and answered our questions.

It sounded like if we wanted everything to go well for the wedding, we should schedule the date with the church a month in advance. The church would provide wine and some simple appetizers to have during the ceremony, while we should be able to find a cook to cater the after-party with a month's notice.

However, the thing that would take the most time would be the dress. Depending on the shop, it was apparently best to consult them two months or more in advance.

So, after leaving the church, we knew where our next stop would be.

"First, though, do you want to get some lunch?" Rit asked.

Right, it's already lunchtime.

At that moment, we just happened to be in an area with some restaurants as well. The place was crowded with people on their

lunch break.

"Everywhere's packed."

"I normally quite like busy restaurants, but…"

"Today I feel like eating somewhere quiet."

"Yeah, me too!" agreed Rit.

I thought about what restaurants there were around here.

Oh yeah. Why don't we try there?

* * *

THE BOOGEYMAN'S GROTTO

Every time I saw that sign hanging over the door, I couldn't help but think it sounded dangerous. The owner had intentionally chosen the name "Boogeyman"—a fearsome monster that kidnaps children—to allude to the fact that this was a place where adults came to drink in peace. Tucked away at the end of a back alley, it gave off the impression of an old, run-down shop.

"Apparently, it used to be called 'The Goblin Cellar.' It was a dangerous sort of place run by a man who'd cut ties with the Thieves Guild and gone straight before the current owner bought it."

"That's another incredible name," Rit said with a laugh.

"It's completely different during the day, though." I pointed to a blackboard set up next to the door and read out the name written on it in chalk: "The Perfect Little Omelet Shop."

"Unlike the last two, that's actually a cute name!"

"Yeah. The daughter of the current owner runs it during lunch."

At night, the place was usually filled with regulars and had a very distinctive atmosphere, but it couldn't be more different when the sun was out.

I opened the heavy door…

"Welcome in!"

…and we were greeted by a cheerful voice.

Of course, the layout was the same as when her father ran things at night, but the curtains were open wide, illuminating everything in

bright sunlight. There were cute little wooden animal figurines set on the tables and a big stuffed goat with a dopey look on its face on the counter.

"It's so cute," Rit murmured.

"Thank you! It's an honor to hear you say that, Ms. Rit," the woman behind the counter—Solis—replied happily.

"Hmm, have we met before?" Rit looked closely at Solis's face, trying to remember. "…Ah! I've seen you at the Adventurers Guild!"

"That makes me happy…to hear that you remember a failure of an adventurer like me."

Solis moved out from behind the counter to greet Rit. A prosthetic leg clunked against the floor as she walked.

"I was once an up-and-coming adventurer, but I messed up on a quest."

"So that's why I stopped seeing you at the guild…"

This world was filled with battles.

Demis had created monsters to develop people's blessings, and he'd given humans and monsters a reason to fight. He'd done this in the simplest way possible: by filling monsters with the malice to attack people. There was no small number of them that enjoyed eating humans despite knowing they were dangerous prey to hunt.

In other words, it was the very god to whom people prayed for salvation who had created the monsters that threatened them.

As an adventurer, Solis had fought against monsters in order to protect people, and she had been defeated.

"But thanks to Mr. Red, I only lost a leg."

"Only…"

"I survived. I can't be an adventurer anymore, but I can still make the food I like for customers here."

Seeing Solis smile, Rit could tell she wasn't just putting up a strong front. She really felt that way.

"In that case, we'll have the chef's recommendation!"

"You got it! Two omelets coming right up!"

Rit and I sat at a table in the back. There was a cute, round doll in the middle of the circular table that looked like a caricature of a lamb.

“That was right after I came to Zoltan.”

“When you saved her?”

“Yeah. The quest was to take out a single ogrekin, but it turned out to be a band of forest giants instead… That sort of thing happens to adventurers pretty often.”

There were lots of cases of people heading out on a quest to slay a monster attacking a village, only for it to turn out to be the work of a completely different type of creature.

The guild’s information was based on reports from villagers who weren’t experts in monster zoology, so it only made sense that mistakes like that would happen. In such cases, it was recommended that the adventurer stop what they were doing and report back to the guild. However…

“Her group hadn’t been able to abandon the villagers who were cowering in fear.”

“…Errors in judgment like that are pretty common.”

“Yeah. In the end, the whole party was wiped out. It was a place that forest giants hardly ever go, so it was just bad luck.”

“But you being there meant the worst-case scenario was avoided.”

“…I just happened to be nearby investigating the distribution of medicinal herbs. Forest giants like to torture people and listen to their screams before eating them…and I heard her cries just as her leg was being crushed.”

“That’s something else Demis did to make them fight people, isn’t it?”

“Probably… This world is filled with conflict.”

After a little while, Solis brought out the omelets and placed them on the table. They were a beautiful yellow color without any char marks. The other ingredients weren’t cooked into the omelets; they were set underneath. As we watched, Solis slipped a knife into each omelet, and the runny eggs spread and enveloped the rest of the ingredients.

“Enjoy!”

“Thank you!” Rit’s eyes glimmered as she took a bite. “Mm, delicious!”

She dug into her omelet with real gusto, wearing a smile that would delight any chef.

"Ahaha, I'm so glad you like it!" Solis said, smiling happily.

* * *

Omelets, chicken soup, salad, and lemon pound cake for dessert.

Other than Solis's specialty omelet, all the flavors were pretty standard, but it was clear every dish had been made with care.

"You're a mean man, keeping such a great restaurant secret from me," Rit complained.

"But if I take you to too many good restaurants, you might stop eating my cooking."

"Hmph! Of course not! I love your food."

"Thanks. I was just kidding, though."

"Honestly!" Rit said, and we laughed together.

"Still, though…," I said after finishing the last bite of the cake.

"What is it?"

"Doing all the initial preparations for the wedding ceremony today…"

"Mm?"

"I guess it's finally starting to sink in that we're actually getting married."

"What? You already gave me an engagement ring and a necklace," Rit said, looking at me with an amused smile.

"So it already felt real to you?"

"It did. Ever since you gave me that amber bracelet, I knew I was going to marry you one day."

"I mean, I felt like we'd be together, but still…"

"Hehe. It always felt real to me."

Compared with me, Rit really had a much better handle on things like this.

That's why I'm sure we'll be just as happy even after we're married.

"Next up are the preparations for the dress," I said, getting things

back on track.

"Yeah!" Rit replied enthusiastically. "The dress is important because however long it'll take will determine when we schedule the wedding!"

You could even call that our main job for today.

"Are you sure it's all right not to just rent a dress?" Rit asked.

"A day like this only happens once in a lifetime, so I want you to have a dress all of your own. I've been saving up to make sure of that."

"You have…?"

"To be honest, I actually asked around to find out the general price of dresses a while ago."

"What?! If it was something to do with our wedding, you should've taken me with you!"

"It would've been really embarrassing if it'd turned out to be too expensive and we had to come up with some sort of compromise, though."

Business had been going great ever since the shop went from being Red's Apothecary to Red & Rit's Apothecary. We'd also made quite a tidy sum offering the Merchants Guild our technique for making oil from coconuts. With our current savings, I thought we'd probably be able to order pretty much whatever Rit wanted from any of the tailors in Zoltan…but in the world of fashion, sometimes a piece of clothing could cost even more than a magic item.

"You're unbelievable," Rit said, pouting unhappily. But the next second, a smile crossed her lips. "Getting married means sharing in the happy things *and* the embarrassing things."

"Ngh…"

"Having the perfect dress would make me happy—but what makes me even happier is preparing for the wedding with you and worrying and figuring things out together."

"…I understand."

It's times like this that Rit takes me by the hand and pulls me along. She has a strength I don't.

Little differences like that make me incredibly happy.

Interlude

The Demon Lord Goes Fishing

In a lake in the forest near the western border of Zoltan floated a ship that looked too big to be a riverboat. It had a single aft mast, yet it wasn't designed to hang a sail. After all, this was a flying ship.

It was a smaller model, about the same length as a midsize sailboat, that had been constructed approximately thirty years ago for use in reconnaissance. It was newer in design than the previous demon lord's flying ship Ruti and Tisse had used, but it was far inferior in capabilities, lacking the ability to land on solid ground. As such, it couldn't lift off again under its own power unless it landed on water.

Demons and dwarves possessed the technology for flying ships, but it was unknown to the Asuras. They could only use the simplest of the flying ships captured from the former demon lord's armies.

And this flying ship, which was so precious to the Asuras, had smoke rising from it.

"Lord Taraxon, please stop cooking fish on the deck."

"The fish here are truly delicious. I want to eat them while they're fresh."

"What will we do if the wooden deck catches fire?"

"Don't be so uptight. There's plenty of water around us to extinguish it with, isn't there?"

This was the Demon Lord Taraxon and his retainer, Shisandan, both currently in their human forms. Taking the shape and name of a man he had eaten long ago, Shisandan was attending the demon lord in the guise of Bui. Taraxon, meanwhile, was holding a fishing rod in his right hand and eating a grilled fish on a skewer using his left.

"This 'bamboo' is quite handy. Perhaps we should bring some

back to grow."

"Please do not bring an unknown plant from a far-off land back with you. We cannot know what effects it might have."

"Hmm. Is there any knowledge of this bamboo in the memories of the people you've eaten?"

"I have not eaten any botanists…so the only memory pertaining to bamboo is that it has an extraordinary ability to grow and, when not carefully managed, can encroach on the surrounding environment."

"Oh-ho! I never would've thought it such a sinister plant! Perhaps this is the demon lord of the plant realm. Hahaha, how very interesting."

Taraxon laughed as he pulled in another fish.

"The fish here resemble those in Asura Kshetra, yet they are not quite the same."

"Presumably because they live beneath the sun."

"Hmm. I wonder why God created the sun."

"Those who live aboveground need the sun to survive, so the logical explanation is that it was created for ground-dwellers, is it not?"

"God is omniscient and omnipotent, though. Wouldn't it be simpler to make people capable of living without the sun?"

Bui shrugged.

Though Asuras challenged God, there was much they didn't understand about him.

They weren't gods themselves, so they couldn't say whether it was easier to create a world without a sun or a world that needed one. God's power was beyond comprehension. If it weren't for the fact that they were Asuras capable of effectively being reborn endlessly, they would have been exterminated long, long ago.

"You know, Bui…"

"Sir?"

"I can't believe Demis created the entirety of this world."

"However, there is no mistake that it was, indeed, created by Demis."

"I know… Nevertheless, I feel the illogical nature of this world

itself is in conflict with Demis's designs. As if the entirety of this world is not as God wished, just as we were born against God's wishes."

"…This is quite the difficult subject."

Bui turned away, unable to follow his master's line of thought.

"I shall bring some alcohol and pickled vegetables."

"Oh, that sounds like it'll go perfectly with the grilled fish. As expected of my trusted retainer," Taraxon said, laughing loudly.

Bui knew the location of the ancient human ruins where the Sacred Avenger they sought was sealed away. It wouldn't be long before they finished assembling the Hero's full regalia.

"Ruti and Gideon… From what you said, they are truly superior humans. I should like to talk with them."

Taraxon wanted to discuss why the Asuras had stolen the demon lord's power and declared war on the world, as well as what their goal was. He was curious what the two humans would say if they knew. Perhaps they would discover an answer the Asuras hadn't been able to.

"It's dangerous…and yet I cannot help but be intrigued."

With that, Taraxon pulled in another fish, skewered it, and put it over the fire.

Chapter 2

Yarandrala Returns

Our next stop was Madam Offler's Wonderful Clothes. It was a high-end shop despite being in Zoltan's downtown, and Rit shopped there even more than I did.

"Welcome!" called out a strong female voice.

It was Madam Offler, the owner of the store. Tall and muscular, she had a broad smile on her refined face as she came over to us.

"Oh my, if it isn't Rit and Red. It's lovely to see you, dearies."

"Good afternoon, Madam Offler."

She bent over just a little to match my eyeline. It was part of her belief as a tailor that she had to see things from the same level as her customers to know what sorts of clothes suited them.

"What are you looking for today?" she asked.

"…"

"Oh?"

She cocked her head when I didn't immediately answer, probably because she thought that was unlike me. But for something like this, I really did need to take a second to drum up a little courage.

"We'd like you to make clothes for our wedding."

"Ohhh, my darlings!!!" Madam Offler clapped her hands excitedly. "The day's finally here! I'm so happy for you both!" She took one of my hands and one of Rit's. "Congratulations! I'll make you the perfect outfits for your big day… As your friend, it would be the greatest honor!"

Tears twinkled in the corners of her damp eyes.

* * *

Madam Offler already had several potential designs for the dress.

She'd trusted that we would get married and had been thinking for a while now about what clothes might suit us.

"But the perfect outfit for a person is always changing. What might have been best for the two of you a month ago won't be the best for you now," she explained while showing us her designs. "And even after you choose something, it will still need to be adjusted right up until the day of the ceremony. You'll have to come by several times to go through various things."

"You'd really do that much for us?"

"Of course!" Madam Offler's powerful voice resonated. "You've asked me to dress you for one of the happiest days of your life, and it's by no means a cheap request, either. That shows how much faith you have in the clothes I make. I couldn't call myself a tailor if I didn't live up to that trust you've shown in me. I'll use all my skills to make the perfect outfits for you both."

Madam Offler rolled up her sleeve and raised her muscular right arm. It was the arm of a former warrior, marked by old scars, yet now it belonged to a craftswoman who had the utmost confidence in her tailoring skills.

"…Also, there's something I want to tell you before you choose your outfits."

""What is it?""

"I was a slave gladiator. My homeland was caught up in a war, and I was captured and sold off to an entertainer. From there, I was put into a notoriously brutal training school, where I was taught how to kill monsters and people, and how to entertain the crowd."

"Madam Offler…"

Rit and I were both bewildered. We'd heard the rumors that Madam Offler had been a slave gladiator in the merchant city of Lark, but this was the first she'd ever told us about it.

"I fought and fought, and with the money I saved, I bought my freedom. But by that point, I didn't know any other way of living, so I just kept on fighting. Then, one day, I found myself talking to the daughter of the tailor who made the clothes I'd been fighting in. She said she was a fan, and she told me how hard they'd worked to

make me look beautiful… It was so wonderful.”

“And that was what led you to stop fighting and open a clothing store?” Rit asked.

“There were a few other things after that,” Madam Offler said with a vague look in her eyes, “but that was the first push. What I was getting at, though, is this: How do you both feel about your past?”

“Our past?”

“That’s right! There are a lot of difficult things in my past, but I incorporated all those memories into these clothes when I made them because that’s what suits me best,” she said, straightening her back.

The dress Madam Offler was wearing really emphasized her height and build, and it also had a swordswoman design embroidered into it… Or at least, that’s what Rit explained to me.

“In Zoltan, it’s generally accepted that you shouldn’t probe into people’s pasts, and I think that’s a good thing,” she continued. “If you’ve completely set aside your past, then it would be better not to leave remnants of it in your clothes. But if your past is something you want to remember, I think you should bring those memories with you to your wedding.”

“Memories, huh…”

“Just whatever you feel comfortable sharing. It doesn’t matter if the order makes sense or if things aren’t connected, but if you have any memories that are precious to you, I’d like you to tell me about them.”

Rit and I looked at each other.

She’s right. Our past is precious to us.

It had already come out that I was the Hero’s older brother, Gideon, and that the war with the demon lord’s armies was over…so it was probably fine to talk about it now.

Rit nodded, apparently having come to the same conclusion.

“Okay, but this might get pretty long, so should we sit down to talk?”

“Of course. I’ll get some tea and sweets!”

“Thank you… Now then, where should I begin?”

As I followed Madam Offler into the back of the shop, countless memories ran through my mind.

Even though she hadn't even started making our clothes yet, I was sure they would be amazing.

* * *

It was already evening by the time we finally left Madam Offler's store, and the sky was red with the setting sun.

"See? Aren't you glad we decided to go to Madam Offler?" Rit said.

"Yeah. I'm sure she'll make the perfect outfits for us."

They weren't the sorts of designs that would be finished in a day, so we would need to go back to her store a number of times. Not that that was any real trouble, mind you. It was a pleasure to see our wedding ceremony take shape.

"It really is starting to feel real."

"Again with that," Rit said with a giggle.

It was true, though, so what else could I say?

"I'm looking forward to after we get married."

"I'm sure I'll be used to it by then."

"Really? You're suuure?" Rit chided me.

We walked side by side back to our home. The thought that this was a moment we'd share countless times over the course of our lives together made me all the happier.

Years from now, we could look back on today as a wonderful memory. And when we did, maybe we'd ask Madam Offler to make some more clothes for us.





I was sure she wouldn't let us down.

* * *

Two days later, it was finally the day of Yarandrala's return.

I had wanted to wait for her at the port, but we didn't know when her ship might come in. It was even normal for them to arrive a day late.

There was also a cold going around Zoltan. It wasn't a dangerous illness like goblin fever that could be fatal, but it was still pretty bad and required a few days of bed rest.

We had received an urgent order for medicine from Dr. Newman's clinic, and he'd even asked us to keep our shop open on the weekend. The doctors of Zoltan were busy trying to stop the spread before it went any further.

"But it's not so easy to stop a disease from spreading, is it?"

And so, Rit and I were working in the shop.

"It's been a while, but it's looking like I should probably go out to gather herbs tomorrow," I said after checking the shelves.

"Huh? We're already running out?" Rit asked in surprise. "Wasn't Ruti going to deliver some tomorrow?"

"Other apothecaries are also putting in orders with Ruti. It would make more sense to prioritize them since I can use my Lightning Speed to gather herbs by myself in just a few hours."

"Is it really getting that bad?"

"Hmm, the doctors at the hospital and clinics are saying it's spreading. That said, there are a wide range of symptoms, and it isn't life-threatening, so it isn't really visible around town."

"Huh."

"More people seem to be taking sick days, but this being Zoltan, that's not particularly rare. The only real difference is that it means other people can't slack off."

"So it seems peaceful…but we can't underestimate it," Rit said with a serious look.

"That's right. Dr. Newman hasn't been able to identify it yet, but

it’s too infectious to just be a normal cold, and it isn’t like any of the other diseases endemic to Zoltan.”

“So it came from outside Zoltan?”

“That’s the natural explanation… It’s rare for that to happen here, though, considering how little foreign traffic we get.”

Zoltan was out on the frontier, so it had fewer people coming and going than most other countries. It was relatively common for diseases that were spreading in neighboring countries not to make much of an impact here.

“Do we know if it’s affecting other countries?”

“We haven’t received any news about it yet. It would be one thing if it was a huge pandemic, but I don’t imagine anyone would walk however many days just to let us know about something that’s the equivalent of a cold.”

In these sorts of situations, the lack of news out here was a problem.

“For now, all we can do is give people painkillers, medicine to bring down the fever, and something to help them recover their stamina. All of those medicines are in high demand, but they’re also used to treat other illnesses, so we can’t afford to run out.”

“Mrgh. Sounds like things are going to get busy. And right when Yarandrala’s about to return, too.”

“That’s okay. We can have a proper celebration after we close up for the night. We have to do something to celebrate her getting back, after all.”

I could do my job as an apothecary and still do the right thing for Yarandrala as a friend. I would give my all to the shop if I had to, but I wouldn’t neglect my friends.

“I won’t be able to start cooking until we close up, though, so the party will have to start later. Maybe I should prepare something else to eat as a light snack.”

“That’s a nice idea! What are you going to make?”

“Just something really simple. Like a platter of fruits and cheeses.”

“That sounds perfect to snack on while we chat and wait for dinner. It might be good to break out some wine to go with it!”

"I don't know about Habotan, but I imagine everyone else won't get too drunk from a little wine."

In fact, should Habotan even be drinking at all?

"We have grape juice, too, so Habotan and Ruti can enjoy that. And the time will fly with everyone chatting," Rit said with a smile.

That was true. I could imagine everyone had lots to talk about.

…As well as some things that can't be discussed.

"We can talk about *that* tomorrow, just between us and Yarandrala."

"Yeah."

While we were talking, the doorbell rang.

"Welcome… Oh! Look who it is."

Habotan, wearing a ninja outfit, and Torahime, in a Jade Kingdom kimono—the demon lord's daughter and the heavenly king of water in disguise—entered the shop.

"Good evening, Mr. Red! Ms. Rit!"

"Hi, you two. Yarandrala isn't back yet, and it's a little early for the party."

"It seems her ship will be arriving shortly," Torahime said.

"Really?"

"It should arrive in port in about an hour. The speed and shape are unlike those that usually call at Zoltan, so it is likely the ship with Yarandrala aboard."

"Wow, how do you know all that?"

"Did you forget I am the heavenly king of water? Anything an archfay of water can do, so can I."

So she can sense things through water, huh?

The ship Yarandrala had chartered was fast, so if it was still an hour away from Zoltan, that would mean Torahime had sensed it from more than ten kilometers away.

They're not called "heavenly kings" for nothing.

"It seems you've regained a fair amount of your strength," I said.

"Indeed. After all, I rested for quite some time… The war even ended without me knowing." Torahime gave a self-deprecating smile.

Torahime…or rather, Altra of the Water, was the sole surviving heavenly king of the demon lord's armies.

With Habotan held hostage, Altra had been forced to obey Demon Lord Taraxon and lead the naval forces from the outset of the war. Together with Gandor of the Wind's wyvern knights, he had played one of the most important roles in the invasion of Avalon—a battle that had ended in defeat for the demon lord's forces.

As a general who had fought and led soldiers into battle, I was sure Altra had his thoughts on the matter. If I were in his position…I wouldn't have known what to say to the people who had fought and died following my orders.

"Hah…" Torahime sighed. "Our two defeats, first against Taraxon and then against humanity, will form the foundation for a new age… That is my hope."

"A new age? Is that possible for demons?"

"For ancient demons such as myself, I could not say. However, the entire demon order was lost in this war. Habotan will have to construct a new order for the age when she rules as demon lord."

Torahime gently rubbed Habotan's head, her eyes filled with a mixture of expectation and affection. Habotan herself had a blank stare on her face, not understanding a lot of the conversation.

"Humans and demons cannot coexist. Otherwise another war will ensue."

"I don't want us to have another war where we deny everything about each other, though."

"Agreed," the last heavenly king said, nodding in agreement. "No matter how much our blessings desire war, I would draw a line where we both allow each other's continued existence in this world. I hope such an age may come."

Altra had changed.

It wasn't as if anything in particular had happened since the battle with the false Asura heavenly kings; he had simply lived in peace with Habotan here in Zoltan. However, apparently the experience of living peacefully in a human village was a new experience for the long-lived, high-ranking demon.

That peaceful, normal life with Habotan was what had changed him. Days of normalcy had transformed even a demon, who was decreed by God as evil.

"Forgive me for keeping you here listening to me," Torahime said.

"No, it was nice talking about the future. And while I was hoping to go meet Yarandrala in the harbor… I mean, just look."

I pointed at the door to the store.

Frantic footsteps could be heard approaching.

"Red!! I need your help!!"

A husky voice echoed inside the shop, all the way from outside. It was the dwarf blacksmith Mogrim.

"There's a sickness going around Zoltan," I explained.

"A sickness?" Habotan asked in surprise.

But before either of us could say anything else—

"Red! I need medicine!!"

—Mogrim burst into the shop.

"Welcome, Mogrim. Tell me a bit more so I know what sort of medicine you need."

"The missus collapsed with a fever! Dr. Newman took a look at her, but he said there's a dangerous cold going around right now!"

"Ah, so that's it. If you came here, that must mean Dr. Newman's clinic is out of medicine."

"All they have left is the stuff for children! He said your place would have it, so I raced over here!"

"I understand. I'll get some for you right away."

Mink, his wife, was someone I knew well. I split the medicine into the appropriate dosages based on her build and physical constitution, then gave it to Mogrim.

"I'm sure you know already, but this medicine just treats the symptoms. It reduces the pain and fatigue, but it won't cure the illness. Even if Mink feels a bit better after taking the medicine, she still needs to rest."

"I'll be sure to tell her!"

Mogrim was a devoted husband. I doubted he would have let his wife overexert herself even without my warning, but with it, if Mink even tried to move, he would force her to stay in bed.

"But with Mink laid up, will you be all right taking care of the babies?" Rit asked.

"Uh, uh…"

Mogrim looked unsure as he held the medicine.

Last winter, we had gone on a journey together to the Wall at the End of the World. I had gone to get a jewel I could use for Rit's engagement ring, but Mogrim had had a different goal in mind. Mink had been pregnant at the time, and Mogrim had been told she might have a difficult delivery. He'd gone to look for a rare mineral called earth crystal to craft the sharpest knife possible and make it as easy as possible on her if they needed to perform a C-section.

"The babies are just a month old, aren't they?"

"They're adorable, but we can't take our eyes off them. That's why I ran over here and why I have to get back as soon as possible… As to whether I can do everything Mink does for them, though… Well, I can't really provide the food they need."

Their children had been born only a month ago. The prediction of the Doctor blessing had been right on the mark, and Mink had needed a C-section. She had ended up giving birth to two cute baby boys. They had named the twins Gillius and Vargas, apparently after ancient dwarven heroes.

Seeing Mogrim look so troubled, Habotan raised her hand.

"Do you wish for this one to help?!"

"You want to help, Habotan?"

"Yes!"

She was as cheerful as ever.

"Do you have any experience taking care of babies?" I asked.

And just as cheerfully, she shook her head.

"No, not at all! But this one is eager to learn!"

"I…I see."

Well, at least she was enthusiastic.

"Either way, I'm sure having an extra set of hands around would be a big help for Mink," Rit said, backing her up. "Habotan is diligent and a fast learner, so I'm sure it won't take long for her to pick it up. And I can't speak for Mink, but I imagine she'd feel better having a woman handle her breast milk."

"Her b-breast milk?" Mogrim asked in a fluster.

"It depends on Mink's condition, but if she can produce milk, then I think that would be better than feeding them any alternative. They

say a mother's milk provides resilience due to their blessing."

"Really?!"

Habotan and Torahime both watched Rit, apparently not knowing about that, either.

"It's just what I heard a dragon from Ancient Mineral Dragon University say once, but supposedly what protects babies from illness when they don't have their blessings yet is the residual blessing passed along in their mother's breast milk."

I'd read about that before as well—though in my case, it had been a study carried out by an alchemist. They had been researching whether it was possible to extract the power of a blessing in a mother's breast milk or blood and make it into a potion, and had come to the conclusion that, in its current state, the effects of the potion would be nullified by the blessing of whoever drank it.

"It's only effective during the first few months after birth, but with a disease going around, it would be best to have the babies drink their mother's milk."

"Oh, I see!!"

"That said, taking them to Mink runs the risk of the babies catching the illness, too, so I think it would be best for Habotan to collect the milk in a container and have the babies drink from that."

Mogrim grabbed Rit's hand in both of his, grateful for what he'd learned from her.

And Habotan…

"Lady Torahime. How should I collect the milk?"

It was an innocent question.

"…Hrm."

Torahime averted her eyes.

I suppose a heavenly king of the demon lord's army wouldn't really know something like that. I didn't know either, though, so just to be on the safe side, I looked away as well.

"All you need to do is support Mink. Help her lift her body up and hold the cup. If you just do whatever Mink asks you to, you should be fine," Rit explained.

"Understood! In that case, this one can manage!" Habotan answered cheerfully. "There is a welcome party for Ms. Yarandrala's

return today, however, so I must depart early, but this one shall assist until then!”

“She’s coming back, eh…?” Mogrim said, a troubled expression on his face.

Dwarves and high elves didn’t get along on a fundamental level. Dwarves valued contracts and rules, while high elves focused more on trust and emotion, so that was only natural.

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about that. I’m grateful for however long you can help.”

“Thank you!”

“I can’t join the party, but give her my regards,” Mogrim mumbled, and then he left with Habotan.

“He doesn’t actually hate her,” Rit said, almost laughing.

Yarandrala had joined partway through our trip to the Wall at the End of the World. Even if different races had conflicting personalities, they could still build trust, but I found it funny to think how differently things would have ended up if they were both high elves or dwarves.

Just as I was pondering that, another customer arrived, so I went back to being an apothecary running his shop.

This person also had family sick with what was going around.

“So what will you do?” Torahime asked after the customer had bought their medicine and left.

“About Yarandrala?”

“Yes.”

I really would have liked to go to the harbor to meet her. Ordinarily, we definitely would have closed the shop and gone.

“As you can see, we can’t really close up right now. In fact, I was even thinking of staying open a bit later than normal.”

“Do you want me to watch the shop for you?” Rit asked. “I’m sure it would make Yarandrala happy if you went, Red, even if I can’t come, too.”

“No… This is a big moment in our lives, Rit, so I want you to be there.”

We would be getting married once Yarandrala returned.

She had been more upset than anyone else when I’d been forced

out of the Hero's party, and she had traveled the world looking for me and Rit, eventually tracking us down all the way out here in Zoltan. I still regretted worrying her so much.

I had fought for so long so that I might change Ruti's fate, even just a little. My entire reason for being had been to fight the Hero blessing—an opponent so great that I hadn't had the capacity to think about anything else. I had always known that my journey would end one day, and I'd come to accept that. Yet when Ares had confronted me and said I wasn't a true comrade, I hadn't known what to do with myself or how I should live my life.

Despite knowing it would worry Yarandrala, all I had been able to think of doing was disappearing and going someplace far away. I could even understand why she'd wanted to take me and Rit away with her to Kiramin, the kingdom of the high elves, when we'd reunited at the Wall at the End of the World. She was a dear friend who had looked after me from a young age, and I had put her through so much.

That was why I wanted her to be there for our wedding. I wanted her to know we were happy and that she didn't have to worry anymore. The wedding would also serve as an end point to the misfortune that had happened that day.

"I do not know why, but it seems having Yarandrala present is of great importance to you," Torahime said, nodding gravely. "In which case, shall I manage the shop while you both go?"

"Huh?! You'll run the shop?!"

I was so surprised I'd just blurted that out. Rit's mouth was also open in shock.

"Is it really so surprising? You should know this already, but I am the greatest water master in the world and have lived centuries longer than either of you. I can discern the ailments of any creature with blood circulating through it merely by observing the flow of water."

"But do you know about medicine?"

"I am indeed inexperienced in the field of medicine. However, I have memorized all of the medicines in this store. I have committed their effects to memory and can discern the symptoms of diseases,

so you need not have any concern."

Torahime smirked. She was the fearsome heavenly king of water, yet that expression almost resembled one of Habotan's. It was endearing.

"We'd really appreciate that, but are you sure it's not an inconvenience?"

"I have no pressing matters at the moment. While I am curious regarding the situation on the dark continent, there is a chance Taraxon will notice if I make any moves myself, so I am simply waiting for the flow of information to reach me from their side," Torahime said with a shrug. "And considering the debts I owe you, something like this is trivial. As such, if I can do something to help you…that is, and stay undetected by the demon lord's forces, then I shall."

Although we'd never directly fought during the war, it was still a strange feeling to hear a general of the demon lord's armies say something like that. It was clear she was earnest about it, though… so I figured I would take her up on her offer.

"I understand. Then can we ask you to watch the store for a little while?"

"Of course. You need not worry about me. Go and greet Yarandrala as she arrives."

"Thank you."

I never could have imagined something like this happening back when I was in the Hero's party.

It really had been painful when I'd been kicked out…but that day had made all my happiness now possible. In hindsight, that made it hurt not so much.

* * *

The Republic of Zoltan's one and only trade port was built on the river flowing through the west side of the nation. It was a shallow harbor, meaning larger, deep-draft ships couldn't enter it.

Situated in the path of storms as it was, Zoltan struggled to

maintain a port on the sea— That weakness was probably one of the main reasons it was written off as a frontier backwater.

Well, there are a lot of other reasons, too, so maybe the port doesn't really make much of a difference.

"There, I can see the ship!" Rit yelled, jumping to her feet next to me.

"Where…? I can't see it yet."

With her Spirit Scout blessing, Rit's eyes were better than mine. A few minutes later, however, I could see the ship sailing on the sea across from the river. It was still small in the distance, so I couldn't make out its shape, but it was moving a lot faster than the usual trade ships that visited Zoltan.

"That one?" I asked.

"A ship like that won't be able to make it into the harbor, so it'll probably take a little longer than Torahime said."

It had a sleek silhouette and seemed to be a new model of sailing ship. It almost looked like one of the warships used by the demon lord's armies.

As Rit had predicted, it stopped a short way inside the mouth of the river, then lowered rowboats.

"They're just using rowboats to land, though."

They were primitive craft powered by oars and arm strength. Our enemies had also used similar boats for landing. Even when technology advanced, some things stayed the same.

While I was thinking about that, a woman came into view on one of the rowboats.

"Yarandrala!"

"Yeah, I see her!"

It seemed like she'd also noticed us, because she was waving excitedly.

At long last, we were reunited!

* * *

"Red! Rit! I'm back!"

""Welcome home, Yarandrala!""

After getting out onto the wharf, Yarandrala wrapped the two of us in a big embrace.

"I missed you!" Rit exclaimed.

"Me too," I said.

"The war's over, but there are still many countries that haven't settled down yet…so we were a little worried about you."

"Thanks. It makes me happy to think my friends were worried for me," Yarandrala said with a smile. "I'm amazed you knew exactly when I would be coming. Don't tell me you've been waiting here since morning."

"No, Torahime told us."

"Ahh, sensing a ship out at sea would be right in her wheelhouse. That's a heavenly king for you."

"It just so happens that same heavenly king is currently watching the shop for us," Rit added.

"She is?! How funny!" Yarandrala looked shocked, then smiled with amusement. "I've traveled this world for over a hundred years, and it still finds new ways to surprise me!"

"I want to hear all about your most recent trip…but first, there's something we have to tell you."

"Mm?"

Seeing me and Rit glance at each other, a huge smile crossed Yarandrala's face.

"Tell me!"

"In three months, once the dress is ready…we're getting married."

Yarandrala wrapped us in another big hug.

"Congratulations…!"

We couldn't see her face, but she sounded truly happy for us.

"Thank you, Yarandrala… I'm sorry for making you worry about me all this time."

* * *

About a half day's walk to the northwest of Zoltan sat a village at the

base of a mountain. It provided lumber to Zoltan, and other than the occasional monster coming down from the mountainside, the people there lived their days in peace.

Today, however, was one of those occasional days.

"It's a plague boar!"

A large boar had appeared from the woods and entered the village. Its body was covered in bubbling ulcers, and rancid pus dripped from its cloudy yellow eyes. It looked like it might collapse and rot away at any moment, but that was just the type of monster it was. Plague boars had a habit of attacking villages and then quickly retreating.

The reason for this behavior was the discolored fangs that protruded from their mouths. Anyone bitten by a plague boar would be afflicted by a disease called "bestial spirit." It had an incubation period of about half a day, after which the victim would spiral into a state of confusion, then begin attacking anyone around them like a beast. The infected people would bite others, transmitting the disease, and once the village fell into chaos, the plague boar would return with its family to prey on the people there.

"Bring spears and bows! Don't get too close to it!"

The men of the village shouted out instructions, using their weapons to threaten the monster and drive it away. They wouldn't have a problem so long as no one got bitten. Plague boars were dangerous, but they weren't particularly strong. In this world, where the path to strengthening one's blessing came through killing, a special ability that didn't have any effect until after it had incubated for half a day was just too slow.

However, that all changed if they had another ability as well.

"Bwoooo!!"

The plague boar howled, and a fog erupted around it.

"Magic?!"

Fog Cloud—a lower-tier spell that created a thick cloud of fog around one's surroundings, allowing them to hide.

The next moment…

"Wha—?!"

An arrow of flame pierced a man who'd been giving out orders.

Fire Arrow was another low-tier spell that fired an arrow formed out of flames.

The man fell to the ground with a cry as the fire spread, and the villagers around him hurried to put out the flames.

His burns were extensive, and they were painful to look at, but they weren't life-threatening. Such was the power of lower-tier magic.

But they had found themselves in a grave situation.

"Th-that monster has a Sorcerer blessing!"

In addition to its natural abilities, the plague boar also had a blessing that let it use magic. They couldn't hit it with arrows in the fog, spells came flying toward them when they raised their spears, and if they approached it, they would be bitten and infected.

"Should we retreat back to our homes?"

"No, it can burn down the houses with that spell!"

The villagers couldn't handle this alone; it was something they would have to call in an adventurer for. They started thinking they should implement their fallback plan. The plague boar would withdraw after a number of them were infected, so if they let a few people get bitten, they could use that time to call for an adventurer.

An old man holding a bow tapped the shoulder of a younger man with a spear. He was asking to borrow the spear, saying that he would go.

The village wouldn't be destroyed…but distress and resignation began to loom over the villagers.

However, that heavy mood was suddenly blown away by a powerful voice.

"What incredible courage. There are even brave heroes in a village such as this!"

Two men walked in through the entrance to the village.

One of them, Taraxon, drew a sword forged in a foreign land.

"I'll kill the monster. Bui, check the surroundings to be sure there are no others."

"Understood."

Bui placed his hand on the hilt of his weapon and ran off into the trees.

Taraxon's sword hung limp in his hand as he walked toward the cloud of fog.

"Watch out!" a villager shouted.

Another fire arrow erupted from the fog, and the next instant, Taraxon twisted his body, dodging the arrow, and threw his sword into the dark haze.

"Bwo!! Bwo!!"

The beast's cries rang out, followed quickly by a loud thud.

The fog cleared as the spell dissipated, and the filthy plague boar came into view, lying on the ground with the katana sticking out of its forehead.

"It tried to hide amidst the fog, but casting Fire Arrow just gave away its position. Even if it can use magic, a monster is still just a monster."

Taraxon approached the beast and withdrew his sword.

The villagers cheered for him and gathered around. It was a scene he and Bui had experienced many times since they'd started traveling around the continent of Avalon in search of the Hero's artifacts. It wasn't the name Demon Lord Taraxon, but that of the human hero Taraxon that had left its mark in villages all around the continent during the chaos that had erupted after the war's end.

"Thank you so much. How can we ever repay you?" the old man with the spear said, bowing deeply.

"Do monsters like that appear around here often?" Taraxon asked.

"As I thought, you are a traveler. They do, although it had stopped happening as much up until recently."

"Do you have any idea why that might be?"

"I don't know whether I'd call it an 'idea,' but about a year ago, an adventurer came to gather medicinal herbs, and apparently he exterminated all the dangerous monsters along the way. Around that time, strong monsters stopped coming down to our village."

"I see. What happened to that adventurer?"

"Hahaha, he got himself a nice home and started spending less time coming out to the mountain… Lately, we haven't seen much of him at all. Seems he found himself a good wife."

"Nah, I heard they haven't gotten married yet," another villager added.

"Oh, my mistake. I'm sure it won't be long before they are. No woman would want to let go of such a nice young man."

"He sounds like quite the guy," remarked Taraxon.

"He is. I imagine you and he would get along well."

"No way, don't go sayin' stuff like that," another young villager chimed in. "Red and Mr. Swordsman here seem like two really different types of people."

"I think they're quite similar, myself."

"Red's a nice lad, but he's mild-mannered and can be kinda detached, don'cha think?"

"Is Red that adventurer's name?"

"Yeah," a younger man answered. "It doesn't seem like he's got a family name… Wait, actually, apparently Ms. Ruhr is his sister, so I guess he'd be Red Ruhr? Anyway, something like that, but he's more an apothecary now than an adventurer."

The other villagers chuckled wryly at the man's flippant tone. Some even murmured to themselves about giving him a talking-to later.

"Red, huh?"

The same man Bui mentioned.

Taraxon smiled to himself at the strange coincidence.

"Lord Taraxon."

Bui had returned from his investigation of the surroundings.

"What's it like?"

"There are no other plague boars. However, I noticed something else entirely."

"Hmm?"

"Asura chain is blooming here."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. Here is one I plucked. I have dealt with it, so it is safe."

Bui produced a peach-colored flower that looked completely normal. Seeing it, Taraxon's expression clouded over.

It was a look he hadn't shown once since arriving on this continent, even when fighting the giants in the previous Hero's

Tomb.

"I suspect the plague boar came down to this village drawn by its scent."

"Why is this growing out in the wild?"

"It wasn't when last I was here… What shall we do?"

"Investigate the surrounding villages. We need to get a grasp on the situation."

"But the sword…"

"It can wait. Right now, we are traveling as heroes," Taraxon said quietly before turning to face the villagers. "Tell me who in the village is ill."

Chapter 3

The Demon Lord's Demon Lord–Slaying Sword

"So there's a sickness spreading?"

"Yeah, which is why it's probably best for the sailors to limit their shore time as much as possible."

Standing on the wharf, Rit and I told Yarandrala about the cold that had been going around Zoltan lately.

Ships carried people, but they also carried diseases.

"Got it. I'll let them know."

The sailors who'd rowed to the pier were taking a break on the boat. When Yarandrala told them about the sickness, they grimaced, then went back to the ship without coming ashore.

"It doesn't seem like a serious disease so far, but it is highly contagious, so I'd rather not let it spread," I said.

"I can't believe this all happened while I was away."

"It seems like it just started spreading recently," added Rit.

"Rit and I only started noticing it the past few days. The symptoms are just like a bit of a bad cold, so at first we didn't realize it was any different."

As an apothecary, it was frustrating I hadn't noticed the spread of a disease. I knew there was no way for me to judge whether one disease was the same as another or just similar, since there was no common skill that could determine the details of a person's symptoms…but making up for that through knowledge and experience was the job of an apothecary.

"You be careful too, Red. You might think you're on the side that's healing people, but your blessing doesn't prevent you from getting sick, does it?"

"That's true, but my blessing level is high, so I can handle sicknesses better than most people with a lower resistance."

“Don’t go comparing yourself with people who have lower blessing levels!” Yarandrala chided.

Blessings related to sickness were capable of endowing inherent skills that gave resistance to diseases. People who had blessings that used spirit magic, like Rit’s Spirit Scout and Yarandrala’s Singer of the Trees, also received resistances, while soldier-and martial artist–type blessings gradually improved a person’s resistance to things that impaired the body’s physical abilities.

Thinking about it like that, there are a lot of different kinds of resistance to disease.

The lowest-tier and most common blessing, Warrior, didn’t grant any resistance, though, so it was unlikely the spread of the disease would stop.

“Here, take these.” Yarandrala removed her leaf-shaped earrings and gave them to me and Rit.

“What are they?”

“Magic items made in Kiramin for high elves who travel the world. They ward against misfortune and grant a strong resistance to infection.”

I could feel a powerful magic power in the jewel of the earring. It probably used a secret type of spirit magic guarded by the high elves.

Items like these were almost never shared with anybody outside of their own race.

“These are incredibly valuable, aren’t they? Are you sure you want us to wear them?”

“Of course I’m sure!”

She’d gotten mad at me again.

“But be careful. Those jewels can only resist infection. They can’t help anyone who’s already sick.”

“Thank you. I’ll make sure I take good care of it.”

I wrapped mine in cloth and carefully tucked it away.

“Red,” Rit said from beside me. “How is it?!”

She excitedly gathered her hair behind her head, revealing the nape of her neck. Yarandrala’s earring was dangling from her ear.

“Does it suit me?”

"Yeah, it looks great on you… You look beautiful in a different way from Yarandrala."

"Ehehe." Rit covered her flushed cheeks and mouth with the bandana around her neck.

"Hehe, maybe I should give you both matching earrings for your wedding."

"You want to give me a pair too?" I asked.

"Oh, I think they'd look great on you," Rit chimed in.

"Hmmm… Really?"

As I pondered that thought, Yarandrala watched on with a kind expression on her face.

* * *

The three of us left the harbor district and went straight back home. I wanted to ask about Ruti's New Truth, but…

"That's not something we can talk about with other people around."

"Right."

It was an important topic that touched on the reason why blessings had been created.

"I was thinking of going out to the mountain tomorrow to gather medicinal herbs. Would you want to come too, Yarandrala?"

"Sure, that sounds great."

There was no better place for a private conversation than in the mountains of Zoltan. No one would think there was some sort of big secret in a remote place like this.

Also…

"You know more about plants than anyone on the continent, so I'll be counting on you."

"Trying to find something to make a medicine for this new disease?"

"Yeah. For now, all we can do is treat the symptoms…but you might be able to figure something out."

"It'd probably be a good idea to go by Dr. Newman's clinic before

we head to the mountain so I can see someone with the disease."

"In that case, why don't we go to Mogrim's place tomorrow before we leave Zoltan? His wife Mink is sick and bedridden."

"She is?! That's concerning… I'm no doctor, but I do have confidence in my knowledge of medicinal plants, and I've seen a lot of different sicknesses in my travels, so I might be able to help."

"Right now, Habotan is helping take care of Mink after she collapsed, so you should talk to her too after the party tonight winds down a bit."

"Party…? You mean…?!"

Rit and I both smiled.

"We were all just so excited for you to get back."

"It's only a little get-together tonight, but the people at the Adventurers Guild and the Merchants Guild also wanted to welcome you back!"

"It sounds like everyone at the colosseum is looking forward to seeing you, too. Apparently, they've all been doing special training to take down the champion. I only caught a glimpse, but a few of them looked pretty good, and it seems like they're coming up with all sorts of strategies. There might be someone who can finally give you a run for your money when you're unarmed."

"Yarandrala will probably give you an earful tomorrow for that when you take her out to the mountain," Rit joked.

"Yeah, I think you're right."

Yarandrala smiled as she listened to us.

"…Hehe, that makes me happy. Zoltan really is a nice place."

Yarandrala had only been living in Zoltan since last winter. It hadn't quite been a year, but she'd already made lots of friends and good memories here. Many people had been sad to hear she'd left to go on a trip, so I was sure they'd all want to talk to her after we got back from the mountain.

…Though I guess it only makes sense for everyone to know the star of the colosseum.

✻ ✻ ✻

""Welcome back, Yarandrala!""

That evening, at Red & Rit's Apothecary, we all gathered around Yarandrala to celebrate her safe return.

Rit and I, Ruti and Tisse, and Habotan and Torahime were all there.

"Thank you, everyone," Yarandrala said, smiling happily.

The food on the table was mostly what I had put together yesterday, with a salad and a meat pie to accompany it. I would have liked to make more, but I'd been short on time.

So instead…

"It's been a while since I had Oparara's *oden*… Mmm, it really is delicious!"

We had stopped by Oparara's stand on the way back and bought some *oden*. But since we'd gone there before she'd been open and there hadn't been much ready at the time…

"Thanks for going to pick it up, Ruti."

"Your cooking is the tastiest in the world, Big Brother, but I like Oparara's *oden*, too."

Ruti had come early after going to pick up the order for us. Thanks to that, we were able to serve some food for Yarandrala earlier than Rit and I had expected when we'd been discussing it during lunch.

"Oparara sends her regards. She was hoping to see you, too."

"In that case, I'll be sure to go and eat at her stand sometime."

"That's a nice idea. I'd like to come, too."

"Please allow me to accompany you as well."

Yarandrala, Ruti, and Tisse chatted as they ate their *oden*.

It was a relaxed conversation among good friends—the sort of thing that would never have happened while Ruti had been journeying as the Hero.

"By the way, Ruti, Tisse…what is this green-colored *chikuwa* bread?" Yarandrala asked.

"Medicinal *chikuwa* bread, our own creation."

One plate on the table was loaded with medicinal *chikuwa* bread provided by Ruti and Tisse.

"Tisse's *chikuwa* bread was popular at the colosseum, but it looks

like you started something interesting while I was away!”

“We believed it necessary for the sake of Ms. Ruti’s plantation to increase the demand for medicinal herbs, so we began to sell medicinal food.”

“Huh…” Yarandrala took a bite out of the new *chikuwa* bread. “Ooh! That’s really good!! You worked the herbs into it, right? There should be some bitterness, but you did a really good job of balancing the flavors!”

“Mhm, Tisse and I tried all sorts of different experiments… *Chikuwa* even started showing up in my dreams.”

“It did?!”

“It got mad at me in the dream…demanding I make it more delicious. It was terrifying.”

“Hehe, to think you can even have such pleasant dreams now. That’s wonderful.”

“It wasn’t a pleasant dream. If anything, it was a nightmare.”

Ruti gestured with her body and hands as she explained just how scary it had been having *chikuwa* angry at her. Unfortunately, however, her best efforts at conveying a terrifying group of *chikuwa* didn’t really translate, and Yarandrala just laughed happily.

Being afraid of nightmares was also a part of being human, though. Back when Ruti had been the Hero, she hadn’t slept, or dreamed, or felt fear. For her to be able to talk about her dreams like this made both me and Yarandrala incredibly happy.

“But you managed to make such delicious bread, so aren’t the *chikuwa* all satisfied now?” I asked.

“Mhm.” Ruti nodded. “When we finished it, I had a dream where the *chikuwa* all praised me.”

“Ahaha,” I laughed, amused.

Everyone was watching Ruti’s growth with warm expressions on their faces.

Time flew by while we were enjoying ourselves. Yarandrala told stories from her trip, and we told her about the Harvest Festival in Zoltan. She had been away from the end of summer through to winter—the blink of an eye in the lifespan of high elves or higher-tier demons. Even in human terms, it wasn’t that long apart, but we still

had no end of stories to tell and continued long after we'd finished all the food. We talked about a cute cat she'd seen in a distant land. The children in the neighborhood getting taller. The delicious stew at a snowy mountain lodge. How this year was a good vintage for Zoltan wine.

Just simple little scenes of life.

"This one has finally learned to bake bread!"

"That's great! Can I try some the next time I come over?"

"Of course! Lady Torahime and I bake often!"

Yarandrala clapped excitedly for Habotan.

Having been raised as the demon lord's daughter, Habotan had never done any cooking before, but now she could make bread. It wasn't anything special, just the sort of normal bread that might be made in any house. That was it.

Yet that itself was a precious thing.

The memories of peaceful, everyday life lasted far longer and were much happier than the violent memories of fighting the Asuras of the demon lord's forces.

* * *





Once the conversation died down a bit and I was starting to think about putting the dishes away, Yarandrala suddenly asked me a question.

"By the way, did a soldier by the name of Harmon come back to Zoltan?"

That was a name I hadn't expected to hear.

Harmon was one of the soldiers who'd returned to Zoltan around the time of the Harvest Festival. He had volunteered to join the fight against the demon lord's armies and had fought from the start to the end of the war. Even now, he was coming by the shop for help dealing with his psychological trauma.

"Yeah, he came back to Zoltan a little while ago. He's working at a quarry managed by some close relatives."

"Good. I'm glad he made it back to Zoltan."

"I'm surprised, though. Do you know Harmon?"

"We adventured together once during my trip. He was quite brave…but he seemed conflicted over coming back to Zoltan. I'm glad to hear he did."

"I can't believe you ran into a soldier from Zoltan of all places and shared an adventure with them… The world sure works in mysterious ways."

"Yes. I was just as surprised when I found out he was from here. We were in the middle of a serious conversation at the time, so I didn't get to mention that I was also living in Zoltan."

"In that case, he doesn't know he'll be able to meet you again here, does he?"

"Probably not. Though maybe he heard my name from someone else."

"It *is* a pretty rare name."

Yarandrala was the champion of Zoltan's colosseum. I didn't know whether Harmon liked to watch the fights there, but it wouldn't be strange for him to have heard her name from a friend. If he heard a description, he'd probably recognize her as the same high elf he'd adventured with.

"But I feel like he would've told us if he knew you."

"I think so too," Ruti chimed in, nodding. "If he didn't say anything, then he probably doesn't know about Yarandrala."

People tended to think that those of us who'd fought in battles liked to watch fights at the colosseum, too. On the whole, though, that tended not to be the case.

Huh, now that I think of it, I haven't really heard much about the colosseum from Gonz or Nao.

"Do you want to go say hi to him tomorrow? He works at the same place every day, unlike adventurers, so we should be able to see him if we go in the morning."

"Hmm, it would probably surprise him if we showed up during work, so let's do it later."

"Oh, right. He's scheduled to come by here in three days, so you could probably see him then."

"He's coming here?"

"Yeah, for help dealing with the aftereffects of the war."

"Ahh… He did seem a bit emotionally unstable. I guess he really was traumatized."

"It's not something he will recover from quickly, but he's doing better. It is a little concerning, though, since Zoltan is so peaceful that there aren't any doctors who are experienced at treating soldiers' wounds."

"You're here, though, Red. You spent so much time studying the problems afflicting soldiers."

Yarandrala had known me ever since I'd been in the Bahamut Knights. She seemed to know pretty much everything I'd done in the capital there.

"Yeah. When I set out with Ruti, there was a chance I might end up being the only one who knew how to lead soldiers, so I needed to be a commander who could do everything myself."

I found myself thinking back to the soldiers the lord had provided and the militia that had gathered around us out of faith in the Hero. We had done the best we could and been victorious on almost every battlefield—but even then, soldiers had still died. We'd had no choice but to celebrate our victories and move forward without even the time to grieve the soldiers we'd lost.

"Still, you studied how to keep them alive, didn't you?" Rit put her hand on my shoulder. "Some generals just think of infantry assembled during wartime as expendable, but you were kind to them."

"Thanks. But I didn't do anything worthy of that sort of praise… I just knew the war with the demon lord's armies would be a long one, and I thought we'd lose if we treated soldiers as disposable."

"You did it for Ruti's sake too, right?"

"For me?"

Ruti looked a little surprised to hear her name brought up.

Rit sees right through me, doesn't she?

"The people who fought for Ruti would live the rest of their lives regretting having gone to war. You didn't want her to have to bear that burden."

"Big Brother…"

"Well, we were only temporarily put in charge of groups of soldiers. We never ended up leading the same forces for an extended period of time."

The Hero's journey had required us to move from one battlefield to the next in order to rescue the various fronts teetering on the brink of collapse. In the end, I hadn't been able to make much use of my soldiering studies, but surprisingly, they had come in handy here after I'd left.

"…I want to tell you about something from the time I spent adventuring with Harmon," Yarandrala said abruptly.

It wasn't like her to forcefully change the topic like that.

She looked at Habotan and Torahime.

"Is it connected to us in some way?" Torahime asked.

"I don't know. It might just be that he had the same name."

"His name…?" Habotan cocked her head.

Outside of her acquaintances in Zoltan, Habotan's social circle was incredibly small. In fact, she likely didn't have any acquaintances on the entire continent of Avalon.

"I met Harmon when I was investigating the tomb of the previous Hero."

"The previous Hero's Tomb?!"

The final resting place of the Hero before Ruti was supposed to be unknown. During the period of time after he defeated the demon lord until his comrade Sage Lilith appeared with the Hero's young son and founded the Kingdom of Gaiapolis, he had disappeared into the shadows of history.

"Sage Lilith built the previous Hero's Tomb and hid it with magic so no one would find it."

"…I see."

There was no end to the questions I had, but for now, I'd just accept it. What Yarandrala wanted to talk about wasn't the past, but the present.

"Harmon's group was searching for the Hero's relics…though it's not really accurate to call it 'his' group. He'd just been invited to accompany them and wasn't particularly searching for anything himself."

"And the problem is the people he was with?"

"Sort of, though it isn't as if they did anything particularly problematic. I might be overthinking it; he could just have the same name and be similar in terms of skill."

"You are being rather vague," Torahime said, impatiently tapping her finger against the table. "I have not had much interaction with you, but you do not seem the type to dance around the topic like this."

Yarandrala took a deep breath. What could have happened to cause this sort of a reaction.

"Again, I have no proof, so please try to stay calm."

"Get to the point," Torahime said brusquely.

"Sorry… There were two human-looking swordsmen with Harmon. They were quite skilled—skilled enough that it was hard to believe they could have hidden their strength for so long."

"That's saying something, coming from you."

"They were strong enough to defeat the powerful giants Sage Lilith had modified to watch over the tomb. I got the impression they were stronger than me, probably about on par with Danan. And they didn't even seem to have gotten serious yet."

"As strong as Danan without even getting serious? That's hard to

believe.” I gulped.

Other than Ruti, Danan was the strongest human in the world. At least in terms of hand-to-hand combat ability, he surpassed even the S-rank adventurers who’d sat out during the war against the demon lord’s armies.

“And the names they used…were Taraxon and Bui.”

“What?!”

Torahime and Habotan both leaped to their feet in shock.

Taraxon was the name of the demon lord. And Bui… Rit and I both knew that name.

“Shisandan…!” Rit’s expression suddenly changed.

“Shisandan? The general who reports directly to Taraxon?” Torahime asked. “I heard he left the front lines after being defeated at the critical location of the northern Duchy of Loggervia.”

Apparently, that was how it had been reported within the demon lord’s army.

Even Torahime—a heavenly king and one of the highest commanders of the invasion of Avalon—didn’t know about his mission in Zoltan.

Humanity probably would have lost if Asuras and demons had put aside their enmity and had a more effective command structure.

“Shisandan infiltrated Zoltan, and the form he took was that of a young man named Bui,” I explained.

“At the time, Zoltan’s underworld was being controlled by a man named Bighawk who made a deal with a contract demon. Shisandan helped dismantle his schemes and was active as the adventurer Bui… He even tricked me,” Rit said bitterly.

Shisandan had killed Rit’s master Gaius, the commander of Loggervia’s royal guard, and taken his form. We had defeated him again in Zoltan, but until Torahime had come, we’d had no way to prevent Asuras from resurrecting.

Now, though…

“Calm down. First, we need to calmly analyze what information we have,” Ruti said softly but forcefully.

“Ruti’s right,” I said with a nod. “I got a little shaken up, too.”

“Yes…”

It seemed like Torahime still hadn't fully recovered.

The Demon Lord Taraxon had defeated the rightful ruler of the dark continent. Our journey hadn't culminated in a battle against the demon lord, but the strength of the various enemies we *had* fought spoke volumes of the strength of the one who stood above them all. And Torahime, who'd faced off against Demon Lord Taraxon directly, had an even clearer understanding of the threat he posed.

"All I saw were two swordsmen by the names of Taraxon and Bui searching for a relic of the Hero," Yarandrala explained. "During that adventure, they showed no signs they were evil. And Harmon doesn't seem like the sort of person to help out with anything bad, does he?"

"No, he's a brave and kind man."

"At the very least, I think during their journey together, Taraxon didn't act like the demon lord. And while in camp, I investigated whether there were any influence or control spells cast on Harmon, but there weren't."

"Why would they have a simple soldier like Harmon accompany them?" Tisse asked.

"I can only think they wanted a companion who knew the lay of the land," I said.

"The impression I got seeing them was that they relied on him and genuinely treated him as their comrade," said Yarandrala.

"The demon lord did?"

"I imagine the demon lord wouldn't be able to wield his full strength fighting in human form, but Harmon *is* an excellent soldier."

We hadn't ever seen Harmon fight since he'd come back to Zoltan. He was living a life that didn't involve much need for fighting, so that was to be expected. But with the bravery he'd shown during the Harvest Festival, it wasn't all that strange that he might have played a part in a battle of heroes.

"We will have to speak with this Harmon, then," Torahime said.

"If it really *was* the demon lord, there's no way he would have done anything that would have clued Harmon in."

"Even the demon lord has no reason to suspect that Habotan and I are hiding here. I may be able to pick up something a human

might miss."

"All right… Then the next time Harmon comes by, I'll ask you two to come and talk to him, too."

"Please do."

We would have to be careful not to let anything about Torahime's connection with the demon lord's armies slip.

Torahime should be fine, but…

I glanced over at Habotan.

"You're currently helping take care of Mink while she's sick, right?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Red and I will be sufficient to gather whatever information is needed from Harmon. You should continue to care for Mink and make note of any distinctive characteristics of the disease," Torahime said.

"Yes, milady! …You want this one to keep notes?"

"Indeed. We were followed here by soldiers of the demon lord's army. Though the odds are low, it is possible they may have brought a sickness from the dark continent, in which case our knowledge may be of some use."

"I—I see!"

"For that, it is important to make notes of the symptoms and progression of the disease that is currently afflicting Zoltan. I am counting on you, Habotan."

"Yes, milady!!"

Habotan seemed fired up by the importance of her duty…but it was an expedient way to keep her away from gathering information about the demon lord.

Probably a wise choice.

"Sorry for bringing this up at such a fun party. I don't want to end it on a sour note like this, so why don't we open one more bottle of wine? And another juice, of course."

At Yarandrala's suggestion, we ended the discussion there. This was a time to celebrate her safe return, after all.

"All right," I said, standing up. "I'll bring out a gentle, smooth wine that's just right for when the party's settling down."

It was a bit expensive, but that should be fine for today. It was a small price to pay to have some more pleasant memories to look back on.

* * *

The next morning, Yarandrala, Habotan, and I headed to Mogrim's shop.

Along the way, we saw a middle-aged man setting out cheap coats on a shelf in front of a store. They didn't look as comfortable as the ones in Madam Offler's shop, but the price was their big selling point.

"Oh, that man is one of the people who was laid up sick."

"That's good," Yarandrala murmured in relief. "It looks like the sickness will heal properly."

I had told her about it yesterday as well, but she was probably glad to see someone who had actually recovered.

"Good morning, Straub."

"Oh, if it isn't Red. Morning."

Straub looked a bit gaunt, but there was a good color to his face.

"Feeling better already?"

"Sure am. Your medicine works wonders."

"It just eases the symptoms. The best medicine was that you don't drink that much and generally take good care of yourself."

"That so? It has been a while since I was sick, so it surprised me."

Straub's blessing was Martial Artist. Although he didn't really make a living in a way that put it to much use, he was strong and sturdy. The gentle urging of the Martial Artist blessing to take care of one's body had probably also contributed to his good health.

"From the looks of it, there don't seem to be any lingering effects. Is there anything still bothering you?"

"Nah, not really. If anything, this cold weather's my biggest problem today," he said, rubbing his hands together for warmth.

⁕ ⁕ ⁕

Mogrim's store was closed. He was operating on shorter business hours until Mink was better.

"Resist Disease," Yarandrala said, her spell enveloping the three of us. "Just to be safe."

"My blessing provides immunity, so this one will be fine, however you should probably be careful, Mr. Red."

"I've got the earring I'm borrowing from Yarandrala. That said, this is probably an unknown disease we're dealing with, so I appreciate it."

Yarandrala's barrier eased any concerns about catching whatever this was. Now I could focus on the checkup.

Habotan knocked on the door.

"Mr. Mogrim, it is Habotan. This one has come to help!"

"Oh! Thanks for coming!!!" There were heavy footsteps, and then the door opened. "What's this? Red and the high elf are here, too?"

"Morning, Mogrim. We came to check on Mink."

"Is Mink all right?"

"She seems to be doing worse than yesterday… If I could take her place, I would. You don't know any good medicine that might help her?" Mogrim asked dejectedly.

He really loved his wife, so seeing her suffering like this must have been tough on him.

"There's no miracle cure for this one. All we can do is ease the symptoms and boost her body's vitality until she can heal on her own."

"Ugh…!" Mogrim groaned.

"Anyway, let's talk inside. I want to see how Mink's doing."

"Right! And I don't want her to have to raise her voice if she needs to call for me!!"

We took off our cloaks and followed Mogrim into the room where Mink was resting.

"Mink, I'm coming in," Mogrim announced in a gentler voice than I'd ever heard out of him.

"Ahh… Habotan. You're here again today."

"Yes, ma'am! This one has come to help!"

Habotan gently stopped Mink from trying to sit up.

She looks a lot worse than I expected…

"You came too, Red, and… Oh, is that you, Yarandrala? You came to see me even though you only just got back to Zoltan?"

Mink was used to seeing lots of people while working behind the counter of the store here, but just now, she'd noticed us only after she'd spotted Habotan. That was nothing like how she normally was, evidence of just how much of a toll the sickness had taken on her.

"Hi, Mink. I got worried when I heard you were bedridden with an illness."

"Haha… My husband is always blowing things out of proportion."

Even her laugh sounded feeble.

Yarandrala and I sat next to her bed, chatting reassuringly as we checked her pulse and fever.

"Could I take a look at the inside of your mouth?" Yarandrala asked.

Mink nodded and opened wide.

"There's swelling. That's a common enough symptom for a cold, though…"

"She has a high fever. Still, it's not too dissimilar from when a cold takes a turn for the worse…"

I connected with my blessing and activated On-the-Spot Diagnosis, a First Aid mastery skill that allowed me to know how to ease any life-threatening symptoms, even if I didn't know what was causing them. It was intended to keep someone alive until an actual doctor could arrive; however, it could also be used to work backward to figure out the cause of a disease by finding out the medicine necessary to deal with it.

"Something for the fever…and hangover medicine?"

""Huh?""

Yarandrala and Mogrim were both surprised by that unexpected answer.

"A hangover cure? That really doesn't seem like it fits here."

"No, I know. But the answers we get from the skill shouldn't be

wrong…”

It selected the most appropriate treatment out of everything I knew. If no medicine I knew of would work, then it would just recommend something to stop the pain, but it shouldn’t recommend something without any effect at all.

“…Let me think about this for a moment.”

A hangover cure?

There were all sorts of medicines for hangovers, including ones made with a certain aquatic plant called water spirit grass. As the name implied, a hangover cure was used to quickly clear up the aftereffects of alcohol. It targeted headaches and had a diuretic effect, speeding up the flow of water through the body in order to quickly work the alcohol out of a person’s system and expel the toxins.

That wouldn’t work on a cold, though. In fact, accelerating the body’s ability to process water would make you need to go to the bathroom more often, and you would have to be careful of dehydrating. For that reason, it wasn’t recommended to treat colds.

Though it just means you have to be careful to drink enough water.

“…Water?”

“Red?”

I’d had a thought.

“Mink, have you felt like your thoughts are getting hazy or had any trouble focusing on things?”

“I mean, with this high a fever, there are times when my mind goes blank.”

“Mogrim, Habotan, have you noticed anything?”

“Hmmm. Well, last night, she *was* a little absent-minded, and there have been times when she struggled to hold a conversation.”

“Yes, this one has noticed that as well.”

“…Really?” Mink asked.

She looked uneasy. It certainly was worrying to have something wrong with the part of your brain that controls thought.

But this was good news. The scariest thing is not knowing how to treat an illness.

"What's going on, Red?"

"I think this disease is causing encephalitis. Because of that, water is building up in Mink's head."

"Encephalitis?!"

"I think that's why my skill recommended a hangover cure as an effective treatment. We need to drain the water in her head to limit any damage to her brain."

"If it's hangover cure you need, then I've got some I bought from you!" Mogrim said and dashed out of the room.

"It can't be just any hangover cure, so I need to double-check it." I followed him out.

"Red really is incredible," I could hear Yarandrala murmur behind me.

To diagnose someone with encephalitis, you needed an inherent skill from a specialist blessing that dealt with diseases, such as Doctor, which would mean taking a skill that had no bearing on combat. And even someone with the Doctor blessing who took the standard sorts of skills generally wouldn't be able to diagnose it until the patient reached a stage of confusion and sensory dysfunction.

We'd been lucky this time. The knowledge I had built up for Ruti's journey had been able to help a close friend. I was overjoyed.

We would need to stop by Dr. Newman's clinic to let him know before heading out to the mountain.

* * *

Yarandrala and I left Mogrim's shop, and by the time we reached the foot of the mountain, it was past noon.

"Right, let's stop by the village at the bottom before we head up."

"What for?"

"I want to see if the sickness in Zoltan is also spreading in the nearby villages."

I always came to gather herbs at the mountain here, and at its base was a small village of lumberjacks who provided a lot of the lumber for Zoltan—an area surrounded by expansive wetlands.

They had a lodge for adventurers climbing the mountain, but I hardly ever used it since I camped out up there. It wasn't exactly bustling, but the people there lived peaceful, stable lives.

"It looks rather turbulent."

We stopped to look around when we reached the entrance to the village. Like Yarandrala had said, there was a heavy mood in the air.

Did a monster show up?

"Stop there, please!"

A voice hailed us as we went to enter the village.

"Oh, is that you, Red?"

"Things look pretty grim here. Did something happen?"

"It's been a while since we've seen you. Sorry, but could I ask you to take five steps back? There's a sickness going around here, and you shouldn't get any closer."

"A sickness?! I'm an apothecary, so if you let me look at the people who are sick, I might be able to help!"

"We're fine on that front. A kind traveling swordsman taught us how to cure it. We just can't let anyone in until we've treated everyone who's sick!"

A traveling swordsman taught them the cure?

"Wait a second, it might be the same as what's going around in Zoltan. I'd like to hear more!"

"Not until everyone's gotten better! That's what the swordsman said! So please, go home, quickly!" the villager said forcefully. "We don't know for sure if it can spread, even at this distance!"

From the sound of it, he wouldn't believe us even if we said we had magical resistance to sickness.

If that traveling swordsman taught them how to cure it, then I guess it makes sense to prioritize his instructions…

At the very least, it seemed like he'd given them a treatment that had shown visible effects.

"Okay, I understand. I'll come back later when things have calmed down."

"Thanks. Sorry."

Giving up, we turned around and left.

⁕ ⁕ ⁕

"Yarandrala, how did the village seem?" I asked once we were far enough away.

Yarandrala could borrow the strength of plants, so in a place like this surrounded by nature, she had easily been able to poke around the village without anyone noticing.

"There are four people in bed with the sickness. I couldn't confirm it in great detail, but the symptoms appeared to be the same as what's going around in Zoltan. However, none of the cases seem severe… Is there a skilled healer in that village?"

"No, the lumberjacks just used the herbs from the mountain without preparing them at all. They shouldn't have a healer."

"That's strange… Here." Yarandrala handed me a tree leaf furled up to hold a gray powder. "I borrowed a pinch of it. This doesn't look like the sort of medicine an amateur could make, does it?"

"I don't have a skill that can analyze it, so I don't know what the medicine does, but it was definitely made by someone who knows how to compound medicines."

It wouldn't have ended up like this just by crushing and blending leaves; it would have required either an inherent skill or specialist knowledge.

"I don't think there's any question this is the medicine brought in by the traveling swordsman they mentioned."

A traveling swordsman, who knew the treatment for a disease neither Yarandrala nor I had ever heard of, had just happened to appear in this village nowhere near the road connecting Zoltan to its neighboring country? …It was completely bizarre.

"Should we report it to the Adventurers Guild? Galatine will do a good job of handling it."

Galatine was a talented man high up in the Adventurers Guild. He would put together a team of people with blessings that could deal with diseases to investigate.

"We can investigate this medicine when we get back to Zoltan, too. I can hand it over to Dr. Newman to analyze."

There were plenty of skilled people in Zoltan. I knew that well from my time living here.

…That's about all I can do for now.

"All right, we can leave the rest for the people in Zoltan to deal with, and I'll do what I can as an apothecary."

"Yeah… I also need to tell you about my trip—and about why I left in the first place."

That's right. This disease was concerning, but so was the nature of Ruti's New Truth blessing. And Yarandrala had brought back a fragment of that answer.

* * *

After climbing the mountain for about an hour, we arrived at an area thick with medicinal plants.

"There are chimeras around here," I said to Yarandrala. "I doubt they'll be much of a problem for you, but best to keep an eye out."

"Come to think of it, there's also those ancient elf…no, ancient human ruins around here. It hasn't even been that long, but it feels almost nostalgic."

The day we'd gone to explore those ruins, Yarandrala and I had faced off against Demis, who'd taken possession of Van the Hero through his blessing.

"I can't believe he beat me and I wasn't able to do anything at all," Yarandrala said.

"I only blocked one attack, and I was slammed into the ceiling and out of action. God sure is strong."

"I mean, of course."

We looked at each other and smiled. Even that hopeless battle had become a memory we could fondly look back on.

"It's a shame I was unconscious and didn't get to see you gallantly strike down Demis, Red."

"I never want to go through something like that again."

Thinking about it rationally, the fact that I had trusted my wildly optimistic theory and sealed my own blessing so I could fight with

the power of the sacred sword still gave me goose bumps.

"Thanks to that, I was able to talk with the first Hero, though… It really was a surreal experience."

The first Hero, an Asura, had said New Truth was both the power of people and the true demon lord, and that he had challenged the strength of humans.

"Before the Hero blessing was created, the true Hero challenged the true demon lord, who is unrelated to the Demon Lord blessing… So this current battle between the 'good' Hero and the 'evil' demon lord is all just a farce?"

"Pretty much," Yarandrala said. "Should we take a break before looking for medicinal plants so I can tell you what I know?"

"Sure. In that case, why don't we set up camp first?"

The plan was to gather a generous supply of medicinal herbs up until noon tomorrow. With Yarandrala's help, I should be able to collect quite a lot.

The small tent I used when I came out here alone would be big enough for the two of us. It was so small we couldn't even put our bags inside, but it would protect us from rain falling from the sky and insects crawling up from the ground. It wasn't cold enough for snow, either, so we would be warm enough in simple sleeping bags.

"There's no trace of anyone around us," Yarandrala said.

This area was chimera territory, so even adventurers didn't come here. There was no need to worry about anyone overhearing us.

We started talking as we worked.

"So what did you find out about New Truth?"

"Right. Sage Lilith, who later married the previous Hero, investigated the Hero and Demon Lord blessings during their journey to defeat the demon lord. After the demon lord was slain, she bore the Hero's son and effectively became the ruler of the world. She was a great woman of unparalleled knowledge and skill."

The countries of the continent of Avalon had been destroyed in the war with the previous demon lord. Sage Lilith had used that chaos to unite humanity and found the first kingdom, Gaiapolis. Officially, it had been ruled by the son born to Lilith and the previous Hero, but Lilith had been the one actually governing it.

With the demon lord gone, she had ruled the world.

"Lilith also knew the history of the ancient humans and recorded that the true holy sword lay in Zoltan."

"Incredible… But why were there no official records of it, then?"

"Not only did she not leave any official records, she sealed her notes away with the body of the previous Hero."

"Did she judge it to be information that other people shouldn't know?"

We finished making camp in no time. We were only staying the one night, so we had kept our gear to a minimum. Sitting on the ground, we took out a thermos of tea and some ration cookies.

"So what was the knowledge Lilith sealed away?"

"As you already know, the first Hero was an Asura who didn't have a blessing. The Hero blessing was constructed by Demis using the captured soul of that first Hero."

"Yeah, he told me that when I held the sword."

"If Lilith's research matches what the first Hero said, then that lends credence to the rest of what I found."

"True…"

Yarandrala still seemed a bit unsure about whether she should go on.

"Apparently, Demis is trying to get other souls to reach the same 'light' the first Hero's soul achieved. He thought by recreating the way the first Hero had lived, the souls of later heroes would be able to achieve that light."

"And he instigated wars spanning the entire world how many times now just to achieve that?"

No matter what, I just couldn't bring myself to like Demis.

"I feel the same way you do," Yarandrala said, biting into one of the cookies.

I let out a breath and slowly unclenched my hands, which I'd formed into fists while listening to her.

"So if the Hero blessing is a copy of the first Hero, then where do you think the Demon Lord blessing came from?"

"The logical guess would be from the demon lord the first Hero fought…which would make the Demon Lord blessing a copy of the

human who possessed the power of New Truth…”

More accurately, the first Hero had said New Truth was a part of the demon lord’s power. There must be other requirements to becoming the demon lord, though.

“That is the reasonable answer. However, Lilith’s conclusion was that the Demon Lord blessing was made from something other than that demon lord.”

“It was made from something else…? But if the goal of the Hero blessing is to recreate the way the first Hero lived, it wouldn’t be able to do that unless its opposite, the Demon Lord blessing, was the demon lord he fought against, right?”

“That’s right. In order to recreate the first Hero’s life, the Demon Lord blessing should also recreate the evil he fought. And yet, Demis did not do that… Why?”

“Maybe it wasn’t possible to recreate it. Or maybe that demon lord was too powerful, and the possibility that the Hero blessing would be defeated too great.”

“No. According to Lilith, Demis should be theoretically omnipotent within the world he himself created. He would be able to create a weakened version of the demon lord capable of serving as an enemy to the Hero blessing.”

“In that case…”

I thought of something Ruti had told me, that Shisandan had said to her.

“How ironic that the blessing designed to prevent this very sort of situation ended up fostering the mental fortitude needed to endure its impulses.”

Because of their ability to resurrect, Asuras were effectively immortal and ageless. They had been present when the demon lord had ruled the world, when the first Hero had been victorious and captured by God, and when he had been warped into becoming the Hero blessing.

Although he’d witnessed it, that didn’t automatically make Shisandan right; however, there was meaning behind his words.

“Did he do it because he was afraid recreating the demon lord through a blessing would risk the birth of a true demon lord?”

"I knew you'd figure it out. That's the same conclusion Lilith reached."

If the demon lord was a being even the creator god Almighty Demis perceived as a threat, then that would explain why he hadn't recreated it.

"In the legends of the Hero, Demis merely provides the blessings and doesn't intervene in the battle between good and evil. The one exception is his giving the Sacred Avenger to the first Hero. Unlike the demons that God gave the role of evil, the ultimate evil—the true demon lord—was a match for the one true God."

"…The first Hero said the demon lord was a being born from humans, but can people really surpass God?"

"Mmm… Naturally, I don't really know the answer to that, either. We just have to accept it, though. Humans wouldn't even be able to defeat the chimeras here without their blessings, so it's unthinkable to us that they could surpass divinity. Yet history is telling us they did."

I had borrowed the strength of the first Hero in order to fight Demis. However, he had been limited by the capabilities of the Hero blessing and Van's physical form, and he'd only been able to wield a fraction of his power. I could claim to have struck a blow against God, but that was likely nothing more than a pinprick to Demis.

"No, that doesn't matter right now. The important thing is how this affects Ruti."

These were all truths that could change the world, but what mattered to us was how it affected Ruti, who had awakened to New Truth.

"…Yes, the main issue." Yarandrala exhaled, and her expression grew serious. "The demon lord is born from people's hearts… The demon lord *is* humanity."

"It's *humanity*?"

"The Hero blessing robs people of their humanity, and its opposite, Demon Lord, is humanity itself. In Ruti's case, I think she awoke to it in anger and hatred at having someone precious to her—you—stolen away."

"Even if it manifested itself as anger, it was a feeling born out of

love for another person. I don’t really think that’s an evil emotion.”

“Right. And there’s the rub.”

“So distancing Ruti from becoming the demon lord is also going to distance her from her humanity?”

That was why Yarandrala had been so hesitant to talk about this.

If that were the case…there wasn’t anything I could do. It would mean robbing Ruti of the happiness she had finally found. I couldn’t take that from her, and I wouldn’t allow anyone else to try, either.

“That was the conclusion I came to as well,” Yarandrala said. “We can’t do anything other than believe in Ruti.”

I see… So that’s why even hearing about New Truth, the threat he once faced, the first Hero only said not to be afraid.

“…In that case, we don’t need to worry. Ruti has lots of friends around her now. Friends she can laugh and smile with. There’s no way the demon lord will be born from such a happy scene.”

“Right.” Yarandrala’s mood shifted, and she broke into a cheerful smile.

In the end, nothing had changed. Ruti would live a quiet, happy life here in Zoltan, and I wouldn’t let anyone complain about it.

“Brave hero, live in happiness.”

Only now did I understand the meaning and warmth behind those words the first Hero had left me with.

* * *

After we finished taking a break, Yarandrala and I split up to gather plants.

“There really are so many medicinal plants in this area,” I mused to myself.

The wood elves had once lived in the area around Zoltan. They had cultivated the soil and introduced various useful plants, and the humans who’d settled here had benefited from that bounty even after the wood elves had been wiped out.

“But wood elves hated ancient human ruins, and they were trying to hide the fact that the holy sword was sealed away in the ruins

here. So why did they cultivate the land in this area?”

Maybe it was because we’d just been talking about the past, but something was bothering me that ordinarily wouldn’t catch my attention.

If the wood elves had cultivated the land around here, then they must have used it for agriculture—though that had a different meaning to them than it did to humans. To wood elves, agriculture meant growing whatever they needed while keeping the forest in its natural state. They probably hadn’t even needed to do any daily upkeep and had instead just relied on the rain and wind. Regardless, they would have needed to work it to sow and reap their crops.

…So would they have had farmlands next to a hidden ruin?

“Well, the medicinal plants here are great, so even if it seems strange, it is what it is.”

I had never even met a wood elf, so I guessed maybe I couldn’t understand them no matter how hard I thought about it.

Sheesh, I really am a bit shaken.

At times like these, I had a bad habit of thinking about things entirely unrelated to the situation.

“Now that I think about it, these flowers weren’t here last year… What are these peach-colored blossoms? Some flowers take a few years to bloom, and there aren’t so many that they’re driving away the other plants, so it doesn’t seem like something to worry about.”

These pink flowers had gradually increased in number during the fall. I had thought they’d wither in winter, but they showed no signs of fading.

“I don’t know this flower. According to my Survival skill, they aren’t poisonous, but nor are they edible. That’s pretty similar to most other flowers, though…”

I turned over a petal to look at the underside of it.

“This one also has what looks like little bits of mold attached to it.”

That was a distinctive trait of this flower; there were always little bits of some kind of fungal-like growth on the backs of the petals. It definitely wasn’t pollen, but with only common skills at my command, I couldn’t investigate further.

"I'm done gathering things here… Guess I'll move to another area."

I walked a little way northwest. In terms of direction, I was going up the mountain, but descending. With my Survival skill, I could tell my bearing and general position, but walking around on a mountain without any blessing skills to rely on could make you really lost, really fast.

"Hm?"

I felt a presence.

Something's watching me.

I put my hand on the hilt of the bronze sword at my hip.

"…Oh, it's just you?"

A large, slow-moving shadow peeked its head out from among the trees. It had a lion's body and the heads of a goat and a dragon on its shoulders—a chimera. This one often came to watch me while I was gathering herbs and plants. Sometimes, it would point me to places where plants were growing, and I'd juggle or do magic tricks when I was taking a break, making its eyes go wide with surprise. It had a bit of an unusual personality.

But today, it looked different from usual.

"Did something happen?"

All six of its eyes looked at me, pleading yet serious. It walked over beside me and gently nudged my back.

"There's somewhere you want me to go?"

"Baaa," the goat's head bleated weakly.

It seemed there was some kind of serious problem it needed help with.

"Got it. Let's go, then."

I started running, and the chimera dashed out ahead to lead the way. After running for about ten minutes through the trees, we reached the reason why the chimera wanted help.

"Grrr…"

A wounded chimera was lying hidden in the undergrowth.

"It's hurt… This is from a sword."

There were monsters like goblins that used swords…but this had probably been done by an adventurer.

Chimeras were hostile toward people. They had only stopped being aggressive toward me after I'd fought them once and demonstrated my superiority by killing several of them. This chimera had probably attacked an adventurer. Even if it hadn't, it wasn't unusual for adventurers to attack a chimera preemptively if they saw one. With the beast's vitality, one of the potions I had with me would be more than enough to heal it. But should I really save a monster that attacked people…?

"Here, drink this potion."

I took out the small bottle, held it to the chimera's mouth, and slowly helped it drink.

"Rawr…!"

The dragon head of the chimera that had guided me here let out a happy growl.

"You don't need to worry… This is your partner, right?"

"Rawrawr!"

The chimeras here didn't move far away from their territory, so there was zero chance it would cause any harm to the village at the base of the mountain. If someone was going to get hurt, it would be an adventurer who came here…but there were dozens of chimeras living on the mountain, so it wasn't going to change much if I helped this one.

What mattered most of all was that, for the sake of its partner, this chimera had worked up the courage to ask me for help. And seeing how happily it was nuzzled up to its partner now…I couldn't help but feel glad I'd helped.

"Oh? You're saving a monster?"

"Who are you?!"

A man was standing around twenty paces away. He was muscular, with black hair and sharp features. A sword with a gentle curve, likely influenced by the katanas from the Jade Kingdom, hung at his waist.

…I didn't notice him at all until he said something.

"Grrrrrr…!!" The monster growled menacingly as it stepped back.

"I see. So you must be the one who fought this chimera," I said to the man.

I moved in front of the beast, protecting it.

"The chimera doesn't want to fight anymore, so will you please just let it go?"

"Chimeras are not the types of monsters to hoard treasure," the man said. "There isn't much to be gained from killing them… So why do you protect them? Pacifism isn't a common philosophy in this world."

"Because it asked me for help."

This swordsman… He's strong.

I couldn't determine his blessing yet, but the pressure I felt facing him was like going up against Danan.

The man carefully examined my face. His arms were hanging loose and unthreateningly, but his sword was designed for quick-draw techniques. I would be at a disadvantage if we drew at the same time.

"What would you do if I told you to get out of my way?" he asked.

"Well, that'd be a problem."

"Haha…"

The swordsman leaped toward me, drawing his sword with lightning speed.

CLAAANG!!!!!!

The clash of metal echoed around the mountain.

"Oh, wow!"

The swordsman looked astonished.

I had stopped his deadly attack with the hilt and guard of my bronze sword—the Bahamut-style cross-guard reversal. It was a technique where you grasped the blade of your sword and caught the oncoming slash between the guard and the hilt. I had made up for the difference in draw speed by only moving my sword as little as possible.

"Splendid!" the swordsman declared loudly. "My apologies. You gave off the impression of being quite skilled standing there, so I felt the urge to test you."

"Thanks, I suppose."

That was an absurdly fast strike… I can still feel the chill down

my back.

The man who'd attacked me flashed his teeth in a wide, joyful smile…but it was a real pain having people just attack me all of a sudden.

You came across swordsmen like him every now and then, and I always wondered how they'd react if they killed someone in the heat of the moment attacking like that.

…I get the feeling they'd just give a wry smile and move on.

"You've already done enough damage, so will you sheathe your blade?"

"Very well. In deference to you, I shall let these chimeras go."

We both put our swords away at the same time. I nodded to the chimeras, and they swiftly fled deeper into the mountain.

"Haah."

I let out a breath. I'd run into another crazy strong swordsman here.

Who in the world is he?

"Today is a good day, encountering a brave man such as yourself out here!" the man said.

"It's a calamitous day for me, having someone suddenly draw their sword on me."

I had a feeling it would be troublesome if I got involved with this man, but there was no way a swordsman like him was walking around a mountain deep on the frontier for no reason.

"I'm an apothecary in Zoltan. I came here to gather herbs and plants to make medicine. What brings you to such a remote place?"

"I am investigating the source of a disease that's spreading in the village at the base of the mountain."

"So you must be the traveling swordsman the villager there mentioned."

"Did you stop at the village?"

"Not really, I was turned back at the entrance. Though they did tell me a traveling swordsman knew the treatment for the disease and had shared it with them."

"I see. That makes things easier. An incredibly dangerous disease has been let loose on this mountain. It must be stopped here."

"You're trying to stop it here? Is that even possible?"

He just said it was "let loose" here… So is this mountain the source of it?

"If you are an apothecary, then you should be well-versed in diseases."

"Not as much as an actual doctor, and my blessing isn't particularly related to medicine, either."

"Hmph." For some reason, a momentary flicker of annoyance crossed the swordsman's face. "Having crossed blades with you, I can tell you are incredibly skilled. If you are that good with a sword, then I can only assume you must also be a very talented apothecary."

"What do sword skills have to do with being an apothecary?"

"It is about spirit."

He was a strange man. Even though we'd clashed, I still couldn't discern his blessing.

"…Thanks. Then allow me to ask you a question, as an apothecary."

"Yes, go ahead."

"Could you tell me about this disease and its treatment? It's also spreading in other villages, so sealing off the village at the base of the mountain won't be enough to stop it."

"I'm aware. There is a cure, but not enough of it."

"How is it made?"

"The ingredients include a plant that is already extinct. There are some still preserved in the nearby ruins, but providing the cure to everyone infected is unrealistic."

"You shared a medicine that precious with the villagers?!"

"I am healthy, and they were sick… It's only natural, isn't it?" the swordsman answered bluntly. "Before discussing the medicine, however, it would probably make more sense to discuss the nature of the disease."

"True. Please, tell me. I've examined it, but this is the first time I've ever seen this disease."

"It is an ancient disease, so it is only natural you would not know it."

"An ancient disease?"

"You know of the ancient ruins on this mountain here? Somehow, a disease that was being preserved inside them leaked out."

During the battle with Demis, the ancient human ruins had used up the last of their energy and stopped functioning. Was that the cause of all this? …But it had been over half a year since then. Why was the disease spreading now?

"Are those pink flowers the cause?"

"They are, indeed! Your skills of perception are outstanding!" the swordsman exclaimed loudly again. "It is an ancient flower known as Asura crown. The flower itself isn't poisonous; rather, the fungus that parasitizes it is the source of the disease."

My bad feeling earlier had been right on the money. The reason the disease hadn't spread immediately after the ruins had stopped functioning was because it had taken time for the flowers to spread.

"The flowers are growing across a considerable area of the mountain, though," I said. "It will be difficult to exterminate them all."

"We have no other choice. That is why we have split up to investigate."

"Did the people who preserved this flower not have a measure in place to deal with it if it started to spread?"

"It's worth investigating the possibility, however, so far, no solution has been found to deal with it other than the cure."

That wasn't just something he'd been told—he knew it firsthand.

"There are monsters on this mountain, so the best thing to do would be to inform the Adventurers Guild and gather people to help…but it would be difficult to get together enough people with blessings resistant to disease."

"You should not bother with that," the man replied. "This disease penetrates blessing resistances."

"It penetrates resistances?! Then was it artificially created using magic?!"

Naturally occurring diseases, no matter how infectious, couldn't penetrate the resistances and immunities of blessings. Even weak resistance at skill level 1 could stop infection from something as

dangerous as pneumonic plague by 90 percent, and an intermediate resistance could prevent it entirely. Stronger resistances were only needed for diseases imbued with magic.

"Leave the flower to me," the man said. "You should focus on caring for the sick as an apothecary."

"…I see. All right. I don't know anything about this 'Asura crown,' so it probably is best I leave it to you."

We'd been talking for a little while, so the chimeras had probably gotten far enough away by now.

"In that case, I'll go back to gathering plants… So far, we've been giving patients medicine to reduce the fever and pain, something to restore their energy, and a hangover cure to improve water circulation in their bodies. There shouldn't be any problems with that, right?"

"It seems you've got a good grasp on it. Additionally, the fungus that has grown in patients' bodies can spread through the air while they are symptomatic, so you should make sure to open windows while caring for them."

"Got it. I'll do my duty as an apothecary."

"Yes. We shall both carry out our roles."

And with that, the conversation came to a close, and I left.

* * *

After walking a short distance away…

"So are you going to show yourself?" I called out to the presence in the trees.

"He is a little too bold, wouldn't you agree?"

A young man with dark skin and a gentle expression stepped out.

It was a familiar face.

"You showing up here is as good as announcing that swordsman is the Demon Lord Taraxon. Isn't it…Shisandan?"

Shisandan was a general of the demon lord's armies, who we'd once fought. It was just as Yarandrala had said—the demon lord and Shisandan were traveling across this continent as humans.

“Don’t play coy. You were already convinced he was Lord Taraxon, weren’t you?”

“I suppose… Talk about shameless, though. If you hadn’t gone out of your way to use the names Taraxon and Bui, no one would’ve been the wiser.”

“Hiding one’s name and scurrying around in the shadows is not how a hero conducts themself. Besides, I respect this man named Bui. He was noble and beloved by all.”

“And yet you ate him.”

“Yes, I did. This form was convenient for blending in amongst humans… Why does that anger you, Gideon? You never met Bui, did you?”

“It’s just irritating seeing you look like that while talking about someone you killed.”

“Haha, life and death are but small parts of an infinite journey. It is no different than day becoming night or night becoming day.”

I’d heard something similar before. From Demis.

“You Asura fight against Demis, but your values aren’t so different.”

“…Hmmm.”

Shisandan didn’t seem to have expected that response, but I continued questioning him, unconcerned.

“Is your goal the Sacred Avenger?”

“I suppose there’s no point in hiding it with you. Yes, you are correct.”

“I know an Asura was the original Hero, but what are you planning to do if you get the sword now? The war’s over.”

“We understand that, of course. Our battle under the banner of the demon lord has ended in defeat, so now we rise to challenge Demis as rightful heroes.”

“If you want to fight Demis, then go right ahead… But if you’re going to get us caught up in it again, I won’t hand over the sword!”

“…For now, we should both prioritize dealing with this sickness.”

“Did you really cure the sickness? As far as I’m concerned, the possibility remains that you were the ones who brought it here.”

“Of course not. It is a disease that is dangerous even to Asura.

We cannot stay safe from it without magic, either.”

We stared each other down for a few more seconds.

Then…

“Standing around like this is a waste of time.”

“Yes, I agree.”

We turned away at the same time and walked off in opposite directions.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

The evening of the following day, Torahime, Habotan, Ruti, Tisse, Rit, and I all gathered at the apothecary.

“I cannot believe the demon lord had already reached Zoltan.”

Torahime was shocked. Understandably so.

“What of Ms. Yarandrala?” Habotan asked.

“When she heard the disease could penetrate resistances from blessings, Yarandrala decided to go somewhere else to wait and see if she had already been infected.”

“Penetrating resistances from blessings… Th-then should this one do the same?!”

“You’re a demon, not a human, so you’ll be fine.”

“Oh, that is true!”

Habotan breathed a genuine sigh of relief.

This demon lord is pretty adorable.

“Are you okay, Big Brother?”

“Rit and I have been borrowing Yarandrala’s earrings that have a resistance to sickness, so we’re fine. Your Healing Hands would probably be able to cure it, but there’s a chance even the Hero blessing’s immunities might not be able to prevent infection, so be careful.”

“I will.”

A disease that could even infect the Hero… I never would have thought there was something like that in the world.

“Even if she were infected, with Ruti’s vitality, I imagine she would recover before there were even any symptoms…,” Torahime

said. “Red, please tell me more about Demon Lord Taraxon’s movements.”

I nodded, then began my explanation.

“The demon lord is apparently after the Sacred Avenger. They didn’t seem to be aware that either you or Habotan are here, and they weren’t searching for you… Perhaps with the demon lord’s armies shattered, there isn’t a reason to capture Habotan anymore.”

“I cannot say without further information, however if the demon lord has come here, then it is safe to assume his armies in the dark continent have also been shattered. The secret technique that allows Asura to resurrect cannot function smoothly without the presence of Taraxon, the Asura king, so there is no telling when or where they might revive. It could be anywhere from several years to several decades from now.”

“I see. I’d always wondered how the demons of the dark continent had been able to get the upper hand over ageless, immortal Asura, but I guess it isn’t quite so unbeatable an ability without the Asura king.”

Taraxon had defeated the rightful demon lord and stolen his power, but in almost every age in the past, Asura had been under the thumb of that very same power. In the former demon lord’s armies, they had been treated as outsiders akin to orcs and monsters.

“After destroying the country he ruled, no doubt he is trying to rebuild the demon lord’s armies with the power of the Hero’s artifacts.” Torahime scoffed. “He’s absolutely shameless.”

“You think he wants to use the Hero’s power for that…?”

Something about it felt off. Did that really sound like something the Taraxon I had met would do? I’d only spoken a little with him… but he had a strong spirit that reminded me of the first Hero.

“Um.” Tisse raised her hand once we’d settled down from Torahime’s comment. “Why is the demon lord attempting to cure people afflicted by the sickness?”

“Shisandan said it was dangerous even to Asura, and he didn’t seem to be lying.”

“Can one really read the expressions of monsters capable of

transforming into humans? I fail to see their motives in curing the disease when they could have simply taken the sword and left Zoltan right away."

Tisse's words made sense.

"They didn't let their guards down, but the demon lord and Shisandan both showed themselves to me. Their goal in doing that was to convey an idea of mutual noninterference."

"Do you not think their goal was simply to keep you, a potential obstacle to their plan, away?"

Another reasonable interpretation.

"The flowers they called Asura crown spread for reasons entirely unrelated to their actions. I can't imagine that was a part of the demon lord's plan."

"Well, yes, that is true…" Tisse still seemed concerned.

"I understand how you feel, Tisse, but we don't know how to deal with the illness spreading. The demon lord's intentions are unclear, but right now, he's the only one who knows anything about this disease."

"I have never seen a disease like this on the dark continent, either," added Torahime. "Granted, I am not a doctor, so I do not know every disease."

"But as one of the top commanders of the demon lord's army, you would at least know if there was an illness going around."

"True. The demon lord's armies are not only made up of demons but also include humans from the dark continent. There would be a report of any disease spreading."

Yet only Taraxon and Shisandan knew anything specific about this disease.

"I'll fight as well, if it comes to that. It'll be all right," Ruti reassured Tisse. "But the Demon Lord Taraxon's forces didn't wage war because of a hatred for humanity, or because they wanted more land, or to obey their Divine Blessings. We're enemies, which is exactly why we need to understand Taraxon to figure out why we're fighting."

"Understand him, huh?"

Torahime and Habotan closed their eyes and seemed to delve into

their memories.

"Asura have opposed Demis and demons since long, long ago, when the Asura Hero's soul was stolen. But their struggles always ended in defeat. They were given the demeaning name 'Asura demons' to imply they were merely a subspecies of demons, and they were forced to serve as common soldiers in the demon lord's armies."

Demon was a term used to denote a race whose members all possessed the same blessing. Asura had no blessing, so they didn't actually fit that classification, but they were still considered a subspecies because they obeyed demons.

That said…if they had the same sense of justice as the first Hero, I was sure they were reluctant to serve as a tool for evil.

"So Taraxon defeated the demon lord and stole his power, then took up that mantle as an evil ruler fighting against humanity…? That's kind of strange."

"I do not know," Torahime said, her arms crossed as she thought.

It was something I'd always wondered about. We still didn't really understand Asura, the enemies of God.

"As Big Brother said, we need to stay alert and not let our guards down. There's still too much we don't know about the enemy to fight them," Ruti said, settling the discussion.

She really is reliable.

"Um, what about the sword?" Habotan asked.

"…Actually, I've hidden the sword somewhere already," I told them.

"You have? Really?!"

"Yeah. With the ruins nonfunctional, leaving it there would have been like leaving it out in the open. Shisandan tried taking it once already, so I hid it."

"Incredible, Mr. Red. Then everything will be fine!"

That was the reason I was feeling a bit calmer about this: I could decide for myself whether or not to give the sword to Demon Lord Taraxon.

Well, it is a big decision for the whole world.

It was probably something for Torahime and Habotan, or heroes

like Van and the others who'd saved the world, to decide…

* * *

"Everyone's gone home," I said to Rit, who was still sitting at the table.

"So Shisandan is here in Zoltan."

"Yeah… We spoke, and there's no mistaking it's him."

Rit stared at her hands on her knees.

Shisandan was her sworn enemy, the one who had killed her master, Gaius. He had also wrought such terrible damage to Loggervia as a general of the demon lord's armies.

"That bastard…!"

Rit's voice trembled.

He had taken someone precious to her. I couldn't understand everything she was feeling, though, since I wasn't from Loggervia.

I gently hugged her from behind.

"I said what I thought while everyone was here…but if you can't forgive Shisandan, then I'll fight with you when the time comes. Your feelings are important to me."

"Thank you, Red…"

Rit's tension dissipated, and she put her hand over mine.

"Even if they die, Asura will revive," she said. "But the pain and loss they experience in death are real."

"Yeah. It isn't as if they just never died. Where for us, we're reincarnated as different beings after we die, they just revive as their same selves."

"That being the case…I already got my revenge for Master in Loggervia. I know I killed Shisandan there."

"You sure did. I'm sure his head from back then is still lying beneath the ground in Loggervia."

That had happened when I had still been the knight Gideon and Rit had been the hero of Loggervia. It was a memory of a bloody wind raging across a battlefield.

"Then it's fine. I've taken my vengeance."

"Really…?"

Rit turned her head and kissed me softly on the cheek.

"It's because you're here for me that I can just be Rit."

"It's the same for me."

"Ehehe… Still!" Rit stood up, her usual cheerful tone back. "It's different if he comes for us! I'll mince him up until he never wants to revive again!"

"Haha, well, there's nothing else for it if he makes the first move. He got the drop on us last time, but this time we'll smash him with our teamwork."

"Our teamwork's even better now that we're about to get married!"

We both chuckled at that. Rit turned to face me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

"You were so far away last night, so I'm not letting you leave my side tonight," Rit whispered in my ear. She blushed and buried her face in my chest.

Whether the demon lord came or not, our blissful life remained untroubled.

If he tried to rob us of it…I wouldn't show him any mercy.

* * *

The next day, Red & Rit's Apothecary was incredibly busy right from the morning. Lots of people came to buy medicine for family members who'd fallen sick, but even more came to buy Loggervian heaters, our winter bestseller, as today was the coldest day of the season.

"Three heaters, please," one man said, setting them down on the counter.

"Sorry, but we're only selling one per person today."

"What? Why?!"

"Yesterday, we were so busy making medicine for the disease going around Zoltan, we didn't have time to get more of the ingredients for the hand warmers."

"Really? But it's so cold today, me and the guys were gonna skip work and drink at the bar."

Skipping work because of the cold to go and hang out at the bar? Zoltan really was as lazy as ever.

"A bar's better than being outside, isn't it? You'll be okay with one."

"Fine, I guess. Talking here's a waste of time, so I'm gonna go."

"A waste of your time…slacking off work to go to the bar?"

"Exactly. I *made* that free time for myself by slacking off work."

All I could do was grimace as he shamelessly admitted it.

Once the morning rush had passed…

"People here are hopeless."

"Right?!"

Torahime and Rit, who were organizing inventory in the back of the shop, came out with exasperated looks on their faces. That man hadn't been the only customer to want heaters so they could skip out on work to enjoy themselves, and the two of them had apparently gotten fed up listening to it.

Actually, no. Rit looked like she was enjoying it a bit. She had definitely adapted to the Zoltan mentality that slacking off wasn't such a bad thing.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself, Red," Torahime said, glancing at me.

Apparently, I had the same sort of expression on my face as Rit.

"The disease is really starting to spread. Your medicines are flying off the shelves."

It was the third day since Torahime had watched the store for us, and the illness was enveloping Zoltan.

"It is fortunate that the disease is generally not life-threatening… However, two people have died."

"There have been casualties…?"

"It is not a rumor; I know it from the water. The deceased were both children who had not awakened to their Divine Blessings. They were also naturally frail of constitution."

Torahime had been keeping a watchful eye through the water, wary of Taraxon. In the process, it seemed like she'd also been

detecting the movements of the people in Zoltan.

"I see…"

"Still, it is strange that an illness able to penetrate a blessing's resistance is so effectively blocked by the physical enhancements bestowed by blessings. Whether natural or derived from a Divine Blessing, those who possess sufficient vitality recover with two or three days of rest without any worsening conditions. It seems rather gentle for a disease created using ancient magic."

"Can you really call it gentle when people have died? …Though I get what you're saying."

If it was man-made, then it had presumably been created with a goal in mind—and for something like a disease, the only possible use was as a weapon. Even nowadays, particularly cruel generals sieging cities did things like hurl the corpses of soldiers or even animals into a fortress to cause the spread of disease.

"But this wouldn't be enough to cause a castle to fall."

"No." Torahime shook her head, not understanding, either. "Although the ancients were human, it would be fair to say they were almost a completely different race from humanity now. There are very few things about them I do understand."

Torahime had lived an incredibly long time, but even she hadn't been around during the age of ancient humans. At that time, the balance of power had been completely broken; ancient humans had been overwhelmingly superior, so demons had blended into ancient human society and operated behind the scenes. The demons from back then had also had completely different values than they did now.

The bell rang, and we stopped talking and looked toward the door.

"Good morning, Big Brother."

"Good morning, Ruti."

It was Ruti, carrying an empty basket on her back.

"Back from deliveries?"

"Mhm. But my plantation is completely out of stock now."

"Really…?"

"We can't make any more medicinal *chikuwa* bread, either…"

"Ah, because that can also be used to make painkillers."

The medicinal herb in Ruti's *chikuwa* bread provided a weak analgesic effect without any side effects, so there were people who needed it to make up for the shortage of normal painkillers. It was also true that taking medicine gave a certain peace of mind that could have an effect easing fevers and pain.

"Even the Hero can't defeat the disease."

"Yeah."

The Hero blessing had the power to heal individuals, but it couldn't cure a disease spreading through a whole town.

"Still, the medicinal plants you've grown and cared for have helped many people. You've even managed to reach people the Hero wouldn't be able to save."

With Healing Hands, Ruti could cure anyone she touched. However, that also meant she couldn't save anyone beyond her reach. There were people who had been saved by Ruti now who she only ever would have been able to help because she'd quit as the Hero.

"Thank you, Big Brother." Ruti smiled, looking slightly relieved. "But things have settled down at the plantation now. We've harvested everything that looked ready, so we can't do anything but tend to the next crop for a little while."

"It wasn't long ago you were worrying about not having enough demand."

"I know. It's a very complicated feeling."

"Well, it is a job where sales go up when people are in trouble."

It was an occupational hazard, not being able to be completely happy when business was booming.

"Anyway, with things having calmed down there, I went to check on Yarandrala," Ruti said.

"You did? I was thinking of going to check on her once we were done here… Is she doing well?"

"Mhm. Her symptoms were mild. There's still a chance she could infect others, though, so she said she's going to stay isolated until her magic can't detect it anymore."

"Okay… I was thinking of taking her something."

"She asked me to tell you that you don't need to come."

"I…see."

Since it wasn't serious, Yarandrala didn't need someone to nurse her, and I was sure she'd figure out something to do for food.

"It's a bit sad that she won't let us worry about her," Rit said, reading my mind. "Maybe we could at least slip a letter in through her window."

"That's a good idea."

We could go to deliver the letter together once we'd finished work.

"By the way, Big Brother, has Harmon come yet?" Ruti asked, looking around the shop.

"Not today, but this is around the time he usually comes."

That was the reason Torahime had come to the store as well. Yarandrala had wanted to meet him again, too, but she was sick, so there was nothing to do about that.

Harmon had settled into his work at the quarry, and he was apparently already as fast as a veteran cutting rocks with the saw.

With more people relying on him at work, it might be harder for him to easily take time off…

"I don't think so," Ruti said, shaking her head. "I went by the quarry and Harmon wasn't there."

"He wasn't?"

"I was planning to bring him with me when I came here."

"If he wasn't at the quarry, then did something come up?"

"The person at the quarry said he'd left to come here."

What? Had he taken a detour…? He'd been in the army for a long time, though, so he was pretty punctual, unlike most people in Zoltan. He'd made a promise to be here, so I doubted he would have gone somewhere on the way without a reason.

"That's…a little concerning."

Zoltan was certainly peaceful, but in this world dominated by Divine Blessings, the seeds of adventure were everywhere. It was possible Harmon had gotten caught up in some sort of incident. I thought it unlikely that Taraxon had made contact with him, though.

"No presence like Taraxon's has approached Zoltan. It is

impossible for such a person to slip past my senses," Torahime said.

"Can you find Harmon's location with that power?"

"Forgive me, but Taraxon and Shisandan's movements are my priority, so I can only sense others to a limited extent."

"That makes sense…"

"However, there might be important information gleaned from speaking to Harmon. I will search for him. I should have sufficient power remaining to trace his current location from where he left."

"I'm worried about Harmon, too, so I'll go with you. You won't be able to fight seriously while focusing on your tracking, right?"

"Do you think there is a chance of encountering an enemy that would really require me to fight seriously?"

"Always thinking about how to make it out alive no matter what happens is what it means to be an adventurer."

"I see… That is a notion that may be lacking in higher demons born with great power."

Having discussed it, Torahime and I prepared to leave, when…

"Mr. Reddddd!!!"

Someone burst into the shop.

"Megria! What is it? What're you all worked up about?"

Megria, who worked at the Adventurers Guild, had rushed in out of breath. She seemed to be in a terrible hurry and was gasping for breath.

"Are you all right? Here, have a drink."

"Th-thank you…"

Rit hurried over with a cup of water. Megria drank it all in one gulp and took a deep breath to calm down.

"So is there some sort of urgent task you need me to do?"

"Yes, a quest we can only ask of you, Mr. Red…"

A quest only I could do? Even though Zoltan's strongest adventurer, Ruti, was right here in the room?

"The Adventurers Guild would like to ask you to sort through the medicinal plants brought into the guild!"

"Huh?"

That was an entirely unexpected quest.

As an apothecary, I guess it wasn't really all that strange for them

to ask me, but the Adventurers Guild didn't generally hire outsiders for temporary jobs appraising items that had been brought there. And on principle, they never asked registered adventurers like me to do any jobs that involved paying out rewards to other adventurers.

"We are aware this is not recommended, but everyone who usually handles it is currently out sick!"

"Ugh, that's terrible."

"We would undoubtedly fall behind if I handled it by myself, but we cannot afford to delay the quests for medicinal plants and herbs right now!"

That was true. It wasn't an issue for me since I could gather my own ingredients, but other apothecaries didn't have that option. Without adventurers gathering and distributing plants, there would be a shortage of medicine.

"The adventurers also understand there is currently a shortage of medicine… However, gathering medicinal plants is already a relatively low-paying quest, so if there is a delay in getting the rewards on top of that, fewer people might be willing to take it on."

"…I see. The thing is…"

I was concerned about Harmon. What should I do…?

But while I was hesitating, Ruti confidently spoke up.

"Big Brother, Torahime and I will search for Harmon. You go to the guild, and Rit can watch the shop here."

Interlude

Gem Beast, Reprise

In the west of Zoltan was a village in the mountains. It was situated in the most difficult-to-reach area in the entire Zoltan region, and in fact, it could barely even be called a village. It wasn't the sort of place where anyone spent their entire life, and it was incredibly rare for a child to be born there. The village had a small-scale jewel mine and a population that mainly consisted of migrant workers and the merchants who sold to them, though they only stayed there temporarily.

Atop the wall surrounding the village to keep out monsters stood a man holding a bow. He was big, with a body forged in a violent world and a fierce visage from the long blade scar that ran across his lips.

He was a thug who had been sent here to serve time.

And right now, the man quivered in terror of what lay before him.

"There's no way we can win against that monster…"

The ground shook and trees toppled as the giant monster approached. It had a shape that resembled a turtle, but its shell was embedded with countless jewels, and its cry was like gems crunching.

A gem beast. Nigh-invincible creatures that had once ravaged huge armies of wood elves.

Standing in terror, unable to do anything in the face of that monster…I could understand exactly how they must have felt.

"Haaaah!!"

I raised my voice, trying to drive away the cloud of despair, then drew my sword and leaped toward the gem beast before me.

"Gyah?!"

My sword shattered the gem beast's giant head, and it raised an

unpleasant cry, like jewels being shattered. It fell to its knees from the attack that had shattered its skull, then started regenerating right before my eyes. It was an impossible ability that absorbed magic and healed even lethal wounds.

When I'd fought it before, I'd had my brother, Rit, and everyone else, and it had still been a difficult battle.

"Ms. Ruti!" Harmon shouted with both shock and joy.

""Raaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!""

The people of the village, who had felt hopeless not so long ago, shouted energetically.

"I'll stop it," I called out. "But…"

Harmon fought, sword in hand, at the entrance to the village.

The gem beast wasn't the only monster attacking.

"Gyagya…!!"

A band of goblins snarled and gnashed their teeth menacingly, attacking Harmon and the people of the village. The weapons they were using weren't the goblin blades riddled with holes they usually preferred, but thin, sharp crystal knives and small round shields—gear well suited to the short and light yet sturdy goblins.

They had attacked the village this morning. The villagers were mostly people who had experienced violent lives, so looking down on mere goblins, they had faced the attack with crude weapons…but the monsters had been far stronger than expected.

Finding themselves in trouble, the villagers had sent a fleet-footed woman who had once been part of the Thieves Guild to ask for help from the guards and the Adventurers Guild. However, both were low on manpower with the sickness going around, so there had been no ready fighting force able to respond right away. It was a village full of ruffians up against goblins, so they likely hadn't grasped how much danger the villagers were in.

Grasping at straws after her request for help had gone unanswered, the woman had asked her childhood friend who'd survived the war against the demon lord's armies—Harmon—for help.

But by the time she had taken him back to the village, the situation had worsened.

"Y-you little shit!!"

A woman was swinging a spear at a goblin, but the monster was playing with her, swiftly darting in and out. It was a tactic of attacking and retreating in order to wear down the opponent.

These goblins had learned basic swordcraft theory…and the one that had taught it to them was undoubtedly the ogrekin in command. If I hadn't come, Harmon and everyone here would have been wiped out.

An ogrekin and a gem beast. They must be remnants from the ancient human ruins—opponents even a veteran soldier like Harmon couldn't handle. The ogrekin's blessing level was high from fighting monsters in the mountains.

The ogrekin formed a seal and intoned a spell in a cracked voice.

"Power of Bear!"

Its strategy was to let the goblins attack while providing support magic from behind. That wasn't an idea a normal ogrekin would ever come up with. I couldn't do something as incredible as figuring out someone's blessing just from their hand motions like Big Brother was able to, but I could tell the ogrekin and gem beast each had multiple blessings.

"Aaagh!"

The woman who'd been fighting fell, her lower leg cut by the goblin.

"Like hell you are!"

I threw the sword in my hands at the goblins rushing toward the woman, splitting them in two and leaving my sword sticking out of the ground.

"Are you all right?!"

Harmon immediately followed my lead.

The woman would be fine, but the battle on Harmon's side was in a bad state.

I want to help…!

"Grrroooh!"

The gem beast charged, and I leaped into the air and punched it in the face. If I didn't stop it, the entire village would be trampled beneath its feet.

I can't move from here!

"Raaaahhh!!"

Harmon was doing well, but fighting alone while protecting your allies wasn't how soldiers knew to fight. He needed help.

"Torahime!"

"Understood. However, I can only use weapons!"

Torahime grasped a naginata she had summoned by magic and leaped into the band of goblins, cutting them down one after the other. Right now, she couldn't use her true powers granted to her as the heavenly king of water, but she disrupted the enemy formation and seemed to make it easier for Harmon to move.

"Graaaaah!!"

"So you are going to fight?"

The ogrekin pulled the goblins back, intent on fighting Torahime itself. Seeing her strength, it must have judged that they couldn't win against her.

It was the calm judgment of a commander…

"It'll be fine leaving that to Torahime."

I'll focus on the gem beast.

I could fight without worrying because I had comrades.

I picked up a steel sword from the ground and pointed it at the monster. My blessing hadn't grown at all—but *I* had. Even without my brother here, I wouldn't lose to anyone attempting to trample over our lives.

The strength of my New Truth reflected the strength in my heart.

I am Ruti Ragnason.

A simple person living a quiet life here in Zoltan!

Chapter 4

The Story of the Hero and the Demon Lord

The next morning, at Red & Rit's Apothecary.

"—And then, Ms. Ruti defeated the gem beast," Tisse said, reverence in her voice. "That's Ms. Ruti for you."

The store was closed today, but we'd given up our day off to handle all the orders coming in from clinics treating the sickness.

"I was just as surprised when I heard the story from Harmon yesterday. Defeating a gem beast alone like that is incredible," I said.

"Were you worried about her?" Tisse asked.

"Of course I was worried!"

"Then perhaps you can understand how we felt when we heard about you fighting Demis."

"I know, I'm sorry." I bowed my head apologetically.

Tisse and Rit both smiled at that.

"Ms. Ruti and Torahime have not come back since then."

"They investigated the gem beast's corpse, and from what Harmon said, they found something they wanted to look into."

"Is that so?"

"I don't know any details myself…," I admitted. "Harmon relayed their message, but they couldn't really share the specifics of our situation or the secrets of the world with him."

"That is true… Regardless, it is a happy feeling seeing Ms. Ruti choose to act on her own without any input from the rest of us," Tisse said warmly.

"Feeling a little lonely?"

"Yes, just a little… But I have my own goal, too."

"A goal?"

"For when the medicinal plantation gets bigger. I was thinking it would be nice to provide a place for the Assassins Guild's operatives

to work while they recuperate."

"Ahh. That's a nice idea."

"Assassins have a difficult job, and it weighs heavily on many people's hearts. By making a place for them here—in the Zoltan that I love, where they can live peacefully during times like that—perhaps I would lose fewer comrades."

It seemed even Tisse had found a goal for herself in Zoltan.

"Well, being a former Hero and former heavenly king, they should be fine even if the demon lord shows up."

"I suppose so."

I'd never seen Torahime go all-out in a fight, but putting it in human terms, a heavenly king of the demon lord's armies would be capable of crushing an army a million strong. Demis had presumably created the heavenly kings' blessings to recreate the life of the first Hero who fought himself rather than lead an army.

"Hehe, that's an interesting pairing," Rit said. "I bet it would give Demis a migraine."

"Hahaha."

Of course, God wasn't as human as that. But it was still fun to think about and laugh.

"Moving onto other matters, I came here because I received an important message."

"Oh?"

Tisse had also been laughing with us, but she suddenly looked serious.

I had just assumed she was here to ask about Ruti. We had sweets out on the table, and she was already on her second cup of tea. It certainly didn't seem like she had some urgent task.

"I ran into Madam Offler on my way here."

"Madam Offler… Then does that mean…?"

"It seems she has completed the designs for your dress and suit. I will look after the store for you, so why don't the two of you go to see them?"



Rit and I took Tisse up on her kind offer and headed out to Madam Offler's store.

The neighborhood was quiet due to the disease going around…or, no, I guess it was always like this on cold days.

"We're closed today and people can't get hand warmers, so everyone's staying inside," Rit explained.

Loggervian heaters started giving off heat as soon as the reagents were combined, so you couldn't stock up on them like you could with medicine. Technically, if you used magic to isolate it from the surrounding air, it should be possible to make one that only started heating up when you needed it to…but anything more than a brief delay and it would be more efficient to just warm yourself with magic.

"This disease is troublesome, but it's not so bad that it would shut down all activity around town. Seasonal illnesses like goblin fever and white-eye are a lot more dangerous."

"It's really infectious, though."

Even if Taraxon failed to eradicate the flowers, it wasn't really a deadly problem. But if it was possible to get rid of the disease entirely, then that would be best.

"…It's just…," I murmured.

"Hm? What is it?" Rit peered over at me. "You're making a strange face."

"I just feel a bit conflicted."

What sort of face am I making?

My thoughts were a little confused, and it seemed like I was smiling faintly.

"Taraxon, Shisandan, Ruti, Torahime, Yarandrala… Everyone's got so much to think about, and they're doing things all over the place. Meanwhile, we're on our way to the tailor to get ready for our wedding. It just reminded me that we really are trying to become normal people."

"…Yeah," agreed Rit. "I think the old me definitely would have gone with Ruti."

Demon Lord Taraxon was here. It was a huge incident…and yet, Rit and I weren't in the center of the action. Even at a time like this,

my brain wasn't in battle mode.

It would have been unthinkable back when I'd been Gideon…but I'd stopped being burdened by the feeling that I had to act whenever something was going on.

Even now, I would fight if I needed to. I had even crossed swords with Demon Lord Taraxon.

But it wouldn't be by my sword that any battle to change the world would be decided.

* * *

It wasn't long before we arrived at Madam Offler's Wonderful Clothes.

It had gotten cold recently, so there were a couple of groups of customers picking out winter outfits. Madam Offler looked busy dealing with them all by herself.

"Welcome, come in!" she called out.

Rit and I gestured to say we were fine waiting, and Madam Offler bowed her head apologetically.

"Business sure is booming," I said to Rit.

"Maybe it's because her store is on the higher end, but there's usually only one, sometimes two small groups of customers when I stop by. It's nice seeing it so busy."

"I wish more people knew about this place. Her clothes are tough, so they make good work outfits, too."

We chatted as we looked at the clothes, waiting for Madam Offler to be free.

"That's right! You have a good eye! The embroidery is a must!"

Her operatic voice carried clearly throughout the store.

Other customers seemed to be interested and glanced over, listening to her explanation.

Time ticked by as we waited, and Rit and I chatted aimlessly as we perused, enjoying this moment of doing nothing.

I felt like this was just another part of a happy life.

⁕ ⁕ ⁕

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's no problem," Rit said with a smile. "Red and I were having an enjoyable chat surrounded by all these lovely clothes."

Apparently, Rit felt the same way I did.

"So…you finished the designs?"

"Yes. I believe these outfits will suit your wedding nicely, but let me know what you think!"

Ms. Offler pulled out a sketchbook from behind the counter and opened it up for us.

""Oooh!""

A white dress and tuxedo—standard for a wedding, but Madam Offler's incredible attention to detail was clear in the design. They were both gorgeous!

"Rit!"

"Mhm, these are wonderful!"

I could see Rit standing in front of me in a white dress.

I think I felt my heart skip a beat.

Rit hid her grin behind the bandana around her neck.

"Good. I'm glad you like them… Your lives have been filled with adventure and excitement, as well as many joys and hardship. It almost feels like a miracle that, with everything you've been through, you would be getting married here in Zoltan."

Madam Offler was right. Rit and I had both had many branching paths in our lives. I don't know what the odds were that in all of that, we would both give up being heroes and settle down in peace here in Zoltan.

Or that we would reunite and fall in love…

"Being such a miraculous event, I thought it best to go with a more traditional design so everyone at your wedding will know at a

glance that *you* are the happy couple that's about to get married!"

Rit and I looked at each other and started laughing, unable to contain our joy.

I felt truly blessed in that moment.

"I'm so glad we came to you for this, Madam Offler. Rit and I would love it if you would make these clothes for our special day."

"Of course. Leave it to me!" she said reassuringly.

After that, we left the shop and stopped by the church and a few other stores to let them know when the clothes were expected to be done. We'd taken another step in our preparations.

The wedding would be two months and sixteen days from now.

All we had to do up until then was follow the schedule.

Right when spring came, we would reach another goal of our journey together…

* * *

It was already dark by the time we returned home.

The light was on in the shop, meaning Tisse must still be there.

I'll have to apologize to her…

"We're back. Sorry we're so late."

"Welcome back, Red, Rit."

"Welcome home, Big Brother."

"You were gone longer than expected, so we have made ourselves comfortable."

"Ruti and Torahime! You're back?!"

It wasn't just Tisse inside—Ruti and Torahime were there, too.

"I heard you defeated a gem beast… That was a shock. Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Fortunately, we made it in time, so there were no casualties."

I had meant it as a question of whether Ruti had gotten hurt, but she had taken it to mean whether she'd been able to save the others.

By quitting as the Hero, I felt like Ruti had become a *true* hero.

"Good job. But I was asking because I was worried about whether you got hurt."

"Oh… No, I wasn't injured at all."

"That's good."

But there was something I wanted to let Ruti know, just for her: *No matter what, I'll always be on the side hoping for your happiness.*

"So what were you investigating?" Rit asked Torahime.

"Ruti and I were investigating the meaning behind the gem beast's presence there."

"The meaning…? It escaped the ancient human ruins, didn't it?"

"It certainly did. However, why did it escape now, and why did the ancient humans create something so dangerous…?"

"You don't think they created it to efficiently raise the Hero's blessing level, like the ogrekin with multiple blessings?" I asked.

"It's too strong for that." Torahime shook her head. "It has too many abilities that would be unnecessary if it were fodder for the Hero."

"I suppose that's true…"

Then why?

"The gem beast is a logger," Ruti said confidently.

"Huh?"

Rit and Tisse both cocked their heads.

But…I understood.

"When we fought it the first time, I wondered what it used all the energy it got from consuming those jewels and creatures for…as well as what an iridescent ruby even is and why we got one from the gem beast."

"Mhm. You're on the right track, Big Brother. The gem beast exists to gather fuel for the ancient ruins. The legendary iridescent ruby is what fuels the facility."

The reason that gem beast had appeared at the Wall at the End

of the World was because Ruti, Shisandan, and I had wrecked the ruins, depleting their energy. And the reason one had shown up at the gem mine now was because the fight with Demis had done the same thing.

"We got an iridescent ruby from the gem beast's corpse again this time. Using that, it was possible to restore some of the functions of the ruins."

"You restored the ruins? Why?"

"To investigate Taraxon's goal. Based on what Harmon told us about Taraxon's movements, he's been on a journey helping people in need while gathering the Hero's artifacts. It isn't a demon lord's journey so much as a hero's journey."

"So that's what he's doing. I didn't sense any malice when I spoke with him, either."

"Torahime and I discussed it, and the conclusion we came to is that having been defeated as the demon lord, Taraxon has gone back to the natural state of the Asura. So if we can find out more about the actions of the ancient Asura who fought as heroes against Demis and the demons to recover the soul of the first Hero, we might be able to understand Taraxon's goal."

They'd figured all that out just from the gem beast… Ruti and Torahime really were amazing.

"That's great. So did you find out anything?"

"Yes. Living as long as I have, I know more about the ancient humans' technology than people do," Torahime said, continuing off from Ruti. "Those ancient humans were incredible. Even as a member of the opposing side, I cannot help but feel awe. I could not begin to guess how many millions of books would be needed to record all the information stored in those ruins… However, we were able to find the information we needed."

"And…?"

"The goal of the Asura is to annihilate Divine Blessings. Their method of doing so is to usurp the bond that links Demis to this world."

"Usurp the bond…?"

"What Taraxon did by killing Demon Lord Satan and stealing his

power, they intend to do to Demis."

"They want to defeat Demis? I don't know how strong the demon lord was, but they live in this world, too… That seems impossible."

"Defeating Demis physically would of course be impossible. Instead, they are trying to become gods themselves…thereby robbing the people of their faith. If they can make every human believe they have no need for God's Divine Blessings so long as there is an Asura Hero, then Demis will lose the bond that allows him to intervene in this world."

"So they want to replace God with hero worship?"

"As for whether that's possible…it seems even the ancient humans did not know. They were unable to make it a reality in the end, as hero worship was wiped out when the ancient humans became completely dominated by the battle between the Hero and the Demon Lord."

Torahime exhaled, then continued.

"Humans are a fearsome species. They surpassed God's expectations with the power of the true demon lord, and then when they lost that power, they did it once again through knowledge and inheritance. I can understand how even Demis had no choice but to eradicate humanity once."

"As a modern human, these stories of ancient humanity don't quite feel real," Tisse said with a shrug. "But if Taraxon's goal is to carry that plan out now, then it aligns with the actions of the Asura."

"Even usurping the demon lord and attacking Avalon?" Rit asked dubiously.

"If they were trying to recreate the legend of the previous Hero, then that could also be explained."

"What do you mean?"

"Unlike this generation, the previous Hero did not emerge until after the world was dominated by the demon lord. The Hero destroyed the demon lord and built a new empire, imposing order over a world that had lost the single unifying government holding it together."

"So the plan was that, after Taraxon ruled the world as the demon lord, a different Asura would emerge as the Hero to defeat

him and build their own empire!”

“However, his war as the demon lord failed, so now he has returned to his old plan, traveling the world and saving people equipped with the relics only the true Hero should be able to wield. If his goal in doing that was to guide humanity away from Demis, then it would also explain his actions while he was with Harmon.”

That was Demon Lord Taraxon’s goal.

The world was filled with adventure and battle.

There were people everywhere seeking a hero.

So if a hero without a blessing granted by Demis continued to save them, they would eventually come to rely more upon that hero than God…

“Taraxon and Shisandan are trying to usurp God by becoming the Hero, and they want to eradicate blessings from this world. If they succeed, the first Hero’s soul, which is sealed within my blessing, will also be released,” Ruti said, putting a hand to her chest.

A lot of this was conjecture, but considering everything we had seen the Asura do up until now, it all seemed to fit. Their opposing goals—sowing the seeds of terror as the demon lord while trying to understand human culture as the Hero—had made their actions difficult to understand.

“In that case, Habotan and Torahime should be safe.”

“Safe for now, perhaps, but at some point, he will come to slay us as the Hero,” Torahime said. “I will have to raise Habotan to be strong for that day.”

“You better not lose this time.”

“Of course not… Hehe, it is odd to hear encouragement from a human.”

I figured maybe I should tell Habotan the strategy I’d developed for fighting Asura when I got the chance.

A calm atmosphere settled over the room. If we knew their goal, then it was possible to devise countermeasures. Even Torahime looked visibly relieved.

“Big Brother, someone is coming,” Ruti warned sharply.

Her instincts were telling her this was no normal visitor. Rit and I quickly took up our swords, which had been resting behind the

counter.

"Taraxon?"

"Unlikely," replied Torahime. "It should be impossible for him to slip through my barrier and reach us here."

Something moved in front of the open door.

My nerves raced.

"Good evening, my beloved ones. I am pleased to be able to meet you like this."

Huh?

A chill went through my body.

I knew that voice, just as I knew that face.

On the other side of the doorway stood a woman with her eyes covered—Eremite, a cleric we had fought when we'd gone to an island with Tanta's family last summer. She had worked in the shadows to lure Tanta and his Cardinal blessing to the church.

However, this wasn't Eremite we were looking at right now.

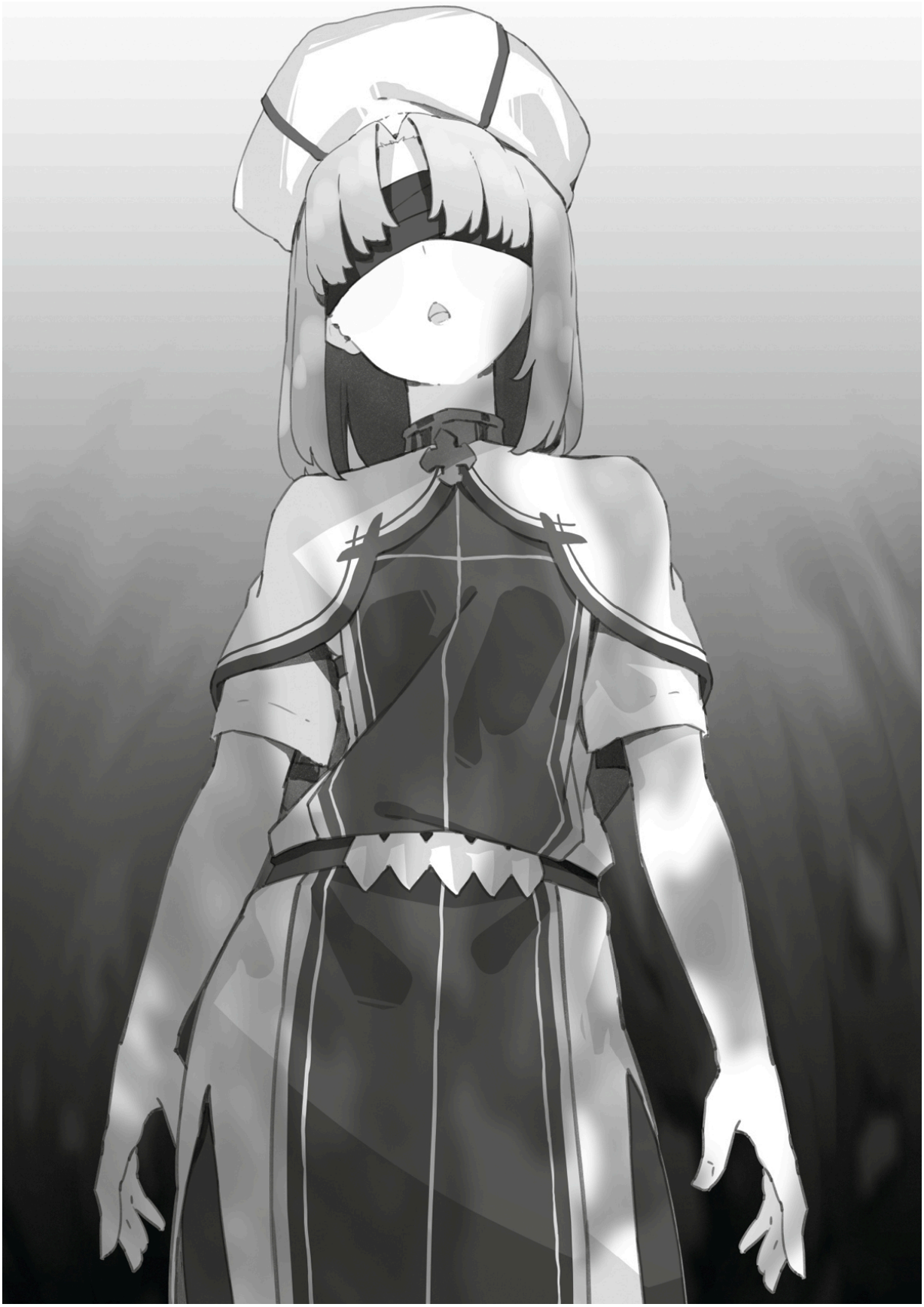
"Impossible."

Torahime sank weakly to her knees. She trembled and looked down, as if scared to look up at the woman's face.

Rit and Tisse didn't fully understand the situation yet, but they could both sense there was some sort of terrifying presence here.

I glared at Eremite.

"Demis…!"





If you asked me how I knew, I wouldn't have been able to tell you. But having fought him once, I was sure it was Demis himself inside Eremite.

✻ ✻ ✻

In the living room of the shop, God, in the form of Eremite, sipped at a glass of water that had been set out on the table. Her expression brimmed with nurturing love.

"Thank you very much. Water is a necessity for the human body. To wet a throat parched dry by selfish desire with cleansing water is an act of virtue."

"You don't say."

I had provided the glass of water out of consideration for Eremite's body, which had been brought here from the island she'd been on without sleep or rest. Unlike when Van had transformed to have an absurd blessing level of 99, Eremite's body was simply exhausted.

"You need not be so on guard, Ruti the Hero."

"I'm not the Hero anymore," Ruti said, her hand still resting on the hilt of her sword.

"…You seem a lot less distant than when you stole Van's body," I said.

Although Demis was still scary, it was just at the level of a fearsomely strong opponent. Even so, his presence had been too much for Torahime—a demon who existed to serve Demis—so she had retreated to the bedroom. There was a good chance she would forget who she was while God was speaking.

"I do not intend to intervene in the world, hence why I avoid doing so on principle. However, there is meaning in providing guidance through this one's Prophecy skill."

"…You're speaking through Eremite's consciousness?"

It was as if Eremite was translating God's words and speaking herself rather than us hearing the voice of God directly.

"Why did you appear before us?"

"My beloved ones, all I do is for your sakes."

"…!"

Ruti's expression shifted…into a look of intense rage.

"Ruti, this is Eremite in front of us here now. It's not like the time he stole Van's body; he's not interacting with us directly. Even if we attack, Eremite's the only one who will be hurt… Our swords won't reach Demis."

"I know…," Ruti answered bitterly.

"Guide, my child, your extraordinary wisdom pleases me."

"Spare us the pretense and tell us what you want."

"Using nothing but your own wits, you have discovered the ambition of the Asura. Your wisdom has allowed me to extend a hand to you in your endeavor."

So it was something to do with Taraxon…but what was he trying to say?

"You must protect the disease that you call Asura crown."

"You want us to *protect* a disease?"

That doesn't make any sense.

Demis continued smiling gently with Eremite's face as he continued.

"This disease is a blade created by the human demon lord of ancient past, who became frustrated by Asura continually challenging him."

"A blade created by the demon lord…?"

"Yes. The sickness spread by the flower infects people, elves, and Asura alike—yet only in Asura does it provoke violent symptoms and leave behind lethal aftereffects in the respiratory system."

Was that why it had been preserved in the ancient ruins…the Hero Administration Bureau? It would make sense that studying a weapon created by the demon lord would have fallen under their authority.

"Its nature penetrating Divine Blessings allows people all across the world to become carriers for the disease, leaving Asura with no way to avoid it. 'Asura crown,' as it is a crown of thorns for the Asura race."

"That's awful…"

Creating a disease to fight the undying, indestructible Asura… Unlike the demon lord's armies of today, which had invaded by force of arms as intended by Divine Blessings, this reeked of the malice of humans merciless toward their enemies.

"So why are you telling us this?" Ruti stared Demis down, unmoved even after hearing about this atrocity created by the ancient demon lord.

"My beloved Hero, I have always wished to be able to speak with you like this. However, it is better I not convey to you my boundless love while yet you live, so I shall simply answer your question."

"I think that's best. Just talking to you makes me keep reaching for my sword."

It had been a long time since Ruti had unleashed killing intent like this. Mister Crawly Wawly even retreated into Tisse's hood in fear.

"I should not directly intervene in this world. Nor am I, through my own power, able to eradicate the Asura who have become enemies of God. However, the Asura are also an incredibly powerful enemy of yours. You must protect the Asura crown."

"What?"

"Carry their seeds throughout the world and eradicate the Asura."

He's telling us to spread a disease?

"You gotta be—"

But before I could finish, Eremite slumped to the table like a lifeless doll.

"He just left as soon as he said what he wanted."

"That was unpleasant."

Neither I nor Ruti made any effort to hide our disgust as we glared at Eremite, who was sleeping in front of us.

"Now, now, I understand how you feel, but there's no point getting angry at Eremite, is there?" Rit said, taking Eremite's arm and checking her pulse. "Mhm, she's just unconscious."

Rit gently shook Eremite's shoulder and called her name.

"…Nhn. I fell asleep?"

"You're awake now. Are you all right?"

The moment she heard Rit's voice, Eremite stopped moving.

"Where am I? What are your intentions capturing me now, after

all this time?”

Hey, God! Did you just use her body and leave without explaining anything?

I *really* couldn’t bring myself to like Demis.

* * *

Late that night, at Red & Rit’s Apothecary.

“”Haaaah.””

Rit and I both yawned.

Torahime and Habotan were in the bedroom, and Eremite was sleeping on the sofa in the living room. The rest of us were sitting in chairs out in the yard looking up at the night sky.

Being in the presence of Demis had caused serious psychological damage to Torahime, so Habotan was sleeping with her until morning. Apparently, Mink was doing much better.

“Could you ever have imagined Eremite sleeping in our house?” I asked Rit.

“Of course not.”

We shared an awkward smile.

Eremite had been terribly exhausted when she’d been freed from Demis. It had been bad enough that we’d worried she might collapse and die out on the road if we made her leave. Demis sure was an irresponsible god, leaving a pious follower like Eremite in that state.

Or maybe he’d just known Rit and I would take care of her.

“…I…,” Rit started. “I don’t like the idea of spreading a disease. If Taraxon wants to get in the way of our happiness, then we can fight him head-on and kick his butt. But as a swordswoman, I can’t think of anything more embarrassing than defeating him by spreading a disease to everyone in the world!”

“I think so, too… But…”

“But what?”

Rit looked surprised to see me hesitating.

“On a personal level, I absolutely don’t want to do this. I’m an

apothecary, so I could never agree with something like spreading a disease. It doesn't sit right with me and seriously pisses me off."

"Then why are you hesitating?"

"I know *my* answer…but what about everyone else?"

"What do you mean?"

"If we don't do anything about the Asura, there may end up being another war that envelops the world like this last one with the demon lord's armies. Thinking about all the people who would die in that war, who could otherwise be saved by a disease with such a low mortality rate, I'm sure some of them think it would be worth it."

"So…are you saying you'll spread the disease?"

"No, my answer's still the same: We should eradicate it."

"Then why are you hesitating…?"

"I'm hesitating over whether we should be the ones making this decision."

It was a choice that would change the future of the world. That was why Demis had intervened, even if only verbally. The Asura were acting as heroes now, but their fight to overturn the very foundations of this world—one built upon the existence of Demis—would eventually involve every living person.

"Big Brother, dinner's ready."

Ruti and Tisse brought out bread, stew, and salad. They had kindly offered to make dinner tonight.

"Thank you."

The meal they'd prepared was simple but warming. Sitting out in the yard like this, that heat was especially gratifying.

Once she'd finished her stew, Ruti spoke up.

"I won't spread the disease. I don't want to involve innocent people all over the world in a fight between Demis and the Asura."

"I figured you'd say that." I smiled and patted Ruti's head. "What about you, Tisse?"

"I am an assassin, so I will kill by striking from the shadows or using poison. However…" Tisse paused, then continued in an emphatic tone. "Involving unrelated people would make me a failure as an assassin. Assassins kill only their targets. We may have an evil blessing used to end lives, but that is all the more reason why we

must retain our dignity. I do not think there is anything more evil than spreading a disease that will plague people forever just to continue killing Asura."

I'd figured Tisse would say that, too. In fact, probably all of my friends would.

"Thanks for dinner. It was delicious."

"You're welcome."

"I am glad you enjoyed it."

Ruti and Tisse smiled happily at the compliment.

It was such a happy scene.

But if we were weaker, if this moment could easily be taken from us and you asked me if I had any regrets after losing everything…

No, even then, I still wouldn't choose to spread it.

At the end of the day, my hesitation wasn't about what I would do in my position; it was about whether I had the right to make a choice that would affect the lives of people whose names and faces I didn't even know.

"Hmm? Thanks, Mister Crawly Wawly."

Mister Crawly Wawly was swaying gently on top of my hand. I rubbed his tummy a little, and he shook happily.

He's a kind spider.

"Maybe I should take a bit of a walk."

I thought it might help clear my head a little.

"Mind if I come, too?" Rit asked.

"Of course not."

"Me too," Ruti added.

"Sure, let's go for a walk together."

"Understood. Mister Crawly Wawly and I will watch things here, so please enjoy yourselves."

"Thanks, you two."

Mister Crawly Wawly hopped up and down energetically as if to say, "Leave it to us!"

* * *

The winter night sky was clear, and the two moons bathed the town in a cool light.

We walked leisurely down a path between trees and meadows, away from the residential downtown area and any houses.

"It sure is quiet tonight."

"Mhm. It's peaceful."

"I feel like it's been a little while since I took a walk with you and Rit like this, Big Brother."

"I guess it has, now that you mention it."

"Everyone's made lots of friends since coming to Zoltan."

We were walking together, but we were all living our own lives. I had my friends, Rit had hers, and so did Ruti. Even though we were close to one another, it seemed like lately, we had all started walking different paths with other people more often.

"But you're the most important person to me, Big Brother. And you're my dear friend, Rit."

"Thanks. And you're my precious, irreplaceable little sister."

"I never would have thought we'd get along this well back when you were the Hero," Rit said to Ruti.

"Yeah. I hated you back then."

"And now?"

"…I love you."

Hearing that, Rit excitedly wrapped Ruti in a hug.

…I'm so happy.

"Nice night for it."

A voice came from the darkness.

We immediately spread out and prepared to draw our swords if needed.

"Shisandan!!" Rit shouted.

"Who would have ever thought we would meet again like this on a night in Zoltan? Life is full of pleasant surprises."

Shisandan had discarded the guise of Bui and was facing us in his natural Asura form.

Did we miss him entering town after Torahime collapsed…?!

"I heard you're getting married."

"…"

“Do you not think I deserve an invitation? I had a hand in the two of you meeting, after all. Maybe I should offer a few words of congratulations as well.”

“Okay, I see you came to pick a fight,” Rit retorted. “In that case, I’d be happy to provide the beating you’re clearly after.”

She drew her sword and took her stance, ready to move at a moment’s notice. However, Shisandan didn’t touch any of the six swords at his waist. He merely crossed his arms and stood there calmly.

“You’re here alone? Taraxon’s not with you?”

“Yes. This was my own decision. I respect Lord Taraxon, but I am capable of deciding for myself what to do. Unlike the demons who submit to the demon lord.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a wise decision, though. Do you really think you can win against all three of us?”

Ruti didn’t have her sword, but she did have an easily concealed dagger intended for self-defense, which she drew. I unsheathed my sword as well.

“Don’t be so hasty. I’m after the Sacred Avenger.”

“The sword, huh?”

“It wasn’t in the ruins. You took it and hid it, didn’t you, Gideon?”

“You investigated the ruins?”

“I was surprised by what I saw. I would very much like to hear the details of what exactly happened down there.”

“I have no intention of telling you, or of handing over the sword.”

“If you’ve explored the ruins, then you should know full well that sword was made for us Asura,” Shisandan said, spreading his arms wide.

It was true: The first Hero had been an Asura.

But I could still confidently rebut him.

“You’re wrong. That holy sword was made for the first Hero, not for you.”

“I see…”

Shisandan drew his swords.

“You really think you can win like this?”

“I intend to fight as a true Asura Hero,” Shisandan answered

without hesitation.

He grinned fiercely.

Seeing his bold stance, I…

"…Rit, Ruti."

"Red, how should we do this?"

"Wait… Let me fight him alone first."

"Huh?!"

Rit and Ruti looked at me in shock.

"Why purposely choose to fight him one-on-one?"

"I can't really say…but if it looks like I'm going to lose, then help me out."

"…I don't know why you want to do this, Big Brother."

Ruti was at a loss.

Even I thought something like this was uncharacteristic of me.

"I just feel like, every once in a while, it might be good to swing my sword out of emotion."

And so, I faced Shisandan alone.

"How unexpected. I never took you for the type."

"Yeah… I guess I changed my mind seeing you willing to face near-certain death without hesitation."

I slowly inhaled.

It was a relatively low-stakes fight; if I ended up in danger, Rit and Ruti would help me out, and if I cut down Shisandan and killed him, he would just be reborn. Even if it *was* a battle of life and death, it wouldn't be the end for either of us no matter who won.

"…!"

I made the first move, charging straight in.

"Hmph!"

He easily blocked my attack.

I parried his counter on my return swing, then thrust at the opening in his defense…but it didn't reach, the result of the shorter length of my bronze sword and our height difference.

"Gah!!"

One of Shisandan's blades pierced my right shoulder. I pulled my sword back to block the follow-up attack, but I couldn't put enough strength into it with my wound and was knocked backward to the

ground.

"Red!!"

"Is that all you've got?"

"Dammit… Haah, haah…"

I took an Extra Cure potion from my pouch and drank it. The expensive consumable immediately closed the wound on my shoulder.

"Just stop this. You're no match for me as you are now."

There was an exasperated tone to Shisandan's voice.

He's right. It's a bit late now, but I didn't think I'd hesitate this much.

My wound had healed, but the pain remained… I could still remember the burning sensation of his blade sliding in.

My hesitation had almost gotten me killed.

"…My eyes are open now."

"Oh?"

"Let's change locations, Shisandan. I'll take you to where I hid the sword."

"Big Brother?!"

Ruti's confusion was understandable. But my doubts had cleared.

"…What are you planning?"

"I have no intention of handing over the sword. I just want to fight you using my full strength."

"That's quite unlike you…although humans undergo extraordinary change in certain moments."

I walked ahead confidently, Rit, Ruti, and Shisandan following behind.

I led us to a nice little hill that looked out across Zoltan. There was a boulder on the hill, and I moved it aside and took out a box.

"…I can't believe you would hide it in such an unguarded location."

Shisandan was speechless. There was something funny about that, and I let out a laugh.

"This sword has had that same unchanging view deep in those ruins for however many thousands of years now. But from here, it can watch Zoltan changing with the times, right?"

"What…are you saying?"

I took the sword in my hands.

"You can't use the Sacred Avenger. It's the sword of a Hero."

"You're sure about that?"

I took a bottle of wild elf medicine that lowered one's blessing level from my pouch and drank it all in one gulp.

Yep, still tastes terrible.

"Hah…"

The sensation of my Guide blessing faded, and the strength of the sacred sword flowed into me.

"Impossible! This is impossible!!"

"Some places you can only reach by experiencing doubt."

Shisandan was flustered. My mind, however, was perfectly clear.

In that moment, my swordsmanship reached the highest pinnacle of my life.

"My answer is unchanged. I will live a peaceful life here in Zoltan. That is my purpose in fighting—and in living."

"I don't understand what you're saying…but that power is the strength of the true Hero… You're not an Asura, so how can you wield it?"

"To borrow a quote from the first Hero, 'If you wish to save someone other than yourself from the bottom of your heart, that is qualification enough.'"

"…Ngh! Raaaaaaaah!!"

Shisandan bellowed and charged at me as I raised the sword. I took the middle stance—the most fundamental of stances and the very first one I'd learned when I'd joined the knights.

I parried Shisandan's first attack to the left, caught his second attack as he swung his other blade down from above…then scooped it up and blocked his third attack with his own sword. Seizing the opening in his defenses, I ran my sword from his left shoulder down to his side.

It had been an honest exchange of swords, as if we'd been performing a staged battle where we'd planned our moves out together in advance.

"I've lost completely…"

Shisandan fell to his knees with a look of total shock. His grip loosened, and all six of his swords clattered to the ground.

"Red!!"

"Big Brother!!"

Rit and Ruti cried out and ran over.

I put the sword back in its sheath and hugged them both.

"Wh-wha—?"

"B-Big Brother?"

"My doubts have cleared. I'm sorry for worrying you."

I turned to Shisandan.

"Looks like I win."

"Yes. There is nothing more to say. Humans… You really are fascinating."

"I really can't forgive the way you acknowledge people like that and still not hesitate to kill them. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have minded handing over the sword…but I guess if things were different, this whole war wouldn't have happened in the first place."

"Probably not…"

"The first Hero wasn't like that; he told us to live in peace. That's why I won't give you the sword. You're not fit to be heroes."

"…Hah, there's nothing I can say to that. How many centuries has it been since I felt so completely defeated…? This, too, is an invaluable experience."

Shisandan held his wound as he spoke, and he almost looked refreshed.

The fight was settled.

"Rit, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Huh?"

"You can kill Shisandan for revenge if you want. Or not."

"You seem even more incredible than usual somehow, Red."

In that moment, I was complete as a swordsman. It was a perfect balance that I would probably lose come tomorrow. It could even be said that achieving this state, where I felt like I wouldn't lose to anyone, was the life goal of any swordsman.

"Wait!"

As we heard that sharp voice, a dark shadow leaped out.

With lightning speed, a lone figure cut in between us and Shisandan.

"Taraxon!"

It was the young man I'd met in the mountains… The Demon Lord Taraxon in human form.

"You… You started this whole war!"

"Demon Lord Taraxon…!"

Rit and Ruti faced the man and readied themselves, but Taraxon just looked around at us, not drawing his sword.

"It's understandable that you are angry. However, even so, please allow me to speak… Would you mind lowering your swords?"

"Why? Asura revive even if they die, don't they?" Ruti answered sharply.

"Because Shisandan is my retainer. I don't wish to let him die."

"You say that now, but you have no qualms killing humans you've gotten along with…!" Rit said, glaring at him.

"In exchange, so long as you all live, we will give up on the holy sword. We shall not interfere with your lives."

"My lord?!"

Taraxon was looking me straight in the eye.

"What proof do we have you'll keep your word?"

"I swear it on the righteousness of the first Hero."

He's serious…

"What now, Rit?"

"…Hah."

There was a clang. Rit had dropped both her swords to the ground.

It was ritual of sorts she had developed to calm the impulses of her blessing.

"I killed Shisandan in Loggervia. If you two never appear before us again or try to invade the world of humans…then fine."

"You have my gratitude. We shall abide by our oath."

Taraxon, king of the Asura, bowed his head deeply to us humans.

"Lord Taraxon… Forgive me."

"Failure and defeat are opportunities to learn. It has been a hundred years—we should take this time to think carefully about our

way of doing things."

"Yes, sir."

It's all over.

But just when I thought that…

"No. That is an immoral decision."

A voice brimming with kindness and compassion rang out.

"So you're back, Demis. Sorry, but I've already decided not to spread Asura crown."

Demis had returned, once again using Eremite's sleeping body.

Showing up like this over and over is really killing the mystery of God.

"It is rather, thus why I believe it best not to intervene firsthand. Direct salvation from God is not love. A golden miracle becomes little more than dull brass when repeated in excess."

"So you can read minds, too? If you understand that, then why don't you just leave and never come back?"

"As you are now, you may be able to endure my voice."

"What?"

The world stopped. The scenery melted away. The only things moving were me…

"This is a surprise! I never imagined I would meet our nemesis here!!"

…and Taraxon, who was shouting wide-eyed.

Something shone above us.

"Don't look at the sky, either of you! Defend yourselves! It's coming!!"

The thoughts of the sacred sword rang in our heads.

"Taraxon! Do what it says!"

I held the sword overhead in a defensive stance, careful not to look at the sky.

"Welcome to my world."

It was a terrible blow. If it weren't for the sword, I would have been crushed against the ground. Taraxon endured it with gritted teeth.

"This is a gap in time, formed by stretching one second into infinity. It seems my words still contain slightly too

much information."

It eased a little.

The mental strain was unbelievable… The amount of information conveyed in that voice was so great, it could fry a human's brain.

All this just from hearing his words.

"I appreciate you showing yourself before me, Demis."

Taraxon transformed into the six-armed, three-eyed Asura king and stood in opposition to God. It was a showdown between God and Asura…

I really wish I wasn't involved, though.

"No, our battle is for your sake."

"Why are you dragging me into this?"

"The light of your soul is approaching that of the first Hero. Should you fully awaken as a Hero, you will not only be able to destroy the Asura but also rule over this world as a living god."

"I see. So whichever side Red takes will alter the fate of the world."

Demis and Taraxon both just seemed to accept it.

"Don't involve me in all this. If you want to fight, then you two should just do it yourselves."

I didn't know whether "you two" was really how I should be addressing God and the Asura, though.

"If you awaken as a true Hero like the first Hero—rather than those with the sham Hero blessing created by Demis—then that would be a monumental event that would change the world. People everywhere would wish for your guidance."

"My beloved child, for that reason, you must understand the significance of the battle between myself and the Asura. I have faith you will come to the right decision."

The two of them just kept talking without any concern for what I thought.

"Life is an infinite journey of birth and reincarnation. The world is unending strife and suffering."

"Souls continue their journey through that cycle, and in that process, they have the ability to forge a light. Souls that develop

such a light escape the cycle of rebirth and arrive in the realm of gods. That is the realm of enlightenment, nirvana, written in the church's holy scriptures. Though it is not a world of physical joy as they describe."

"The joy of gods is *vajrasukha*. It is not something that can be expressed in any words in the human world. All of the lives that continue in the cycle of rebirth are to be pitied. However, the gods do nothing more than watch over their suffering. I did not believe it right to claim to save the lives of the people by keeping the world as it was and merely waiting for a hero to show up."

"And so, Demis created blessings."

"Through Divine Blessings, I replicated the life of the Hero who had reached the realm of gods. To that end, I also created an accompanying cast of advisers and the demon lord as blessings. My world should always have been efficient."

"What arrogance. In order to save one Hero, you condemned everyone else to live side parts where they couldn't be saved. A world filled with naught but those damned from the moment they are born is sheer folly."

"No, my love is simply insufficient. Once my world is complete, it will be a place where more souls are saved than any other god's world."

"You are a fool, Demis! Do you see now, Red?! You could take the place of this prideful, asinine god to create a world where everyone might be saved."

"Red, my beloved child. Please believe in my love. A world for the sake of saving one person is more righteous than a world that saves no one."

You really explained it all in depth for me, huh? In which case, my answer is…

"To hell with both of your choices! I'm getting married to Rit!"

"…What?"

"…Huh?"

God and the Asura king were both perplexed, but I no longer had any doubts. I didn't need either of their guidance.

"This is *my* happiness! *My* reason for fighting! The goal of *my* journey!"

"Are you sure you're not simply overwhelmed? This is a decision that will determine the fate of every person who lives in this world."

"You are the only one whose soul approaches that of the Hero. Please, I ask you to reconsider."

"My answer's the same no matter how many times you make me say it! *I don't care about your fight!*"

Maybe my shouting drove the point home, because it felt like the pressure bearing down on me from God weakened a bit.

I lowered the sword I'd been holding overhead and stood up straight, my head held high. There was no need for me to cower any longer—not even in the face of God.

"I am going to be married to Rit for all my days, make sure my sister Ruti's life is filled with happiness, and enjoy spending time with all my friends here in Zoltan. That is my joy and goal in life! You got a problem with that?!"

"Those are not the deeds of a Hero."

Demis's voice grew louder, but it didn't have the power to bend my will. He sounded flustered. It was as if God himself hadn't expected things to go like this.

Hahaha, this is exhilarating.

"There's no room for *my* happiness in the world you're talking about. All you think about is souls after dying, and nothing about the joy of actual people living in this world right now."

"What is this power…? Don't tell me…"

"Neither of you consider people's happiness while you're deciding everyone's fates, so I reject both paths!"

The answer I had come to when I'd been struggling over what to do about the Asura crown was that I didn't want to make Rit and Ruti sad. That was it. And that was everything to me. If the people I cared about would feel guilty every time they saw someone sick, then I would eradicate Asura crown.

"My life is my own! And the same goes for everyone else! Everyone is fighting to find happiness in this world filled with strife! The fate of the world should be decided by the will of the people living there!" I shouted.

In that moment, a blessing was born inside of me:

Mumyou. "A path without light."

If the Hero was how a person became a god, then the demon lord was someone who guided them to stay human.

"A Hero's soul coexisting with the demon lord's power…"

"How can you possess two contradictory powers?"

Neither of them understood humans at all.

"That's what it means to be human. You never had to create the Hero and Demon Lord blessings in the first place." I looked up at Demis and pointed to my chest. "They've both been right here all along."

I knew why a true Hero had never been born through Demis's method: Because the Hero blessing had only retained the righteousness of the first Hero. He had also struggled and doubted himself, and he'd overcome all of that.

Just then…

"Why?! How?! I do not understand!"

A booming voice echoed around the space.

"Gah, guuuhhh?!?!"

Taraxon groaned. I felt like I would lose consciousness, too…but if I did, my soul would be crushed!

"I loved them! No! I was wrong! I hurt them! It wasn't supposed to be like this!"

God was doubting himself.

…Ahhh, I see.

Demis was a human who had been called a hero in another world. He had died and become a god, and in his kindness, he'd thought long and hard about how to save as many people as possible. And somewhere along the way, he had forgotten why he'd become a hero in the first place.

I have to stop him… Make him realize…!

"We have to do something…"

"Red, can you use the sacred sword's power?!"

"I can't even lift my arms… I can't swing the sword like this! You're the Asura king, right?! Is there anything you can do?!"

"I'm doing it already! Is this just how terrifying it is for a god to feel doubt?!"

Closed off in this divine realm, Taraxon and I would both be crushed to nothing if we had to continue listening to God's lament.

What should I do…?!

"Red…!"

"Big Brother…!"

I heard voices somewhere far away.

"Throw me!"

Sacred Avenger's shout echoed in my head.

"Taraxon! Lend me your strength!"

"Ngh! Raaaaaaaah!!!"

Taraxon's magic power pushed back Demis's voice ever so slightly. Using that brief window, I gathered the last of my strength and launched the sacred blade with all my might in the direction of the voices.

Without the sword's protection, the burden on my body increased.

But I can't fall. If I die here…nobody will be saved!

* * *

This is the tale of how a hero was saved.

Holding the sacred sword in that world frozen in time, Ruti unleashed the entirety of the Hero blessing inside her.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!!!!!!!"

Her scream was so loud, it sounded as if she would rupture her vocal cords. She swung the blade with all her might to save her brother, who she loved more than anything.

The will of the first Hero residing in the sword and the soul of the first Hero sealed within the Hero blessing were united. The sword made by God, the will and soul of the first Hero, and the strength of

Ruti the Hero's demon lord power—everything combined into a single attack that tore through Demis's realm.

Having used the last of its power, the sacred blade crumbled.

"Ah... Aah..."

Demis's presence pulled back from the world.

"Try again, and follow any one person's life from start to finish. The joy and sadness, and the doubt, too. If you can remember what it means to be human…then you should also be able to remember just what it means to be a hero," Red said to the withdrawing god.

"..."

There was no response.

However, that night, every living creature with a blessing felt a slight sense of comfort, as if they had just been freed.





Epilogue

The Couple's Goal

Two months and sixteen days later.

Morning, in the bedroom of Red & Rit's Apothecary.

"Done."

I was standing in front of the mirror, making sure my brand-new white suit was on just right.

"…Is it really okay like this?"

I got a little nervous when I stepped away from the mirror.

It feels like my tie isn't quite straight. Maybe I should double-check…

"Big Brother."

Ruti opened the door without knocking and quickly came over, walking around me in a circle.

"Mhm. Perfect."

"Ah… You could tell I was a bit unsure?"

"I expected it. You often doubt yourself, Big Brother." Ruti smiled.

She saw right through me, even the lame parts.

Feeling a little embarrassed, I looked away, scratching my head.

"Let's go."

"Y-yeah, we better."

Ruti pulled my hand, leading me out of the room…

"Oh, just one sec."

"?"

It looked like…there was a wrinkle in the bedsheets. It might upset Rit when we got back…

"Big Brother, you won't make it in time if we don't leave soon."

"All right."

I'd been scolded by Ruti.

Pushing down the restlessness bubbling up inside me, I finally left

the house.

✻ ✻ ✻

Side by side with Ruti, I walked down the same Zoltan road I always did.

Winter had passed, and it was a nice day that felt like spring. A cat was sleeping comfortably on top of a fence. I could feel Ruti's warmth holding her hand.

"Even after today, I want to hold hands like this while we walk," she said.

"Of course. You're my precious little sister."

"Mhm. And you're the most important person to me."

Ruti smiled, her cheeks slightly red, as we walked through the neighborhood.

On that day, Ruti's blessing had disappeared along with the Sacred Avenger. The first Hero had finally been freed from his incredibly long fight.

Ruti still had the demon lord power New Truth, though. She couldn't use the Hero's skills like Healing Hands any longer, but she was an even stronger fighter than before and was still active as Zoltan's strongest adventurer, working together with Tisse.

Needless to say, their herb plantation was running smoothly as well. Word was that the Merchants Guild and the Adventurers Guild were eyeing her for a leadership position. Ruti wasn't on board yet, saying it was still too early, but she wasn't as opposed to it as Rit had been. I had a feeling she would eventually do what she could for Zoltan from a position of authority.

Ruti had become able to love the world she lived in.

✻ ✻ ✻

We arrived at the chapel, and I saw that our Zoltan friends were already there.

"The leading man takes the stage!!" Gonz said with a whistle.

Tanta and Mogrim cheered and celebrated.

"You're awfully early, aren't you?! The ceremony hasn't even started yet!"

"On a happy day like this, there's no way I could sit around the house waiting!"

"No alcohol until the banquet starts, Brother!" Nao warned, her arms crossed.

"I—I know! Ain't that right, Storm?!"

"Y-yeah!"

Gonz and Storm responded hurriedly.

Just then, a man with the glasses of an alchemist and a portly fellow walked over carrying a bag filled with bottles of wine.

"Hey! Gonz, Storm, Mido. We went and bought the wine you asked for! They even gave it to us for free when we said it was for Red's wedding, just like we planned!"

"D-dumbass! I told you, not now!"

"I'll have you know I was against this!"

Gonz and Mido argued frantically.

I knew it… They were just planning to drink and party.

"You two! This is Red and Rit's special day!"

Gonz and Mido slumped, scolded by Nao.

The two arrivals were the Alchemist Godwin and the ax demon Frank, Habotan's attendant, who had returned from trading with the zoogs. Apparently, the two of them had become friends somewhere along the line.

It was a strange feeling, seeing the two former Bighawk underlings smirking together like that.

"Hey, Boss! You're really popular, you know that?" Godwin called out to me.

The two of them were in high spirits, and Frank grinned as he showed me the bag filled of wine and all sorts of other things.

"The whole neighborhood's in a festive mood for your wedding."

"Hehe. Thanks to that, everyone's a lot more trusting when I say I'm a friend of yours, Boss. Makes business a lot easier."

"It was only a short while ago that I was living in hiding. Now

people are even waving me down and asking me to come check out their shops," Frank said, his large belly shaking happily.

"But if you do anything bad, I *will* destroy you."

"I—I know. You don't have to remind me, Ms. Ruti."

"I would never do something so stupid as try to commit a crime in a town with you in it, milady."

The two of them hurriedly shifted into an obsequious tone at Ruti's warning.

Thinking about the fight with Bighawk sure took me back.

"Mr. Red!!" a cheerful voice called out.

"Al! You came, too?!"

"Yes, sir! This is you and Ms. Rit's special day, so I wanted to celebrate with you!"

Even the hero of the Bighawk incident had come—Al the Weapon Master. The timid half-elf boy living in Southmarsh was now a rookie adventurer sensation known in all the surrounding countries.

"They're even talking of promoting me to B rank."

"B rank already? That's incredible!"

"It's all thanks to you and Ms. Rit teaching me the sword that I could grow this strong. So I brought a few gifts to celebrate your wedding!"

"I can't wait to see them!"

"I'm glad!"

There was a strength in his words. He wasn't just a child anymore.

And speaking of growing up, there was one other person there as well…

"Al!!"

"Tanta!!"

Tanta rushed over from where he'd been with Gonz and the others.

"It's been ages!!"

"Yeah, it really has!!"

"I finally connected with my blessing, too!"

"Really?!"

Tanta had started working as a carpenter, and his boyish face had

grown sharper and more masculine. He'd also put on a bit of muscle. It seemed like he had a good handle on the impulses of his Cardinal blessing, and he even stood out when working with first-class craftspeople.

The two of them had been best friends, but now they were living completely different lives far apart. Yet even now, they were able to laugh and smile together without reserve when they saw each other. Their friendship hadn't faded at all.

I smiled at their reunion and quietly slipped away.

"Red."

"Dr. Newman!"

It seemed like even Dr. Newman had come.

"I thought I should come early, but it seems everyone's already here. It really would be nice if they put this much effort into their normal jobs."

"Hahaha. That's asking too much for Zoltan."

"I suppose so."

The Asura crown disease, which had been causing Zoltan so much trouble, had been safely eradicated. Taraxon and Shisandan had completely eradicated the flowers causing the sickness and freely shared all the cure they'd had.

After that, it seemed like the two of them had departed from Zoltan.

Annoyingly, though, they had left all the Hero's artifacts in our home. In their own way, it was the logical conclusion before setting out on their own journey again, but it was a hassle for a guy content living as an apothecary out on the frontier.

…Is some future Hero going to end up coming to my store to search for the legendary gear?

Maybe now was the time to work out what to say to them if that ever happened.

"Big Brother, it's almost time."

"Whoops. Right. Thanks for coming, everyone, and I'll talk to you all more later."

✻ ✻ ✻

The small church in our downtown neighborhood was normally so plain and tranquil, but today it was splendidly adorned with a huge number of flowers. We didn't enter the magnificently decorated chapel, though. Instead, I turned right in the hallway just before it and went into another room.

"Red! You're finally here!"

"You kept us waiting."

"We thought you would be here earlier."

"You look wonderful, Mr. Red!"

Yarandrala, Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly, Torahime, and Habotan were all there. Not to mention…

"Rit…"

Rit was there in her white dress, sitting in a chair with her back to me. When I said her name, she slowly stood up and turned around. Madam Offler's pure white wedding dress was truly wonderful…but it was all there just to emphasize Rit's own beauty.

Everything and everyone else paled in comparison. Eyes like the sky. Flowing blond hair. A mouth that conveyed the strength of her will. Her toned, shapely physique. Lithe, supple legs…

She was gorgeous.

"What do I do?" Rit said, quickly covering her mouth.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You look so handsome I can't help grinning, but I don't have a bandana to hide it."

Seeing Rit blush, I couldn't help blushing, too.

"The preparations are complete, so we will all go to the hall."

"Yes. All that's left is for you two to go over the schedule together."

"Let's go, Ms. Ruti."

Torahime and Tisse smiled as they guided Habotan and Ruti out of the room.

"This one still wishes to speak with Ms. Rit, but…all right. We'll talk more afterwards!" Habotan said with a wave of her hand, doing

things in her own time as always.

"Big Brother."

Ruti looked me in the eyes.

"Ruti…"

"Big Brother, Rit… Congratulations on getting married!!!"

Her smile was as wide as a flower in full bloom.

"Thank you, Ruti… I'm happy. From the bottom of my heart."

Once Ruti had also left…

"Here."

Rit had a kind look on her face, and she passed me a handkerchief.

"Thanks."

I took it and covered my eyes as I cried a few tears of joy.

* * *

Now that it was just me and Rit left in the room, we sat down without speaking. All we had to do now was wait until Father Talin came to get us and stick to what we'd done during the rehearsal. Unlike a noble's wedding with countless rules and procedures, we would just listen to Father Talin say a prayer, exchange jewelry—rings in our case—then share a kiss to seal our vow of love.

After that, we would move the celebration to a nearby venue, where we would also be able to enjoy a buffet-style meal.

"The day's finally here."

"My heart's bursting."

Neither of us particularly seemed to start the conversation, but we ended up talking about everything from the day we'd met up till now: The fight in Loggervia and our farewell.

Being kicked out of the Hero's party.

Our reunion in Zoltan.

Starting the store together.

The Bighawk incident.

Fighting to save Ruti.

Traveling to the Wall at the End of the World to make the

engagement ring.

Protecting Zoltan by fighting Queen Consort Leonor of Veronia.

The trouble caused by Van the Hero.

The secrets of the world we saw in the ancient ruins.

Watching Tanta grow up.

Our odd friendship with the daughter of the demon lord.

Running a stall at the Harvest Festival…

"We really have made so many memories together."

"Yeah, we really have."

"…I love you, Red."

"I love you too, Rit."

It had been a long journey. There had been lots of detours to get here. Still, because we'd known what our goal was all along—because we knew we would be happy—it had been fun.

* * *

Extra chairs had been set out in the chapel, but even then, every seat was filled. Everybody we'd sent an invitation to had come. There were so many people who wished for our happiness, it almost felt like a miracle.

I'm getting emotional.

"You may now exchange rings."

While engagement rings were connected to the legend of the winter demon, exchanging jewelry was more of a regional custom. In Zoltan, a place founded by pioneers, it was left up to the wishes of the couple as to whether they exchanged jewelry or not. In our case, we'd decided we wanted to.

After all, for such a joyous event as this, it would be a waste not to, wouldn't it?

"Hehe, does it suit me?"

Rit showed off her silver ring. Unlike her engagement ring, it was a simple design that could be more easily worn on a daily basis.

"Of course it does."

"Thank you. Yours looks good on you, too."

I had never worn a ring before, so I was a little worried…but if Rit said that, then I should just take some confidence in it.

"Thank you," I said with a smile.

My hands naturally reached out to Rit's shoulders.

"Red…"

Her sky-blue eyes wavered.

"Er, I guess I'll keep the prayer short."

Out of consideration, Father Talin gave an abridged version of the prayer leading up to the kiss.

Everyone in the chapel was smiling.

Rit and I both blushed…

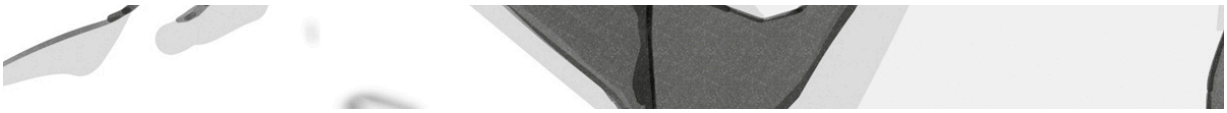
"I love you."

And with that vow, I felt Rit's soft lips against mine.

* * *

The ceremony ended without issue, and we went outside the church. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and a pleasant spring breeze was in the air.





“And now, the bride will toss her bouquet. All those who are hoping to get married, please step forward!”

There was a belief that the next wedding would belong to whoever caught Rit’s bouquet.

“Here I go!”

Rit had fun adding in a few feints before tossing the bouquet high into the air.

“What? It’s coming down near us.”

“Haha, looks like things are finally goin’ my way.”

The bouquet was falling right toward Godwin and Frank.

That would’ve been unlucky.

“Hm? The wind’s picking up,” Yarandrala murmured, a quizzical expression on her face.

The next moment…

“”Whoaaaaa!!!””

Godwin and Frank were blown away, and black clouds descended from the skies.

“Wh-what?!”

Everyone froze in shock as a fairy leaped out of the black clouds and caught the bouquet in both hands.

“Rit! Congratulations on your wedding!”

“Lavender?!”

It was Lavender, the archfay of calamity.

“You should have told me if you were getting married!”

“There was no way to contact you all the way on the other side of the continent…but you still came. I’m so happy!”

“Of course I did! This is a new start toward your goals for love! Someday, Van and I will also…”

The next moment, I heard people chattering.

“Is everyone all right?”

“That was rougher than a ship in a storm. My legs are still wobbly.”

Those voices…

The black cloud enveloping Lavender’s body dissipated to reveal…

“Van! Esta! Albert! Cardinal Ljubo! King Salius and Lilinrala!!!”

It was Van the Hero’s party and the two leaders from Veronia!

"Lavender brought all of you?!"

"Of course I did. A wedding is such a wonderful thing! So it should be celebrated by all your friends!"

They'd traveled across the entire continent just to be here…? A warmth surged through my chest.

"We couldn't catch Danan, though. I have no clue where he went."

"He disappeared as soon as the war was over… We couldn't even give him his reward."

Esta and Albert sounded disappointed.

"That's a shame… Danan already gave us a gift, though, so it's fine."

"*Danan* did?"

Esta and Ljubo both looked shocked.

Danan had given us a handmade bell when he'd left Zoltan. He had explained that in his homeland, there was a custom of giving bells to children to ward off evil.

How nostalgic. I hope we meet again someday.

"It's been a while. Congratulations on your wedding."

"King Salius. It is truly an honor. Thank you very much."

"You were my friend and benefactor even before I was king. There's no need for you to be so formal with me."

Prince Salius was now the king of Veronia and a hero who had greatly contributed to the victory of the allied forces of humanity. It would be more appropriate to call him King Veronia, but he didn't like such formalities and insisted on being called King Salius.

"For your wedding to Rit, I would have liked to provide at least one of the kingdom's treasures as a gift, but unfortunately, we departed quite suddenly."

"By that, he means we were dragged out of bed in the middle of the night," said the high elf with a patch over one eye—Lilinrala—shaking her head. "It was lucky I had spare clothes in my item box, otherwise I'd be showing up at a wedding in nothing but my underwear."

King Salius and Lilinrala both laughed.

This whole turn of events was on a scale normal people couldn't

really grasp. The people of Zoltan had moved away in surprise at the sudden storm, but when they recognized the newcomers as heroes who'd come to Zoltan before, they ran over happily.

"Red!" Lavender glared at me. "You better come when Van and I get married, too!"

"Yeah. I'll come running, wherever in the world it is."

"You said it, so that's a promise!" Lavender smiled.

A pleasant chatter filled the surroundings at the sudden arrival of our new guests.

"I'm so happy," Rit said, coming up next to me.

Yeah, it really is a joyful sight.

There were so many people there celebrating our happiness. How could any goal be more splendid than this?

"Rit."

"Hm?"

"Let's make each other happy."

"Yeah."

Rit nodded, her cheeks red as she thought about what I'd said.

"Now then," I said cheerfully, "where should we go for our honeymoon?"

"Wh-what? I don't know! You can't ask me so suddenly like that!"

True, that wasn't really the sort of thing we should be deciding in the middle of our wedding.

"In that case, I've got the perfect spot for you two!"

Without delay, the people who'd overheard us started talking about interesting places they knew about.

It was fun, noisy, and lively, and everyone around us couldn't stop smiling.

Nor could Rit and I.

Afterword

Next time, the final volume!

Sorry for shouting all of a sudden.

Those of you who've read the series all the way to the end will understand, I imagine, and I'm sure it feels like Volume 14 ended with a nice resolution and everyone living happily ever after, but there's still one more book!

In the harsh world of light novels, being able to write this story all the way to the end was only possible because the readers enjoyed it…so thank you all so much.

There's one more story of Red and Rit's journey after they're married. I hope you'll join me for the fifteenth and final volume.

By the time this book reaches you, the second season of the anime will have finished. It's gone by so fast. This new season, once again, made the original story even more interesting and encapsulated the anime style to create something really great, in my opinion. Thank you to all the staff involved in the production process.

I hope everyone was able to enjoy watching the anime just as much as I did.

Finally, I have a few announcements.

Volume 13 of Masahiro Ikeno's manga adaptation is on sale, as is the third and final volume of Mutsuki Higashioji's spin-off starring Rit, *Rejected by the Hero's Party, a Princess Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside*. Please check out both of those as well!

I wouldn't have been able to make this book alone, and once

again, this volume was only finished with the help of many people. As an author, as well as a reader myself, I would like to convey my gratitude to everyone involved.

Thank you all so much.

I hope you look forward to the final volume!

Zappon
Basking in sentimentality, 2024


This is Yasumo! It was fun being able to draw so many happy pictures.



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