The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows



6

Sakaku Hishikawa

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Standing serenely in the middle of the muddy swamp, a woman parted her pink lips to speak.
“Can you please be quiet? I’m trying to sleep.”
Aska
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Jose
“A thrilling adventure awaits you!”
Zenos
Roa
Carmilla


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"THIS IS FOR EVERYONE!"
Aska's gaze fell on the girl carrying the spirit of her mentor.

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Prologue

A young man walked down a richly decorated hallway, its polished floor tiles reflecting his handsome features. His back was straight and slender, his movements graceful and precise, and his dark gray locks swayed gently over his detached eyes. He had an air of supreme elegance about him as he made his way past the rows of first-rate paintings adorning the walls.

When he stopped before a door adorned with intricate floral patterns, the servant at his side moved to slowly push it open.

"Lord Albert Baycladd has arrived," the servant announced.

Albert, heir to House Baycladd—one of the seven great noble houses at the pinnacle of Herzeth's aristocracy—quietly stepped inside. He pressed his right hand to his chest and bowed his head deeply.

"Apologies for the delay," he said. "I have come in place of my father."

Bright sunlight poured into the white-themed room from a skylight far above, illuminating a round table in the center. Around it, six other great nobles were already seated.

As Albert took his own seat, a narrow-eyed man across from him coughed briefly, then spoke. "While I would very much like to say 'good day' to you, Lord Albert, I find myself unable to. You may be part of the seven great houses, but you are only the heir. What were you thinking, keeping us waiting like this?"

"My apologies, Lord Giesz," Albert replied politely. "I was held up by an argument with my father. He's in poor health, yet he insisted on coming. It took quite a bit of effort to persuade him otherwise."

"Ah, yes," Lord Giesz replied with a soft cough. "Your father's condition. How is it?"

"He seems to be suffering from a combination of advanced age and overwork. The long years of pressure must have finally caught

up to him."

"Hopefully that's all it is."

"What are you implying?"

"Your family is known for its scheming," Lord Giesz said, gazing upon Albert coolly.

"Ah ha ha! You overestimate me," Albert replied with a cheerful smile. "I'm still a novice. I'm no match for my father."

"I certainly hope not." The corners of Lord Giesz's lips lifted into a small smile. "How goes your work as the headmaster of Ledelucia Academy, by the by?"

"It's quite the meaningful duty. I find engaging with the youth quite refreshing."

"Truly? Even though you went to the trouble of isolating problem students in Class F? Although I did hear that class disbanded without a single expulsion taking place."

"Well-informed as always. Thanks to our intensive education efforts, the class turned out to be quite excellent."

"I know you. I'm certain your plan was to get the entire class expelled before the next rank review meeting."

"Ah ha ha! Quite harsh of you, Lord Giesz. The role of an educator is to safeguard the future of young people."

"You, an educator? Quite the amusing jest. You're a mediator of order in noble society, nothing more."

Albert smiled. "Lord Giesz, all of us in the great noble houses make use of power to influence others. But I have found that in this world, there are those who, even without rank or fame to support them, exert influence through sheer skill and conviction. The realization that there are things beyond my control was quite the valuable lesson. I hope you have the chance to learn this as well someday."

Seeing the usually guarded young nobleman wear such a pleased expression, Lord Giesz furrowed his thin brows. "What are you talking about?"

"Lord Giesz," interjected a smooth baritone voice, "perhaps we should let the subject rest."

It belonged to Lord Fennel, who was known for being a

moderate. There was a rumor that his beloved daughter Charlotte was betrothed to Albert, but the engagement was unofficial and amounted to little more than a joke making the rounds at social gatherings. After all, marriages between the seven great noble houses could affect the power balance of the entire nation. They could not be decided solely by the individuals involved.

Charlotte herself didn't seem to take the engagement seriously, but no one knew what Albert truly thought.

Lord Fennel looked around the round table as he spoke. "I hear we have matters of grave importance to discuss this month. We must present a united front, Lord Giesz."

"I've always advocated for such myself," Lord Giesz replied after a pause. He closed his eyes, leaning back into his chair.

With tensions momentarily settled, a state official who'd been waiting in a corner of the room nervously stepped forward. "Now then. Everyone, if we're ready, I'd like to begin this session of the Council of the Seven."

The Council of the Seven was a gathering of the highest-ranked nobles of the Kingdom of Herzeth to discuss the country's policies. Lord Fennel had interrupted the exchange between Lords Giesz and Albert because even small talk at a meeting of this caliber could influence the tides of national governance.

"Today, we have a proposal from Lady Minerva," the official continued.

Minerva, a noblewoman wearing a veiled hat, spoke in a soft and sensual tone. "The saintess has blessed us with a prophecy for the first time in a long while. 'Rot is upon us,' she says."

Lord Giesz's spine straightened at Lady Minerva's words. "Is that true?"

"Oh? Are you accusing me of lying now?"

"I only wish to confirm the veracity of this very serious claim. How severe is the rot?"

"*Most* severe."

In an instant, the room's atmosphere turned tense.

"*Most* severe?" Lord Giesz repeated, stopping himself from folding his arms. "Surely you jest. It's rare for rot to be severe at all, let

alone *most* severe."

"The saintess's words are absolute, Lord Giesz. Surely you have not forgotten our nation's history of prosperity?"

"I have not," Lord Giesz muttered after a pause, huffing. "The saintess's prophecies are always accurate. The issue with them is that the details, such as what exactly they're about and when such an event will occur, are always vague."

"That's why we're here today, Lord Giesz," Lord Fennel interjected. "We have access to a wealth of information, both domestic and foreign. And we've used that information and our authority to confront national crises in the past, have we not?"

"Well, some things even we cannot fully grasp," Albert remarked quietly with a daring smile. His words seemed to go unnoticed.

Lady Minerva, maintaining her dignified demeanor, directed her veiled gaze toward the others. "Does anyone have any ideas what this 'rot' might be? In the past, when severe rot was prophesied, we had an epidemic turn a district into ruins, or a natural disaster wipe out an entire town. Has anyone noticed any signs that point at this *most* severe rot?"

"One thing does concern me," said one of the nobles seated at the table. "The Empire's recent movements."

The neighboring Malavaar Empire, which had grown rapidly in strength in recent years, had been engaging in border skirmishes with the Kingdom of Herzeth.

"If we focus too much on external threats, we risk overlooking internal dangers," another noble said. "Should we not prioritize quashing the seeds of rebellion within our own nation?"

The Kingdom of Herzeth had a strict class system, and it was a well-known fact that the existence of the poor was meant to divert the dissatisfaction of the citizenry away from the government. Various conflicting factions like demi-humans, criminals, and ethnic minorities had been deliberately allowed to proliferate to keep the poor from uniting. At one point, there had been whispers of someone going by "the Mediator" trying to unite these groups. But an investigation by the Royal Guard had resulted in the dismissal of the possibility of such a leader existing, and that fact had since

faded from the minds of the upper echelons.

As the nobles' opinions grew more divergent, Lord Fennel turned his gaze to Albert. "And you? What do you think?"

Albert looked around the table, then turned his gaze back to Lord Fennel. "Are you aware that magical beasts and monsters have been more active as of late?"

"No. This is the first I've heard of it."

"Understandably so. The increase in activity has been gradual, making it easy to miss. However, an analysis of quests and extermination records from various Adventurers' Guilds shows a clear upward trend, especially in the Zagras region."

"Zagras, you say?"

The nobles around the table all seemed somewhat unsettled. Located southwest of the royal capital, Zagras was a rugged, mountainous frontier. Though remote, it was rich in precious minerals, making it a region the kingdom could not afford to neglect.

"As I recall, about ten years ago there were rumors of an S Rank, catastrophe-level magical beast appearing there."

The details regarding said beast remained unclear, as information was fragmented and the damage hadn't been extensive enough for it to be a widely remembered event.

Albert scanned the room and continued, "If we can get an agreement from the Council of the Seven, we shall formally commission the Adventurers' Guild to investigate."

"You waste no time, do you? Truly, you are the future Lord Baycladd," Lord Fennel remarked with an admiring nod.

Lord Giesz, meanwhile, seemed displeased. "Hmph. And I assume you've already selected the personnel? Sending in just anyone would only bloat the costs."

Albert smiled and nodded. "We plan to limit participation to competent parties of Bronze Class and above."

"Such a vague standard," Lord Giesz scoffed. "Hardly convincing."

"Worry not. I've already contacted the Silver Wolf."

"What?"

"Not someone who easily accepts such requests, mind you, but indeed. We've secured the Silver Wolf's agreement in advance for

this one."

Lord Giesz pressed his lips together in silence.

"A fabulous choice," Lord Fennel said with a cheerful smile. "The Silver Wolf will no doubt uncover the source of the rot."

"So we hope."

"Hmph. Not bad at all, but can you provide adequate support for the Silver Wolf?" Lord Giesz asked, continuing to find fault.

"What might you mean by that, Lord Giesz?"

"A healer, for instance. Can you arrange for the finest healer available? This is, after all, a *most* severe rot. Even one as capable as the Silver Wolf may struggle alone."

"We've already petitioned the Royal Institute of Healing for assistance. Lord Shalbart, the current director, will surely select the most suitable candidate."

"Very well, then." Lord Giesz folded his arms, falling silent.

Albert gave the nobleman a polite smile, but his thoughts were elsewhere. *The finest healer*. Though he had, indeed, already reached out to the Royal Institute, there was a certain individual who came to Albert's mind as a potential candidate. He chose not to mention said individual, however, as he didn't want to reveal the man's existence at this gathering just yet.

A man with no status or possessions, but with the skills to foil even the plans of a member of one of the seven great noble houses. If there were anyone capable of excising the rot festering in the nation, it would be someone like him—unbound by the constraints of the system.

Albert knew this wasn't someone he could simply order to act, but he'd nevertheless laid some groundwork in advance. A minor gamble. Fate allowing, the man would willingly become involved in this endeavor. And, should that thread of fate grow stronger, their paths would surely cross again in the future.

Would he win or lose? Albert had never enjoyed gambling—he always won, after all.

Who knew one day I'd find myself placing my bets on another, he thought uncharacteristically with a small, self-deprecating laugh.

Chapter 1: The Launch of St. Carmilla Academy

At the heart of the royal capital of the Kingdom of Herzeth was the royal palace, home to the nation's ultimate authority. Around it was a special district where the country's nobility resided. Beyond that was the town district, where the capital's citizens found their rest and leisure. Between the city and the towering trees of the untouched forests outside the capital, acting as a barrier between the two zones, lay the forgotten slums, home to the poor.

And separating the city and the slums was a strip of ruins—the remains of a district once ravaged by a plague.

Today, a number of people of different races from the slums had gathered in one particular building located within those ruins. A man clad in a jet-black cloak, urged forward by a group pushing his back, stood at the front of the crowd.

"Whoa. It's actually finished," marveled Zenos, an unlicensed but brilliant practitioner of healing magic, nicknamed the shadow healer. He was breathing heavily—having just finished treating a patient—as he slowly lifted his gaze.

"Yep. All done, doc," said the leader of the lizardmen, Zophia, with a smile.

"I could cry," remarked Lynga, boss of the werewolves, as her wolfish ears twitched in delight.

"Indeed. It's finally finished," noted Loewe, chieftain of the orcs, crossing her muscular arms.

Everyone was staring up at the brand-new, wood-built school building, bathed in the morning sunlight. The project for a school for poor children had been made possible through repurposing an abandoned building in the ruined city, with help from those affiliated with Zenos's clinic.

"It *is* finally finished," Zenos echoed.

Meeting his mentor had changed Zenos's life. This would be the place for him to pay that kindness forward to the next generation. That was why he'd gone so far as to take on the role of temporary teacher at a school attended by noble children. Through that job, he'd learned the basics of education from one of the students and managed to obtain a large supply of textbooks, thanks to the goodwill of a noble girl from one of the seven great noble houses.

"I'm so excited," murmured Lily, a young elven girl, her eyes sparkling with wonder as she looked up at the school. Then, as if realizing something, she brought a finger to her cheek. "Oh, by the way, what will the school be called?"

The demi-humans tilted their heads.

"Huh? A school's a school," Zophia replied.

"Yeah. It's just a school, I think," Lynga agreed.

"Indeed. What else could it be but a school?" Loewe asked.

"No, no, that's not what I mean," Lily interjected. "Look, that school for nobles is called Ledelucia Academy, right? So I was thinking, it'd be nice to give this one a proper name."

"A name," Zenos repeated idly.

Zophia raised her right hand. "How about Zenos Academy?"

"No, no, no. I'm not so great that you should be naming a school after me." He'd only been the idea guy, and having the entire school named after him would be a bit embarrassing.

"I agree," Lynga said. "It's not a good idea to have Zenos's name stand out like that."

Loewe clapped her hands together. "I've got it! Since we're operating from the shadows, how about Darkness Academy?"

"Um, I don't think I'd want to attend a school with that kind of name," Lily pointed out.

As everyone pitched different ideas, an ominous chuckle echoed from Lily's staff.

"Hee hee hee... There is no need to debate the name, for it has already been decided," said Carmilla the wraith.

"Has it?"

"Take a gander at the side of the building."

As the group walked around to the side of the school as instructed, they found a misshapen sign nailed to the wooden wall, with large letters painted in red.


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“St. Carmilla Academy...?” Zenos asked.

The apex undead burst into laughter. “Well?! Does it not simply overflow with elegance and wisdom?! I even stayed up all night handcrafting the sign myself!”

“Do you have nothing better to do?” Zenos cast the laughing staff a sidelong glance. Seriously, were other wraiths this prone to afterlife flippancy? “Well, fine. It’s better to have a name than not, I suppose.”

“Truly?”

The demi-humans began to voice their agreement one after the other.

“Yeah, I don’t have any objections either,” said Zophia.

“Wait, wait,” protested the voice from the staff.

“Me neither,” interrupted Lynga. “If the government comes knocking to ask about the school, it’s better to have it named after someone who doesn’t really exist.”

“I exist, though.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Loewe. “It feels like the school’s protected by a guardian spirit.”

“Who are you calling a guardian spirit?!” the staff yelled, disappointed for some reason.

The others didn’t interject at all, leaving the wraith to let out an unsatisfied sound at the lack of reaction.

“I think it’s a good name,” Lily piped up. “It feels like it’ll bring us good luck.”

“Hello? Have you all forgotten that I am an apex undead?” Carmilla grumbled.

Everyone, displeased wraith included, went inside St. Carmilla Academy. The building had three stories: The first floor housed the classrooms; the second floor had a library, a multipurpose room, and a cafeteria; and the third floor featured an auditorium.

A group of children from the slums who’d expressed interest in going to class were already gathered in the auditorium when the group walked inside.

“All right, doc,” Zophia said. “A few words?”

“I was gonna suggest the same,” Lynga added.

"Yeah, we can't start without a few words from Zenos," Loewe agreed.

"Not really my thing, but fine..." Zenos muttered.

He recalled he'd also been asked to give the opening speech at the night festival they'd held in the slums a while back. But in this case, he *was* the one who'd first pitched the idea, so he couldn't very well remain silent. Urged by Zophia and the others, he scratched his head as he stepped in front of the children, who all looked at him with serious expressions.

"Dreams...*can* come true," he began.

The children in the auditorium were of various ages and races, including demi-humans and humans, boys and girls. But they had one thing in common—their position at the bottom of Herzeth's society.

Zenos looked over the group of future students and continued, "But I'm not gonna sugarcoat anything. This country's really harsh on the poor, and for people like us with no citizenship, even going abroad isn't an option. We'd be treated as nothing more than trash. And I know many of you are probably more worried about what you're gonna eat tomorrow than chasing your dreams."

Some of the children gave resigned laughs, while others nodded sadly, acknowledging the truth of his words.

"That's why we need to carve out a place for ourselves. And to do that, we need wisdom. We need knowledge. Skill. And friends. I hope this place will help with all of that." Zenos thought back on his mentor's smiling face. "I hope someday, when I tell you guys that dreams can come true, nobody has to laugh or feel sad."

"Zenos..." Lily whispered.

Zenos pointed at the group. "Anyway, that was the nice part of the speech. Now for the rest. Tuition for you kids is free for the time being, but we expect you to pay us back once you succeed. So study hard, make it big, and repay us tenfold, all right? I'm not working for free, you hear me? I mean it!"

After a brief silence, the auditorium erupted into thunderous applause.

Surprised by the unexpected reaction, Zenos blinked two, three

times, then scratched his cheek awkwardly and stepped back.

"Thus began the proud history of St. Carmilla Academy—a legendary private school that would go on to produce a great number of illustrious alumni."

"What's with the commentary?"

The staff propped against the wall quivered. "Hee hee hee... A wraith's premonitions are always correct."

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"Now then, let's start our first lesson," announced Zophia, ushering the thirty or so inaugural students of St. Carmilla Academy forward to the first-floor classroom.

For now, the school would operate with one weekly morning class followed by lunch, then dismissal. The idea was to get the children accustomed to sitting through lessons, and for the schedule to gradually change based on the students' progress.

Zenos and the demi-human leaders watched from the back as the sounds of firm footsteps echoed outside. The classroom door swung open, and the teacher for the first-ever lesson made her entrance, wearing a handmade black suit that contrasted with her flowing blonde hair.

"Hee hee! You may call me *Miss* Lily!" declared the bespectacled young elf.

"Why the glasses...?" Hadn't Zenos seen this somewhere before? Glasses-wearing teachers?

"Good morning, everyone!" Lily chirped.

"Good morning, Miss Lily!" everyone replied energetically, making Lily beam with pride.

At the noble academy, Lily had taken elementary education lessons under Ilya, a former commoner girl who had sort of acted as the elf's tutor. Lily, in turn, had diligently studied on her own during the day while Zenos busied himself with his own teaching duties. She had now fully grasped the basics of the kingdom's elementary education, it seemed.

Lily cleared her throat, then glanced around the classroom. "Now,

before we begin, allow me to introduce the assistant teacher."

A lizardman, dressed in a black suit not unlike Lily's, stepped into the room. "You kids better study hard, yeah?" he said roughly.

"To think my little brother would become a teacher," Zophia said with a sentimental look as she watched her brother Zonde at work.

Zenos often needed to answer sudden medical calls, and couldn't always attend lessons. Lily, meanwhile, was younger than some of the students, so there were doubts about whether she'd be able to manage the entire class by herself. Thus, during the building's renovation into a school, a selection process for an assistant teacher had been conducted.

During a study session using the textbooks, Zonde had displayed surprisingly great results. His experience running the band of thieves alongside Zophia, managing the group's operations and finances, had seemingly paid off.

"Bah ha ha! I'll make you do so much math you'll see numbers in your nightmares!" Despite the villainous declaration, he was entirely serious...or maybe he wasn't? It was getting a bit hard to tell.

Oh, and he was also wearing glasses.

"Now then, please open your textbooks," Lily instructed.

With that, the first math lesson began. Lily started by explaining how to read and write numbers, using the textbook as a guide.

For now, Lily and Zonde would teach the children reading, writing, and math. Zenos would occasionally cover subjects like history, geography, and healing magic. When necessary, the demi-human leaders would teach practical knowledge and survival skills.

After a simple explanation about numerals, Lily adjusted her glasses. "All right, everyone seems to be doing great! Now let's move on to addition."

On the blackboard, purchased from the black market, Lily wrote simple equations such as "1+1" and explained them.

"Okay, does anyone know the answer?"

Several children eagerly raised their hands, shouting, "Me!" "Me!"

"Well, look at that! Nicely done, runt! You wanna join our band?" Zonde joked as he watched a boy using fingers to count.

The first lesson carried on with a lighthearted atmosphere until

suddenly a voice came from the back of the classroom.

"Ugh. Boring," said a girl with dark skin, leaning lazily on one elbow at her desk. She seemed to be in her mid-teens, and had vibrant green hair tied back in a ponytail. Her lean, nimble physique and sharp gaze were unusual for a child and gave off a wild, untamed vibe.


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"Hmm." Zonde pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his middle finger. "You've got some nerve shit-talking our class, Roa."

"Look, I'm not trying to rain on anyone's parade here. Just, all this number and math stuff? Eh. I wanna be a swordsman. An adventurer. Teach me something *useful*, Zonde."

"Uh..." Zenos looked between Zonde and the girl. He didn't recognize her; she wasn't anyone who'd come to the clinic before, at least.

"The girl is from the Kumil tribe," Zophia explained with a sigh. "She ended up in the slums a couple years ago. She has no family, so we've been feeding her and helping her out now and then."

The Kumil tribe, if Zenos remembered correctly, was a small group of mountain-dwelling hunters.

Zophia crossed her arms and turned to the girl. "Roa, the poor can't become adventurers. Don't ask for the impossible."

"But..." The girl pouted and turned her eyes, green as her hair, toward Zenos. "You're Dr. Zenos, right? Didn't you used to be an adventurer?"

"Well...kind of," Zenos replied. He hadn't been officially licensed as an adventurer, and looking back, he'd been more of an unpaid odd-job man attached to a party. Still, it was true he'd traveled to various places.

"So, doctor, adventuring is fun, right?"

"Huh? You wanna hear about my adventuring days? I mean, I don't really have fond memories of them."

"Really?" Roa asked, confused.

Zenos scratched his head. "Well... My bad memories are mostly of my party, really. The adventures themselves were fun. I got to see a bit of how vast the world really is."

Golden seas of wheat shimmering in the sunlight. Brightly colored butterflies dancing in the sky above rolling hills. A massive abandoned mansion once home to an ancient noble family, now overrun with endless undead. A bottomless underground cave, said to have never been fully explored.

The world was full of mysteries and wonders.

Since the Adventurers' Guild partnered with other guilds from

allied nations, having the proper adventuring permit allowed one to travel to other countries. And, depending on their rank, adventurers could even receive permission to explore special lands.

"Wow..." Roa's eyes sparkled in stark contrast to her earlier disinterest. She jumped to her feet. "Yeah! That's the kinda story I wanna hear!"

Zophia let out another sigh. "Doc, please talk some sense into her. Roa's been playing at being an adventurer lately."

"What do you mean?" Zenos asked.

"I hear she's been hunting magical beasts in the mountains beyond the slums."

Unashamed, Roa puffed out her chest. "What's wrong with that? I'm building renown. That way, the Adventurers' Guild will have no choice but to sign me up."

"It's dangerous," Zophia admonished. "You're still a kid."

Roa grinned confidently. "No need to worry! I'm the Sword Saint's daughter, after all!"

"The Sword Saint's...daughter?" Zenos asked.

"Yeah!" Roa replied with a cheerful nod. "You were an adventurer, so you must've heard about him, right? The Sword Saint? I'll have you know I'm his flesh and blood!"

"There Roa goes, telling lies again," one child said.

"Roa the liar," another mocked.

"I'm not lying!" Roa protested.

Zenos crossed his arms as the children bickered. "I mean, I'm in no position to criticize, since I was also 'playing at' being an adventurer myself, but... You know, Roa, adventuring can be fun, but it's a hard life. Magical beasts and other creatures won't go easy on you just because you're a kid."

Some magical beasts specifically targeted children, even.

"Hmph. I thought this school was supposed to be a place for people to chase their dreams without getting laughed at!"

"Well, yeah, but...to be an adventurer, you also need to handle stuff like checking quests, negotiating pay, and managing budgets. So you need to be able to read, write, and do math."

"I-I know, okay?! I can do those things! A little bit." Roa pouted,

glaring at everyone around her. “Fine. Whatever. Everyone’s gonna be singing my praises one day. Bye!”

“You wait right there, Roa!” Zophia called after the girl. But Roa ignored the lizardwoman and nimbly exited the room. “Ugh, honestly. That girl just doesn’t listen...”

“She’s a lot like you back in the day, sis,” Zonde pointed out.

“Oh, shut it, Zonde. Still... All the more reason for me not to leave her alone.”

As the lizardman siblings sighed in frustration, the staff propped against the wall gave a single shake. “I can feel it. Something is about to begin...”

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After the first lesson and lunch ended at St. Carmilla Academy, the usual gang gathered at the clinic to reflect.

“Did we do okay?” Lily asked nervously, looking around at the others.

“The lessons were easy to understand,” Zenos praised. “And there were plenty of hands-on tasks, so I think the kids stayed engaged without getting bored.”

“Really? I’m glad! I was so nervous...” Lily sighed in relief, then exchanged a glance with Zonde. “The glasses really helped, huh?”

“Yeah,” Zonde agreed. “The glasses were lifesavers.”

“Just to get this out of the way, uh, glasses don’t really have special powers,” Zenos pointed out.

The conversation then shifted to the Kumil girl, Roa, and Zophia gave an exasperated sigh.

“Roa’s a handful. She never listens to what we grown-ups say. She’s gonna end up getting herself hurt one of these days, I swear.”

“Just like you,” Zonde repeated.

“Nobody asked you, Zonde! Although...I do agree it’s like seeing a reflection of me when I was younger.”

“Hey, Zophia, is it true that the Kumil tribe...” Lynga trailed off, a serious expression on her face.

“Yeah. It is.”

"What are you talking about?" Loewe asked, tilting her head in confusion.

Zophia crossed her legs in her chair and explained, "Oh, you haven't heard? There are various different Kumil settlements, but about ten years ago, one of the larger ones was wiped out by a magical beast attack. Roa is one of the survivors. She doesn't talk much about it, and we don't press her for details either."

"Huh. So it's possible that she hunts magical beasts because of that."

"I hope she doesn't do anything rash," Zenos remarked as he picked up his teacup.

The untouched forests surrounding the slums were known to be home to magical beasts. The kingdom reportedly let the slums be so they could act as a buffer zone to protect the rest of the capital from these threats. Though most of the magical beasts in the woods were small, it wasn't uncommon for more dangerous creatures to appear in certain areas. The people of the Kumil tribe, despite being known for their hunting skills, weren't immune to the risks either.

"She mentioned being the Sword Saint's daughter," Lily said, tilting her head. "But, um, who is this Sword Saint?"

Zenos finished his tea, then replied, "'Sword Saint' is basically a title given to the greatest swordsman of an era. The one I figure she's talking about is a guy known as the Thunder God. Apparently his sword moves were as fast as lightning."

Aston, Zenos's old party leader, had admired the Thunder God so much that he'd even tried to test the man's sword techniques using Zenos as a training dummy. What an annoying memory. Zenos had ended up needing to learn protective magic to survive—though that skill had since proven useful in many situations. Funny how things worked out sometimes.

"Do you think she's really his daughter?" Lily asked.

"There were rumors that the guy had a disciple, but I've never heard of a daughter. Either way, the Thunder God disappeared a long time ago. There's a new Sword Saint by now, I think."

Rumors were plentiful about the missing former Sword Saint. Some said he'd died from illness, while others claimed he'd

abandoned the sword and retreated to the mountains. No one had ever learned the truth, however. Someone had since taken on the title of Sword Saint—Zenos vaguely recalled hearing about this during his adventuring days, but he couldn't remember the person's name.

"Now that I think about it, I don't know much about adventurers," Lily mused.

"Yeah, I don't know a whole lot either," Zophia chimed in.

"Me neither," Lynga added.

"It's never really been a thing we needed to concern ourselves with," Loewe remarked.

"Guess not," Zenos said, slowly sitting down in his consultation chair. "If you're a citizen or higher, you can get an adventurer license by passing a written and practical exam. Then you get a rank. If you're part of a party, then your rank is that party's rank, and if you're solo, then it's just your own individual rank. Usually, people start at White Class, then they climb up to Blue, Red, Bronze, Silver, and so forth, based on their achievements."

"What rank was your party, Zenos?" Lily asked.

"I think we ended up at Gold Class. It's technically the third-highest rank, but in practice, it's the second highest."

"Wow." Lily clapped her hands in admiration.

"What do you mean, 'in practice'?" Zophia asked, raising her hand slightly.

"Uhh... Above Gold Class is Platinum Class, which is considered the highest rank. But beyond that, there's the elusive Black Class. It takes amazing skill and achievements to get there, so it's not really something people can just aim for."

For that reason, adventurers who attained Black Class were granted special rights, including the ability to become nobles after retirement. However, even then, further recommendations were necessary and other conditions existed, so not all Black Class adventurers could be granted that status.

Monsters, freaks, geniuses, superhumans. Only those with truly outstanding, extraordinary ability could reach that level. The director of the Royal Institute of Healing had once been a Black Class

adventurer, but that was exceedingly rare. In any given era, there were usually only a handful of such people.

"Do you still want to be an adventurer, like Roa does, Zenos?" Lily asked.

"Hmm... I didn't hate adventuring itself, but now I have too much on my plate, so I don't really care to do it anymore. Besides, it's not like us poor usually get that sort of opportunity anyway."

Suddenly, the door to the clinic burst open, and a group of children from the slums peeked in, shouting, "Doctor!"

"What happened? Is anyone hurt?"

A demi-human child at the front shook his head, panting. "No, it's just...we went to Roa's shack to play with her, but she wasn't there. We found this instead..."

The child handed over a crumpled note. It was a hand-drawn map, scribbled on a torn piece of paper. At first glance, it was hard to make out, but it seemed to be a map of the forest outside the slums; Roa must've drawn it. There were circles marked in several places, along with simple, messy handwritten notes.

"June 13th, one-horned rat... July 9th, two burrow boars... This looks like a record of magical beast hunts," Zenos said. The paper was full of names of beasts she'd hunted as well as the dates.

"She's been keeping track, huh," Zophia muttered, peering over Zenos's shoulder.

As Zenos scanned the map, his eyes stopped on one spot. In the top-right corner of the map there was a circle marked with today's date, but no magical beast was listed. It was likely where Roa had been planning to go.

"This place," he murmured, his eyes widening slightly.

"Doctor, do you think Roa went there...?" the children asked anxiously.

"Yeah. We'd better hurry."

"What's wrong, Zenos?" Lily asked.

Zenos lifted his head from the map, grabbed his cloak from the wall, and turned to the others.

"This is bad. She's heading into a very dangerous zone."

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Departure

"What's their problem?" grumbled a girl of Kumil origin as she moved through the forest that stretched outside the slums.

Her skin was dark, and her green hair, reminiscent of the forest, fluttered in the wind. Though the height of summer was passing, temperatures remained high—yet, thanks to the thick foliage blocking out the sunlight, the air around her felt somewhat cool.

"They don't even know what I can do."

Roa pouted as she brought her hand to the hilt of the sword hanging at her waist. People around her, it seemed, weren't very receptive to the idea of her hunting magical beasts. Still, she knew that for a poor person to become an adventurer, they needed some sort of significant achievement. And Roa was confident that, with her skills, she could accomplish exactly that. After all, she'd come from a tribe of hunters, and was the daughter of the Sword Saint—

Suddenly, Roa stopped. There was something beyond the trees.

There was an unusual quality to the flow of the breeze, a certain smell in the air. Her sharp instincts as someone with hunting in her blood told her a presence lurked nearby. She slowly drew her sword from its sheath and crouched, holding her breath and licking her lips.

"This feels different," she murmured to herself. "Nice."

All of the magical beasts she'd dealt with so far had been weak—not the kind that could bring her notoriety. She'd been planning to challenge something stronger today, which was why she'd chosen the Swamp Forest as her hunting grounds. The place was known for frequent sightings of powerful magical beasts. Though she'd forgotten to bring her handmade map, she'd mostly memorized the terrain already.

As Roa carefully circled around the trees to avoid getting stuck in

the perpetually sloshy ground of the forest, she spotted a black mass reaching up to about shoulder height. The beast, fully covered in mud, sported a pair of yellowish, murky fangs dripping with slime. It was a mud wolf—a lupine magical beast that inhabited swamplands. Mud wolves had webbing between their toes, allowing them to move surprisingly quickly, even on unstable ground.

This one was likely a relatively young individual. Had it been a pup, its parents would likely have been nearby, which would've called for a cautious approach. But this one was sizable, so it was likely acting alone. Recalling her memories of hunting in the mountains with her late tribe, Roa gradually crept closer from within the shadows of the trees.

Though the creature hadn't moved at all, it had likely already sensed her approach. Mud wolves hunted by lurking in the shade or in swampy ground, waiting for prey to approach. And so, when the girl took another step forward—

"Groooar!" the mud wolf roared as Roa came into its attack range. It charged savagely at her, splashing mire and shaking the nearby branches and leaves in its wake.

Roa leaped backward to dodge the mud wolf's ferocious fangs and the beast immediately followed up with another attack. That too, however, hit only air—Roa had planted her foot on the trunk of a tree behind her during her jump and propelled herself up into the air. With a quick airborne spin, she aimed the tip of her sword downward, descending upon the mud wolf's head.

The creature let out a pained yelp as the blade plunged straight through its skull, then collapsed into the swamp with a dull groan.

"Hee hee! How's that?" Roa asked, smugly wiping at her nose. She cut off a portion of the beast's fur and tucked it into her pocket as proof of her kill.

Just as she was about to head back, however, she froze. There was something else behind her.

A chill ran down Roa's spine as the atmosphere turned distinctly more threatening than before. She slowly turned around to see the bushes parting roughly as a massive black figure emerged from between them.

“Huh?”

***

“We need to hurry!”

Zenos rushed through the forest alongside the three demi-human leaders and Lily, who rode on Loewe’s shoulders. They hadn’t initially planned to bring Lily along, but she’d insisted on coming, claiming she was concerned about her student. The group’s movements were exceptionally swift thanks to Zenos’s enhancement spells boosting their leg strength.

“I-I’m sorry, Loewe,” Lily stammered.

“I don’t mind,” Loewe assured her. “This is good exercise.”

As she ran, Zophia asked, “What is it about the Swamp Forest that makes it so dangerous? I keep hearing that people should stay away from it, but I never found out why.”

“I think it’s because the magical beasts there are a bit different,” Lynga ventured.

“Mud wolves can be found there. They’re C+ Rank magical beasts, if memory serves,” Zenos explained. Most of the other beasts near the mountains’ foothills were ranked F up to E, so mud wolves were quite literally on a different level.

“What’s a rank?” Lily asked, tilting her head.

“Just like parties have classes, magical beasts have ranks based on how difficult they are to defeat. F is the lowest rank, and from there the ranks go up to E, D, C, B, and A.” Each rank was further divided into three tiers, for instance A, A+, and A++. Defeating an A Rank beast was considered a Gold Class-level achievement, marking one as a top-tier adventurer.

“Is A++ the highest?” Zophia asked.

Zenos shook his head. “No, there’s a special rank above that: S. A beast at that rank is considered catastrophe level. They don’t come up very often.”

There was, in fact, an even higher rank than that, the Z Rank. But this rank, belonging to the demon lord who’d been destroyed three hundred years ago, was considered defunct in modern times.

"So, I'm not sure I fully follow, but you're saying these C+ Rank beasts in the Swamp Forest are dangerous?" Loewe asked.

"They'd be considered manageable by a skilled adventurer," Zenos replied, glancing over at the orc leader. If Roa was a capable hunter, she could probably defeat a mud wolf quite easily.

It was just that mud wolves weren't the *real* problem.

Zenos pressed on, pushing his legs harder, and continued, "Not many know this, but there's a beast in the Swamp Forest that preys on mud wolves. They're B+ monsters called iron kongs."

***

"No way," Roa muttered in a trembling voice as she looked up at the massive creature that had appeared before her.

It was a large simian magical beast, its hard-as-steel fur standing on end. Its eyes were a deep crimson, like blood, and were staring straight at Roa. The sheer bloodthirst emanating from its body made the girl's knees buckle.

An iron kong...

Not only did iron kongs possess exceptional physical abilities, but they were also extremely intelligent for magical beasts, making them particularly difficult opponents. It was unusual for Roa not to notice something approaching, but she'd been so focused on her battle against the mud wolf that her reaction time had been delayed.

"I should run," she began, moving to step back for a moment before stopping herself. "No, I can't."

Defeating a beast like this was sure to bring her the recognition she wanted.

"Groooooooooar!" roared the iron kong, the vicious sound reverberating through the air and making the swamp ripple.

But Roa couldn't afford to flinch. The iron kong was testing its prey—her—through intimidation. She immediately twisted her body to dodge the massive hand bearing down on her from above, and the powerful blow gouged the ground, sending mud flying everywhere.

"Take this!" she yelled, spinning around and thrusting her sword

at the iron kong's neck.

Instead of a kill, however, she ended up with a broken sword. The blade snapped cleanly in half with a shrill *clang*, its tip spinning through the air as it disappeared into the bushes.

The enemy's second strike came from below, and while Roa managed to instinctively move the hilt of her broken sword to block it, the force of the blow sent her flying. Her back slammed into a tree trunk, and the impact knocked the air out of her for a moment.

Roa slid down, landing on the swampy ground. Feeling the warm mud against her cheek, she groaned, "Ugh..."

Growling lowly, the iron kong approached her in slow, cautious steps, as if studying its prey.

This is bad. This is so bad, she thought, her mind racing. Her body, however, wouldn't move.

"...oa!" came a voice from somewhere far away.

Roa wanted to respond, but the burning pain in her back kept her from being able to speak. *Dammit, this isn't how this was supposed to go...*

Momentarily distracted by the voice, the iron kong lifted its head and looked around, but soon refocused on the collapsed Roa. Its massive, thick-as-a-log arm, covered in sharp bristling fur, slowly rose into the air.

"Roa!" the voice repeated, clear this time.

The girl's eyes darted around, spotting familiar faces in the distance beyond the thick bushes: Zenos, the healer, clad in his black cloak; the three demi-human leaders, Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe; and the young elf girl, Lily. However, they were still too far to do anything.

For some reason, Zenos, who was leading the group, suddenly bent down, picked up a stone, and threw it.

That's not gonna do anything, Roa thought to herself. But...

"Grah!" the iron kong grunted. The stone had sliced through the air like a bullet, striking the beast's forehead directly. The impact caused the massive creature to fall backward, and it twitched once before it stopped moving entirely.

"Wh-What...? No way... Doctor, what are...you...?" she mumbled,

about to push herself up.

Zenos shouted in warning, "It's not over yet! Iron kongs play dead!"

"Huh?" Roa turned to look, but the iron kong was already gone.

She felt a hot breath brushing against her neck from the side. The simian beast, having moved behind a tree to avoid more stone throws, bared its large fangs. Its eyes were blazing with rage.

"Whoa!" she shouted.

"Um," came a much more relaxed voice.

Someone else was now standing right behind the iron kong—a woman? She had pale, white skin, pink lips, and sleepy-looking eyes. Her long locks were like shining strands of spun silver, arranged carefully into braids.

Standing serenely in the middle of the muddy swamp, she said, "Can you please be quiet? I'm trying to sleep."

"Grooo— Argh?!"

The iron kong's roar stopped midway. It felt as though a breeze had just blown past, and a moment later, a sharp *whoosh* rang out in Roa's ears. A vertical line, running from the iron kong's head down to its tail, slowly formed before the woman as she stood there nonchalantly.

Her slash had been so fast the sound had lagged behind.

As though only just realizing it had been cut, the iron kong's body split apart. Blood, dark red and thick, gushed forth as the two halves slid to the damp ground.

"Huh...?" Roa mumbled.

Zenos and the others reached the girl just as the beast collapsed. "Roa! Are you all right?!"

"Did you do this?" Zophia asked, staring at the halved beast.

Trembling, Roa pushed to her feet and shook her head. She pointed at the disinterested-looking silver-haired woman. "N-No... *She* did..."

A white scabbard hung at the woman's waist, but it didn't look like she'd drawn her sword at all.

"Oh! I remember now!" Zenos exclaimed, clapping his hands.

"Remember what?" Lily asked.

"You know when I told you guys about the old Sword Saint, the Thunder God? And that there's a new Sword Saint now?" Zenos asked, turning his eyes toward the sleepy-looking woman. "Yeah, she's a Black Class adventurer, going by...Silver Wolf, I think." He paused briefly, then concluded, "This must be Aska Follix, the silver-haired swordmaiden, and the current Sword Saint."

"The...current Sword Saint?"

Everyone's gaze turned toward the woman, who narrowed her own eyes slightly.

"Please don't call me Sword Saint," she grumbled, annoyed. Then, looking bored, she turned around and headed back toward the bushes. "Now be quiet. Good night."

With a big yawn, she laid down in the sleeping bag she'd left there.

"Wait, is she going to sleep?"


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The midday sun had passed its peak and now leaned toward the west, casting a soft glow upon the clinic in the ruined city.

"Um, Zenos? That lady woke up," Lily called out.

"Yeah?" he replied. Zenos went to the treatment room and found the silver-haired woman sitting up on the bed.

The evening sun streamed in from the window, reflecting off her flowing waist-length hair and making it sparkle. In this light, though she wasn't quite a girl, she looked rather young. She seemed a bit dazed as she touched the sheath of the sword beside her, her drowsy eyes slowly scanning her surroundings.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Our home," Zenos said, exchanging glances with Lily. "Apologies for disturbing your sleep, but we couldn't just leave you vulnerable in a place like that." He paused. "Color me curious, though: How can you sleep so peacefully in such a dangerous area?"

"Rest when you can. Basic rule of adventuring," she replied as she slowly twisted her hips on the bed to place her toes on the floor. "I've trained myself to be able to sleep anytime, anywhere." Then, as if she'd only just realized this, she asked, "Who brought me here?"

"Hmm? I did." The demi-humans could be rough when handling people, so Zenos had carried her himself.

The woman's gaze narrowed slightly. "What are you?"

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

"While sleeping, I wake up naturally if anyone approaches with hostility, ill intent, or wicked thoughts. I've even cut people down in my sleep before."

"Uh, yikes? You could've said that sooner."

"I can hardly believe I didn't wake up with someone carrying me."

"I made sure to be as gentle as I could." Though the woman hadn't been injured, he'd treated her like he would've any other patient.

"I see," she murmured softly. Her expression was difficult to read, so it was hard to tell whether she was satisfied with his explanation

or not, or what she was thinking. She tucked her silky silver hair behind her ear and asked, “What time is it?”

“Evening.”

“Wow. I slept all this time? It’s been a while...”

“Um!” interjected Roa, the Kumil girl who’d been waiting in the back of the room, just as the woman was about to get out of bed. “Th-Thank you for saving me. Are you really the Silver Wolf? The Sword Saint?”

“I am called the Silver Wolf, yes,” the woman confirmed. “But I don’t like the name ‘Sword Saint.’”

So Aska Follix, the Silver Wolf, didn’t appreciate the Sword Saint moniker, despite undoubtedly being considered the current one by the general public. She was also a Black Class adventurer—Zenos wondered what she was doing in the mountains behind the slums, but figured it wasn’t a good idea to pry too much.

It was she who asked a question instead. “Right, so...this is the slums?”

“Yeah, it is,” Zenos confirmed.

“Do you perhaps...know a man by the name of Zenos?”

“Huh?” Zenos blinked. “Uh—”

“W-We don’t know him! Not at all!” Lily cut in frantically, shaking her head vigorously. She looked at Zenos, clearly trying to stop him from revealing his identity. Her delicate brows were furrowed in desperation, likely signaling to him that telling the woman who he was would lead to trouble.

Maintaining his cool, Zenos looked at the woman. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I’m heading out on a mission, and my sponsor, Lord Baycladd, told me about a man named Zenos living in the slums. He said that, if I happened to meet him, I should bring him along. He gave me this.”

Aska handed over a letter addressed to a “Sir Zenos” at the top, with a red stamp on the upper right corner marking it as a special summons.

“Whoa,” Zenos blurted out.

“What’s the matter?”

"Oh, nothing."

Baycladd—a name he was familiar with. House Baycladd was one of the seven great noble houses, and its heir, Albert, was the headmaster of the aristocratic Ledelucia Academy. He was the same man Zenos had clashed with over the disbandment of the temporary Class F, which the healer had been in charge of as an interim homeroom teacher.

Realizing this was unlikely to lead to anything good, Zenos casually placed the letter on his desk. "No, thanks."

"But I haven't explained anything ye—" Aska paused abruptly. "Wait, why are *you* refusing?"

"Oh, uh, I was just trying to think how this Zenos guy might respond," he said quickly.

"So you *do* know Zenos? What kind of man is he?"

"Umm..."

As Zenos hesitated, Lily spread her arms wide and replied, "He may go on and on about money, but he's super nice, super cool, super amazing, and can't sit still when someone's in trouble! He's, like, a greedy hero of justice!"

"That's...a compliment, right?"

"A greedy hero of justice? What?" the Silver Wolf repeated, tilting her head. She sighed quietly. "Well, whatever... It doesn't matter to me either way."

Letting the matter go, she slid smoothly out of the bed. She was about to leave the clinic when Roa stepped in front of her. "Um, Miss Silver Wolf! I have a request!"

"What is it?"

"Let me be your apprentice!" Roa pleaded, kneeling in front of the Silver Wolf with her head bowed.

"Huh?" Zenos and Lily exclaimed in joint surprise.

"I want to become a swordsman and adventurer! I'm the—"

"I don't take apprentices," the Silver Wolf cut in flatly. Her tone didn't carry any hint of its earlier sleepiness—this was a flat rejection.

"But—"

"I don't take apprentices," she repeated. "And I don't need allies.

I didn’t even save you in the first place. Adventuring is all about personal responsibility. I help no one. I acted as I did because that beast woke me up.” Her response left no room for argument.

Roa remained on her knees, unable to move. The Sword Saint silently walked past her and placed a hand on the door of the clinic before turning to Zenos.

“I only came to look for this Zenos because my sponsor insisted. Whether or not I find him is irrelevant to me. I never intended to form a group anyway.”

“I see...” Zenos replied.

Apparently, the reason this woman had been in the mountains was simply because cutting through there was the fastest route between where she’d been and the slums.

“Thank you for the restful sleep.” With that, the current Sword Saint left the clinic.

***

Afterward, Roa sat on the edge of the couch, hugging her knees dejectedly. The others had been scolding her, warning her not to go anywhere dangerous from now on, but she seemed to be in shock and only gave half-hearted replies.

“Roa,” Lily said, “I think you shouldn’t have suddenly asked to be her apprentice like that. It put her on the spot.”

“I know that,” Roa replied. “But still...” She bit her lip in frustration, then stood up, looking resigned. “Doctor Zenos... That letter the Silver Wolf gave you...”

“Hmm? It’s probably a quest,” Zenos said, picking the paper up from the desk.

Aside from the ominous crimson stamp on the top right that said “Special Summons,” the form itself was the same type used by the Adventurers’ Guild to issue quests. The client was marked as House Baycladd, and the quest involved investigating the cause of the increase in magical beast activity in the Zagras region.

“An increase in magical beast activity, it says,” he muttered.

While the exact circumstances of this phenomenon weren’t clear,

the reward offered was exceptionally high. It made sense, considering the client was one of the seven great noble houses. There was even a stipend for preparations for the trip.

The quest specified only adventurers of Bronze Class or higher were allowed to sign up, which made sense. The Zagras region was known for its harsh natural environment and great variety of magical beasts. There were even rumors of a powerful one sighted there about a decade ago—no wonder they wanted skilled adventurers.

Participants were to gather at noon tomorrow at the Hundred-Year Tree Plaza on the outskirts of the royal capital. Lord Baycladd's intentions were unclear, but if the Silver Wolf and other experienced adventurers were involved, this didn't sound like the kind of thing a mere shadow healer should be getting involved in.

It was best not to mess with the powers that be.

Or so Zenos had thought.

***

The next morning, Zophia burst into the clinic, sweating. "Doc! Roa's gone again!"

"What?" he replied, standing up from his chair. "Is she out hunting magical beasts?"

"I doubt she'd do that after what happened yesterday. I gave her a big earful too."

"So where has she..." he trailed off as the realization hit him. "Damn it! The quest!"

Roa had been present when Zenos read the request form that Aska, the Silver Wolf, had left behind. The girl knew what it was about—and if she went to the designated meeting spot, she could meet Aska again.

"Crap. Is she still thinking of becoming an apprentice?"

"What are you talking about, doc?"

"Sorry, no time to explain. I've gotta go fetch her!"

The quest's participants were supposed to meet at noon in the Hundred-Year Tree Plaza. Since it was by the royal capital's main gate—completely opposite to the direction of the slums—even

running there with leg-enhancing magic would cut it close.

"Wait, Zenos! It's hot outside, so take this, please!" Lily said, hurriedly packing a water canteen into a rucksack and giving it to him.

"Thanks, Lily. Bye!"

"Please take care of Roa, Zenos!"

"I'm counting on you, doc!"


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“Yeah! Take care of the place for me!” he called out as he dashed out of the clinic, darting through the streets with his enhancement magic. He crossed the stone bridge, cut through the shopping district, and sprinted down the alleys.

And then came an ominous laugh from inside his pack. “Hee hee hee...”

“What?” Zenos stopped abruptly. “I know that creepy laugh, you floaty snake!”

“Creepy, he says!” Carmilla protested. “I had a feeling and hid an ancient bracelet of mine in this pack, you see, so I snuck along for the ride.”

“You can’t be serious,” he muttered. Now that he thought about it, things *had* been unusually quiet lately—and that invariably meant that the wraith was up to no good.

In contrast to Zenos’s annoyed thoughts, the voice coming from the pack was excited, almost childlike. “I have not adventured in ages. I wonder what kind of quest awaits us. Hee hee hee...”

“‘Ages’?” he echoed. “Look, just so you know, I’m not accepting anything. I’m just going there to bring Roa back.”

“But Zenos had no idea that this was but the beginning of a thrilling, grand adventure, full of challenges and wonder—”

“Quit it with the ominous prophecies alreadyyy!!!”

***

“Made it...”

Zenos exhaled deeply as he arrived at his destination, wiping the sweat from his brow.

The Hundred-Year Tree Plaza was a park filled with long-lived broad-leaved mord trees, which were typically planted during celebrations. Their wide branches cast a cool shade over the grassy lawn, making the plaza a popular relaxation spot for citizens.

Today, however, heavily geared adventurers were milling about. At a glance, Zenos counted over thirty people.

“Where’s Roa...?” he asked, standing on the tips of his toes as he looked around. He couldn’t find her.

All of the adventurers gathered in the plaza were either chatting excitedly with their acquaintances or, in some cases, glaring at one another. The atmosphere was quite chaotic. Zenos gave up looking for the Kumil girl and decided to look for someone else instead, quickly finding his target this time.

"There she is."

Standing quietly at a slight distance from the crowd was Aska Follix, the silver-haired swordmaiden known as the Silver Wolf. The space around her was empty, as though the intensity of her presence had naturally scared everyone else away.

Roa had to have come looking for the Silver Wolf; Zenos figured that, if he stayed near Aska, he'd probably find Roa eventually.

"Hey," he said, raising one hand in greeting.

"You're..." The Silver Wolf lifted her head slightly and gave a small nod.

Immediately, the surrounding adventurers began to murmur.

"Who's that guy?"

"He just casually walked up to the Sword Saint."

"Who the hells is he?"

The sudden buzz from the crowd was noticeable, but Zenos had no time to worry about that right now.

"Sorry to bother you before the quest," he said to Aska. "I'm looking for Roa, the girl who asked to be your apprentice. She's gone missing, and I figure she may have come here."

"There," Aska responded surprisingly quickly.

"Huh?" Zenos followed her gaze and spotted a girl lying on her back in the shade of a tree. She had dark skin and bright green hair; it was Roa, all right. "Uh..."

"She's just unconscious. She showed up here demanding to be my apprentice again, so I gave her a light tap with the hilt of my sword and put her to sleep."

"O-Oh, did she? Sorry about that."

That would explain why the other adventurers were keeping their distance from Aska. The current Sword Saint was really something if she was willing to casually knock out an eager young girl within seconds, just like that.

Zenos hurried over to Roa and lightly smacked her cheek. “Hey. Roa.”

“P-Please let me be your apprentice!” the Kumil girl exclaimed as she suddenly jolted awake. She blinked rapidly. “Huh? Doctor? What? Where’s the Silver Wolf?”

Seeing Roa’s confusion, Zenos sighed and said, “Don’t bother an adventurer who’s busy getting ready for a job. Let’s go home.”

“N-No!” Roa leaped back as if to avoid Zenos, shaking her head. “I’m sorry for causing trouble, doctor, I am! But this is my only chance! I’ve *gotta* become the Sword Saint’s apprentice!”

Aska sighed softly, her cold silver gaze settling on Roa. “I told you, I don’t take apprentices.”

“I-I know it’s a selfish request! But it has to be you, because I’m the—”

“Hey, twerp!” said a man wearing a harsh expression. He had a skull tattooed on the back of his hand and spiky purple hair styled in a mohawk, giving him a rather unsavory vibe. The man grinned smugly as he glared in their direction. “You don’t get to bother Aska while *I’m* around, runt.”

“Who are you?” Roa asked.

Aska, meanwhile, only tilted her head slightly.

“Hey, now! It’s me! Veego from the Skull Dogs? The Silver Class party? We hit it off at the tavern, remember?”

“No,” Aska replied flatly.

“What?! You were sitting there all dreamy-eyed listening to my tales!”

“I was probably just sleepy.” Aska’s expression was completely deadpan. “I mean no offense. I just can’t remember people who don’t make a strong impression.”

“Wh-What did you just say?! Then how did you recognize *this* guy?” the spiky-haired Veego shouted, pointing at Zenos. “I’m way more memorable than some nobody like him!”

After a brief silence, Aska lightly touched her cheek.

“You’re right. I wonder why I remembered him.”

“Now listen here! You’d better remember me! Nobody gets to look down on me and live to tell the tale, y’hear?!” Veego shouted,

his anger escalating in the face of Aska's unflappable composure. "I don't care if you're the Sword Saint or what—"

Another voice interrupted his rant just then. "Silence! It's time!"

Several men wearing Adventurers' Guild uniforms stood in the middle of the plaza. One of them, using a magical loudspeaker, called out to the group.

"The expedition to Zagras is about to begin. Only Bronze Class or higher adventurers, as well as those with a special summons from Lord Baycladd, may participate! Present your adventurer cards!"

As the announcement was made, the adventurers began gathering in the plaza's center.

Veego clicked his tongue. "I'll make sure you remember me, like it or not," he muttered. He spat on the ground, glaring at Aska as she walked away.

"Wait, I'm coming too!" Roa called out, trying to follow after the Silver Wolf.

Zenos quickly grabbed the girl's shoulders. "Hold up. You don't even meet the participation requirements. Don't cause trouble."

"Please, doctor, I need to do this!"

"You're not going."

"Let go!"

"Pipe down," said an Adventurers' Guild staffer as he approached them with suspicion. "Are you two here to join the expedition?"

"Oh, sorry," Zenos said. "We're not adventurers. We were just on our way, actually. Come on, Roa."

"Nooo! Don't take me awaaay!"

"Can you *please* not give them the wrong idea?"

"Show me your adventurer card, now," the staff member said sternly. A man restraining a young girl definitely warranted caution, after all.

"Look, like I said, I'm not—"

"What the...? You don't even have a card and you still thought you could sign up for a mission for one of the seven greats?" interjected Veego, the arrogant adventurer from moments ago, having overheard the commotion. He approached, smirking, hands in his pockets. "Or is your rank so low you're ashamed to show your

card? Gah ha ha! I get now why the Sword Saint remembered you! You're just *that* much of a moron! You don't belong here, rat. Scram!"

"I wasn't planning on joining in the first place," Zenos muttered, dragging the struggling Roa away in an attempt to avoid further involvement.

But...

"Wait a moment," the guild staffer called out suddenly, holding a piece of paper in his hand. He took a glance at it, then at Zenos, and immediately took a deep bow. "M-My deepest apologies!"

"Huh?" Zenos said.

"I didn't realize you were one of the individuals personally requested by Lord Baycladd!"

"Whaaat?" Veego blurted out.

"Huh?" Zenos repeated. Veego wasn't the only one in shock.

The guild staffer, who just seconds earlier had been suspicious of Zenos, had completely shifted his demeanor. He gestured widely toward the plaza's exit, as if escorting a noblewoman. Over a dozen carriages were lined up, waiting.

"You should have said so sooner!" the staff member exclaimed. "Please, step into a carriage."

"Wh-What?"

"A-And your attendant as well, of course."

"Yay!" Roa celebrated, jumping for joy. "Way to go, doctor!"

Zenos just stood there in confusion.

"*That* guy got one of Lord Baycladd's special summons?" an adventurer asked.

"I thought only the Sword Saint had gotten one," another said.

"So that's why he was all buddy-buddy with her," added a third. "Who *is* this guy?"

Zenos hadn't wanted to attract attention, and now found himself the center of it. If he tried to flee now, it would only make things worse. With the guild staff member practically pushing him toward the carriages, he muttered bitterly, "I know this is your doing, you floaty snake."

Carmilla had secretly stashed the special summons Zenos had

received from Aska yesterday into his pack. The spirit, residing in a bracelet within the bag, had pushed out the paper when no one was looking.

"Hee hee hee... You left me no choice. This group is headed for Zagras now. Either way, even if you were to bring Roa back, the girl would find a way to run after the Sword Saint at the first opportunity. Or do you intend to lock her up?"

"Well, no, that's not really an option..."

Roa, meanwhile, practically leaped into Zenos's arms, bursting at the seams with excitement. "Thank you for the help, doctor! You're awesome! I'll never give up on my dreams, just like you taught me!"

"Uh... Yeah... Sure..."

"All right, time to depart! I wish you all good fortune!" the guild staffer called out.

With that, the horses all neighed in unison like a chorus of whistles signaling the start of the journey, and the many carriages set off side by side. A cloud of dust rose high in the air.

As Zenos watched the rows of hundred-year trees fade into the distance, he muttered in disbelief, "How did this happen...?"

From the pack on his lap, an amused voice rang out. "Rejoice, Zenos! A thrilling adventure awaits you!"

"*You* shut your mouth!"

Chapter 3: Night at the Camp

"Now what am I supposed to do?" Zenos muttered as he gazed vacantly at the passing scenery, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Long, thin clouds drifted across the azure sky. Below, their carriage raced across the road, barren land stretching out on either side. The capital was now far behind them, and they were nearing the frontier region.

The wraith's voice came from the pack resting on Zenos's lap. "Do not worry about Lily. The demi-humans will take care of her. She is a smart young lady and will sense that there must be a reason for your absence."

"I guess..."

"It is, in fact, wholly possible that she anticipated that the Kumil girl would resist and you would end up following her along on this mission. I suspect that is why she gave you the bag with my bracelet in it just before your departure."

"Hmm..." Well, he supposed it was possible. Lily could be astonishingly insightful sometimes. "Still, we only just opened the school..."

"Lily and Zonde are there. St. Carmilla Academy will be fine. Your presence at the lessons is little more than a bonus."

"You don't *have* to say that."

"Doctor, who are you talking to?" asked Roa, who was sitting to his right.

"Uh, I... No one. I'm just thinking out loud," Zenos replied, giving the girl a tired look.

In contrast, Roa seemed unable to contain her excitement. "Makes sense! You're excited about the adventure too, right?! I'll do everything I can to make the Sword Saint notice me!"

"Right..." Now that he thought about it, Zenos recalled Lily and Zophia asking him to take care of Roa. His excitement level couldn't

be any lower, but he had no choice but to go along with it for now.

The Zagras region was a rugged, steep, mountainous land, which made travel by carriage difficult. The organizers had arranged for specially trained horses that could take them there much faster than those pulling ordinary carts. The seats were incredibly comfortable, clearly made from luxury materials. In addition to the carriages transporting adventurers, there were also wagons for supplies like food and water. The patronage of House Baycladd, one of the seven great noble houses, was evident.

"Excuse me," said another occupant, seated to the left of Zenos and Roa. "My name is Jose Hayworth. Are you two a party?"

The boy leaned his elbow on the window frame as he spoke. He was small and somewhat innocent-looking, with orange hair cut in what looked almost like a bob. With how cute he looked, he could easily be mistaken for a girl if he didn't speak, although there was a subtle cheeky vibe to him. His only visible equipment was a traveler's robe, and he didn't give off the impression of an experienced adventurer. Perhaps he was part of the mission's support team.

"I guess we're kind of a party. My name's Zenos. This is Roa," Zenos said vaguely with a nod, not wanting to bother with a lengthy explanation.

"You're not carrying much. And the girl, is she Kumil? What an unusual lineup."

"Yeah." Zenos also had an apex undead in his pack, but he wasn't going to mention that.

"I hear this quest involves a fair amount of danger. Are you sure you two are up for it? Or maybe you're just *that* confident?" the boy asked pointedly.

"Well, I wasn't planning on coming along at all, really. I got dragged into this."

"Aw, come on, doctor! You're here for me, aren't you?" Roa said.

"You *do* know this is your fault, right?"

"Hmm," Jose hummed. "I don't get it. Why would someone like you get a special summons?"

Ah. So the commotion during the departure hadn't gone unnoticed.

“Well, it was kind of a mistake. I didn’t actually want a summons, so...”

“A mistake, huh? Well, whatever. I myself ended up here by chance.” Jose let out a resigned snort.

Unlike the other adventurers, the boy didn’t radiate enthusiasm or intensity. In fact, he seemed pretty unmotivated. At least it kept the atmosphere from being stifling, Zenos supposed. But still, now that he was in this situation, he wanted to wrap up the mission as soon as possible and get Roa back home. And to do that, he needed information.

Resignedly, Zenos asked, “The missive mentioned something about an increase in magical beasts, but...what are we trying to do, exactly?”

“Huh? You don’t even know what this is about? Are you confident, or just stupid?”

“Neither. I told you, I wasn’t planning on coming.”

The boy nodded in understanding, straightening up a bit. “Apparently, over the past few years, disasters caused by magical beasts and monsters in general have been increasing across the country. This trend has been particularly pronounced in Zagras, and our objective is to investigate the cause.”

“The cause, huh. So they think—”

“Yes. They do,” Jose cut in with a sullen nod.

Roa, looking between the two, joined in. “What? What do they think?”

“Well...magical beasts and monsters can influence each other,” Zenos explained. “If a powerful magical beast is around, its presence can attract other magical beasts to the area.” As demonstrated when Carmilla’s presence had drawn large numbers of undead to the Royal Institute of Healing.

“So...”

“The increase in magical beasts could be due to various factors, like climate changes or food availability, but it’s likely some powerful beast is behind it,” Zenos concluded.

“In other words,” Jose said, “our mission is to find and eliminate the magical beast at the root of the problem.”

If there was indeed a magical beast lurking in the area, to cause an increase in monsters of this magnitude, the beast would likely be extremely powerful. That was likely why the mission was restricted to high-ranking Bronze Class and above adventurers.

"I remember hearing about a powerful beast appearing in Zagras about ten years ago," Zenos said.

"Yeah. I was young back then, so I don't know much about it, but from my understanding the area is naturally prone to accumulating raw mana."

Zagras was known for being rich in a variety of ores and manastones. Since manastones were essentially crystallized raw mana, it made sense.

Roa clenched her fist excitedly. "A powerful magical beast, huh? Perfect for my track record. This mission is made for me, doctor!"

"At least one of us is excited."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing..."

Although Zenos was concerned about Roa's excessive enthusiasm, the Sword Saint was part of the mission. With a Black Class adventurer—practically a superhuman—on their side, surely they would be safe. He told Jose as much.

"I would hope so, but..." Jose said, sounding somewhat dissatisfied.

"Is there a problem?"

"Oh, I don't doubt her skill. It's just that from what I've heard, the Silver Wolf works on her own and never joins parties. Apparently, she doesn't like to waste her energy helping people who would only slow her down. So if we end up in a bind, I don't know that she'd actually help us."

"Ah, I see..." Zenos did recall Aska saying something like that at the clinic: *"Adventuring is all about personal responsibility."* She wasn't wrong.

Jose, elbow still propped up, looked over at Zenos. "So, what adventurer class are you guys?"

"Uh, we're not really adventurers—"

"You were Gold Class, right, doctor?" Roa asked unnecessarily,

interrupting the simple explanation Zenos was about to offer.

The boy's expression changed slightly. "Huh. Gold Class would put you in the top percentile of adventurers. You'd be elite. That's weird, though, because I've never heard of an adventurer named Zenos."

"Yeah, it figures. I was just a hanger-on in a Gold Class party."

"You're making this complicated. So, basically, you're a nobody?"

"You could say that."

Jose let out a small sigh, then spoke as though recalling something. "Speaking of Gold Class, have you ever heard of this one party called the Golden Phoenix?"

"Uh, I, er, might've." A faint chuckle came from Zenos's pack, prompting him to glare at it.

"It was an incredible party that took down multiple A Rank magical beasts practically unscathed. They were close to making it to Platinum Class, with some thinking they'd reach Black one day. But then, inexplicably, they failed to hunt a B+ Rank magical beast, and no one's heard from them since. I wonder what happened."

"Y-Yeah, I wonder..."

Jose glanced around, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "This is just a rumor, but...supposedly, the Golden Phoenix was a four-person party with a hidden fifth member. The party fell apart because the mystery fifth, who was their strongest, left them. There's no other explanation for their sudden decline." He snickered. "Though, really, what a joke, right? If someone that skilled existed, then where did they go? What are they doing?"

"Wow. That's so interesting. Ha ha..."

"What's with the nervous laughter all of a sudden?"

Zenos pressed down on his bag to muffle the chuckles coming from within it. "Anyway, uh, say, are you an adventurer too?"

"Me? I'm—"

Just as Jose began to respond, a horse neighed suddenly, and the carriage came to a halt. The air grew tense immediately, and they could hear the other adventurers shouting outside.

"Beast! Magical beast!"

Jumping down from the carriage, Zenos spotted a large insect-like

creature scurrying about in the sandy area stretching ahead. The thing was the color of amber and had sharp pincers, with a tail that extended straight into the air, tipped with a bladelike point.

"Oh. A crag scorpion, huh...?"

The magical beast resembled a giant scorpion, roughly as big as a human toddler. Though it wasn't particularly agile, it was known for its hard, rocky exoskeleton. Its high durability made it surprisingly challenging to defeat for inexperienced parties.

"Ew. Gross," muttered Jose, who'd also gotten off the carriage.

A lone crag scorpion was classified as a D Rank beast, but they usually moved in small groups. *Usually*. Today, there were at least a hundred of them. One scorpion near the front started clacking its pincers in a show of intimidation, and the whole group responded by joining in and clacking their own in turn. The air vibrated as the area was quickly engulfed in the deafening chorus.

"This seems to lend credence to the idea that there's been a rise in magical beasts," the boy mused with a finger on his chin.

"Perfect opportunity for a little warm-up," Roa said, cracking her knuckles excitedly.

"Obstinate little..." Zenos muttered in exasperation.

The other adventurers seemed just as thrilled as Roa, stepping out of their carriages one by one with an air of confidence. They were all seasoned adventurers, ranked Bronze or higher. They didn't seem the type to be intimidated by a swarm of crag scorpions.

"Hiyaaah!" Roa shouted, charging forward before anyone could stop her, leading the attack.

The other adventurers, not wanting to be outdone, followed close behind. Shouts, roars, and the shrill sounds of clashing metal rang out. Dust rose into the air, and in an instant, the place became a battlefield.

"You're not going?" Zenos asked Jose.

"Are you kidding?" the boy responded with a wry smile. "Do I look strong to you?"

"No, actually."

"What about you? Not joining in?"

"I don't work unless I have to."

"Ha! That certainly is an excuse."

Zenos's specialty was support, after all. He didn't feel the need to get involved, especially with so many seasoned adventurers around. He watched from the sidelines, noticing that a few individuals stood out as particularly skilled.

First, there was Veego, the man who'd caused a commotion at the plaza. He leaped at the scorpions, shouting, "Hyah ha! Here's one for the books!" A sword with a distinctive curved blade in hand, he ran rampant across the battlefield. His fighting style looked self-taught and inefficient even to an amateur, but his sheer physical ability compensated for that. It was clear he wasn't someone Zenos wanted to get involved with.

There was also a timid-looking black-haired female adventurer dressed in a simple traveler's robe. She looked nervous, but as she formed seals and chanted something, the nearby crag scorpions started attacking each other.

A beast tamer? Zenos wondered. It was a very unusual specialization.

Another noteworthy figure was a large elderly man wielding a long spear. The deep wrinkles etched into his face and his unkempt facial hair showed his age, but his movements were more powerful than anyone else's. With a single sweep of his spear, he sent a dozen scorpions flying.

Roa, who came from a hunting tribe, was also nimbly darting around and making short work of the magical beasts. Zenos figured he'd help her if needed, but so far, she seemed to be doing just fine on her own.

"Wait, where's the Silver Wolf?" Zenos asked.

"Oh. Now that you mention it..." Jose looked around, scanning the area. The Silver Wolf should have been in the carriage at the front, but her figure was nowhere to be seen on the battlefield. "She must be asleep."

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"Uh, I'm joking. There's no way she'd actually be asleep," Jose said, waving his hand dismissively.

It was entirely possible, though. This was a woman who could fall

into a deep sleep even in an area teeming with dangerous magical beasts.

In the end, it took the thrill-seeking adventurers less than half an hour to exterminate the swarm of crag scorpions.

Jose placed his hands on his hips and gave a small nod. "Well, leave it to the elite adventurers to take care of that."

"Yeah. Hopefully things stay this easy."

"You're an odd one, aren't you? Though I want to take it easy, myself." The boy sounded tired and unmotivated.

Zenos had been dragged into this adventure almost against his will, but he wondered why this boy had joined such a dangerous expedition. He was about to ask when Roa came running back from the sandy area, waving.

"Doctor, did you see that?! See what I can do?! I—"

Roa stopped abruptly. She lowered her stance slightly, furrowing her brows as her eyes darted around. It was as though she'd sensed something.

"Roa...?"

The other adventurers had begun to casually return to their carriages when the girl shouted, "Something's coming!"

Sand burst into the air as a massive figure suddenly emerged from the sandy ground. For a moment, it looked like a snake, but something seemed off. Instead of eyes, it had rows of jagged, bladelike teeth lining a large, gaping maw. Its slick, fleshy body swayed slowly from side to side as if sizing up its prey.

It was a sandworm—an ordinary earthworm that had mutated into a magical beast. But this one...

"No way, man," one of the adventurers murmured.

This one was *huge*.

Ordinary sandworms were usually about the size of an adult human, their threat level around C+. But this particular sandworm, either due to mutation or as a result of whatever phenomenon had caused the recent increase in magical beast activity, absolutely towered over the group, its massive figure looming over them menacingly.

"Eww... The scorpions were already gross, but this thing is even

worse," Jose complained, his face twisted with disgust.

The sandworm let out a vicious roar into the sky, then whipped its massive serpentine body around, swatting four adventurers aside at once. Immediately after, it spat out a barrage of rocks from its maw. The seasoned adventurers, having lowered their guards after finishing off the rock scorpions, were caught off guard by the colossal creature's sudden aggression. Screams and blood spatters tainted the relaxed atmosphere.

"Whoa!"

"Ack!"

"Argh!"

Watching the scene, Zenos muttered quietly. "Damn. It's hard to keep up the protective spells like this."

Protective magic was weaker the further the caster was from the target, and with everyone scattered around like this, the effect was unreliable. Not only that, during his time as an adventurer, Zenos had only had his party members to worry about; with this many people, choosing who to prioritize was surprisingly tricky.

He was about to move to heal the injured when the massive sandworm raised its head like a cobra poised to strike and lunged straight at the lead carriage—the one where the Silver Wolf was. The driver leaped away in a panic, leaving the carriage to its fate as the sandworm's coiling body whipped toward it with full force.

And then—

"What's with the noise? I was finally getting some rest."

Somehow, even amid the commotion, the voice rang clear as a sleepy face poked out from inside the carriage. The Silver Wolf had, in fact, been slumbering.

Her shimmering silver hair swayed almost imperceptibly, and a long, straight slash appeared across the sandy ground. The next moment, the sandworm's body split in two, the head and tail sections writhing as they flew off in opposite directions. Again, the sound of the slash came after—shrill and sharp, followed by a powerful gust that sent the nearby sand whirling into the air and made the carriages' canopies flap wildly.

"D-Damn," muttered an adventurer.

The Silver Wolf cast the prone adventurers a cold glare. “If *this* thing can injure you, you’ll just be in the way. Go home already.” With a yawn, she began to sluggishly retreat back into the carriage.

“Huh?” mumbled an adventurer, confused, giving the Sword Saint pause.

The adventurers that the sandworm had knocked down were now standing up, looking at themselves in puzzlement. They touched their bodies, marveling.

“My wounds are...gone?”

“Whoa! Mine too!”

“When did I get healed? Who the heck...?”

The Sword Saint observed them in silent impassivity, then scoffed lightly and returned to the carriage.

A voice came from the pack slung over Zenos’s shoulder. “Was that you, Zenos?”

“No, I only healed...” He trailed off, turning to the boy beside him. Zenos was certain he’d just heard the quiet whisper of an incantation: *Hi-Heal.* “Hey, did you...?”

“Not that I wanted to, mind, but it *is* my job.” The boy turned to the adventurers, his expression weary. “You should all be grateful.” Then he shrugged and looked up at Zenos. “Oh, I never finished introducing myself, huh? Jose Hayworth. Elite healer, believe it or not.”


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Once the carriage resumed its journey, Jose began to wearily recount the circumstances that had forced him into joining this entourage.

"Dr. Shalbart is awful. He turned to me and said, 'Hoh hoh! You have the most free time out of all the elite healers, do you not? Quit your whining and make yourself useful!' And now here I am, taking part in this dangerous expedition." His cute face twisted in annoyance as he spoke, the mimicry of Shalbart's line and expression carrying a hint of malice.

Zenos turned to the still-cherubic-looking boy. "You said you're an elite healer? You're pretty young."

"Sixteen. Horrible, don't you think? There are other elite healers, but nooo, they went out of their way to send their youngest! I bet the old fart is jealous of my talent."

Sixteen was about the same age as the students Zenos had taught at Ledelucia Academy, and probably not far from Roa's age. Typically, commoners could only begin training to be healers after graduating from secondary school. How had this boy reached elite rank at such a young age?

"I come from a long line of healers," Jose explained. "I've been training since I was little. My talent was such that the Royal Institute of Healing took notice of me early on. I skipped rank after rank, and before I knew it, I was stuck as elite class...even though I don't actually care about being a healer."

"You don't care, and you still do it?" asked a perplexed Roa, seated to Zenos's right.

"Yes. And precisely because I don't care, I try to make my treatments quick. That way, I can go back to my room, eat sweets, and read the books I like. But as it turns out, being efficient landed me this job." Jose let out a dispirited sigh.

Elite healers were rare enough; finding one that had gotten to that point for such reasons was exceptionally unusual.

"You elite healers sure are an odd bunch," Zenos remarked.

"Huh? You've met others?"

"Yeah. Becker, a few times." And Zenos's mentor had supposedly been an elite healer as well, but given the matter of the curse, he figured it was best to not mention that.

"Ah, Mr. Becker. A little wicked, that man, but one of the few proper elite healers out there."

"He's proper, is he?" Zenos couldn't begin to imagine what the rest of them must be like, then.

Jose clapped as though recalling something. "Wait, no, no, he's not proper at all! He was arrested once for attempted mass poisoning, even!"

It was true. Not that Zenos could mention his own involvement in that incident. And considering his mentor, well, maybe there were no decent elite healers after all.

"But hey, how do you know Mr. Becker?" Jose asked.

"Well, some stuff happened..."

"So you got a special summons by 'mistake,' and now you know Mr. Becker...yet I've never heard of an adventurer named Zenos. Who *are* you, exactly?"

"A guy who wants to do what he can and live a quiet life."

"Hmm..." Jose rested his cheek on his hand, gazing out the window with an air of disinterest.

"Is something on your mind?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just, when I healed the injured adventurers back there, it seemed like the healing affected a wider area than usual. I thought maybe another healer was around, but I didn't hear any chanting. Perhaps I misjudged my output."

"Oh, ha ha, yeah, perhaps. Ha."

"Why are you laughing nervously again?"

"Uh, well, anyway," Zenos said, clearing his throat and changing the subject. "Looks like the Sword Saint isn't the only skilled adventurer around."

Jose seemed suspicious for a moment, but he played along. "I know of Veego, the leader of the Skull Dogs. The party's only Silver Class, but they've been soaring through the ranks. Originally, they were essentially a gang of notoriously brutish thieves."

Veego was the mohawked man who'd been causing a scene before they'd departed. His background seemed fittingly suspicious—not that Zenos was in any position to judge.

"Then there's Misery Ren. She's only Bronze and doesn't have a notable record, but beast tamers are unusual. Her previous party was supposedly wiped out, so she may be here to try and find a new one."

That had to have been the unassuming female adventurer. She'd been through a lot, it seemed.

"The highlight of the bunch is Kaiser Donner, the Platinum Class spearman. He's over sixty, but his skills don't seem to have dulled at all."

"Ah, the older guy..."

Platinum was effectively the highest class an adventurer could achieve, and there had definitely been something extraordinary about the man.

"You know, Jose, you're very knowledgeable about adventurers. I used to go on adventures too, but the only famous ones I'd heard of were people like the Sword Saint and the saintess."

"I like reading and hearing about other people's adventures. I've always been made to walk a set path, so I like to learn about the stupid, reckless bravery of people who can do whatever they want." The words carried a hint of venom, but they didn't seem malicious. "And, well, it's probably that love of adventures that got me roped into this. Hah..." After a short, dry laugh, Jose's expression turned serious. "But I'm really mostly intrigued by the Silver Wolf."

"Why?"

"She's said to be a solitary swordmaiden, rarely mingling with others. So it's strange to me that she'd join an expedition with such a large group, even as a summons from Lord Baycladd. So I'm wondering... Does she have a personal connection to Lord Baycladd, or is it something else?"

He had a point. Judging by the Sword Saint's demeanor when the crag scorpions and the sandworm appeared, she had no intention of mingling with anyone. If anything, she seemed more annoyed that others were around. For her to nevertheless have joined this

expedition, there had to be a good reason.

Roa, who'd been silently listening in, suddenly turned serious at the mention of the Sword Saint. She still hadn't given up on the idea of being the swordmaiden's apprentice, which was starting to become a headache.

Before Zenos could say anything, the carriage came to a sudden halt.

"That's as far as we go today," came the driver's throaty voice from outside. "We'll begin preparing to make camp."

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The surrounding area had already begun to grow dim when Zenos got out of his carriage. Under the twinkle of the first star dotting the evening sky, he stretched to ease the stiffness that had built up in his body over the many hours of travel. Feeling nature's embrace throughout one's entire form like this was part of the thrill of adventu—

"Wait a second," Zenos snapped. "Roaaa!!!"

Before Zenos realized it, the Kumil girl was gone from his side, having rushed to the Silver Wolf the moment she saw the swordmaiden step out of the carriage at the front of the caravan. He enhanced his leg strength and managed to catch up to her before she made it to Aska.

"Cut it out, Roa!" he admonished her.

"Let me go, doctor!" Roa pleaded, but the healer kept a firm grip on the struggling girl's collar.

A little ahead, the Silver Wolf turned to look at them. "Why are you two here...? Wait, don't tell me you're actually Zenos..."

"Yeah, sorry," the healer admitted, scratching his head. He pulled the special summons from his pack. "I *am* Zenos. But I didn't mean to join the expedition, really. I'll do my best to keep this girl from getting in your way, yeah?"

Aska stood silently for a moment before speaking again, her expression blank as ever, making it hard to read her thoughts. "I see... So you're the one Lord Baycladd was looking for. That's quite

the coincidence."

"I've always had a knack for getting myself into trouble," Zenos muttered. "Anyway, Roa, let's go."

"Nooo! Please make me your apprentiiice!" Roa whined stubbornly as Zenos dragged her away.

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In a tree-lined clearing, Zenos gathered branches for firewood as he spoke. "Why are you so obsessed with the Silver Wolf?"

"She's the current Sword Saint, right?" Roa asked. "I told you, I'm the daughter of the previous Sword Saint! Are you calling me a liar too, doctor?"

"No, I don't think you're lying," Zenos replied without missing a beat, making Roa's green eyes widen in surprise.

He finished gathering a number of suitable-looking branches and snapped them. Fresh wood contained too much moisture to be good for burning, so he wanted to check how dry the branches were.

"I want to trust my students," he continued. "And you wouldn't be doing all this if you were lying. But you know, since I'm already neck deep into this, you could at least tell me a bit more."

Roa looked down and clenched her fists tightly. "I've never met my father. But my mom told me he was the Sword Saint."

"You heard it from your mother?"

"She wouldn't lie about that!" Roa said, raising her voice. "The Kumil tribe lives in mountain villages. My mom said that my father was an adventurer known as the Thunder God. He stayed in our village for a while, and that was when he and my mom got close. But one day, he just disappeared and never came back... When I was born, he was already gone. I don't really know all the details."

She leaned against the trunk of a tree, folding her arms behind her back, and her voice grew quieter.

"Mom told me he'd come back one day, but... Then *that* happened." *That* likely referred to Roa's village being destroyed, as Zophia had mentioned. "I was playing by the river down in the valley that day, and I heard the screams on the wind. When I got back, the

village was gone... And my mom too...”

“A magical beast attack, huh...”

“Yeah. There were no more beasts there by the time I got back, but...”

Roa slowly reached into her pocket and pulled out a small cloth pouch. Within was what looked to be a fragment of jet-black plumage. It seemed quite old, but still emitted a dark, eerie sheen.

“Do you know what beast this is from, doctor?”

“No, I have no idea.” Though Zenos had encountered many magical beasts during his days as an adventurer, he’d never seen any with fur or feathers that matched this. “Where was your village located, Roa?”

“That’s the thing... I was really little, so I don’t remember very well. A group of Kumil nomads found me all alone and took me to another village. After that, I moved around from place to place,” she explained. “This is the only clue I have.” She stared intently at the remnant of the beast, then clenched it tightly in her palm. “I’ll find this thing and avenge my mom and the others.”

“Is that why you wanted to become an adventurer?”

She nodded firmly. “Yeah, and I also thought that if my father... If the Sword Saint had returned to the village in time, maybe everyone would’ve lived.”

Zenos listened silently. The previous Sword Saint, the Thunder God, was rumored to have gone missing.

Roa nodded as though acknowledging this. “I eventually decided to come to the capital to become an adventurer. That was when I found out that no one knew where my father had gone.”

After a moment of silence, she looked down and kicked a pebble into the distance.

“I’ve never met him, so I don’t miss him. I don’t even want to meet him. But I wanna know the things he saw, what he thought...why he never came back. I thought maybe if I could become a Sword Saint too, I’d understand.”

“So that’s why you want the current one to take you as an apprentice.”

Roa’s actions are reckless, but her motivations make sense, Zenos

thought.

The Kumil girl suddenly placed her palms on the ground and looked up at Zenos with a serious expression. “Zophia and the others have always said that if anyone can make the impossible possible, it’s you, doctor. So, please, help me become the Sword Saint’s apprentice!”

“Look, Roa... The impossible is just that. Impossible. I can only do what’s possible.”

“But you do so many things that look impossible to ordinary people!”

“I do...?”

“Do you really think it’s totally impossible for me to become the Sword Saint’s apprentice?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s *totally* impossible, but...”

“Then please! Even people from the slums can achieve their dreams, right?”

Zenos scratched his cheek and shrugged. “Well, I’d need to be adequately compensated.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t work for free on principle. I don’t charge to treat children, but helping you become the Sword Saint’s disciple isn’t exactly a treatment.”

“Th-Then...” Roa gulped. “I... I’ll be your girlfriend?”

“What part of ‘adequately compensated’ do you not understand?”

“O-Ouch! It took all of my courage to say that!”

“You should be making better use of that courage.”

Zenos let out a heavy sigh. Roa didn’t sound like she was going to give up anytime soon. That meant he wouldn’t be able to take his eyes off her, which in turn meant he wouldn’t be going back home in the near future.

“All right. Fine. I’ll help a little. The rest is up to you, though.”

“Really?! Yay!” She paused, her excitement giving way to uncertainty. “Um, but how do we...?”

Zenos glanced toward the carriages in the distance and said, “Well, the Sword Saint doesn’t take disciples or have allies because she thinks they’ll get in her way. So...the only thing you can do is

prove that you won't be a liability."

***

Zenos, with Roa in tow, carried the firewood toward the area where the adventurers were gathered. Smoke was already rising here and there, with participants sitting by their campfires of choice.

"Doctor, what do I do to 'prove' it to her?" Roa asked.

Zenos looked over his shoulder at her. "Challenge her to a sparring match. If she can recognize your skill as a fighter, you won't need to plead your case."

"You want me to spar with her?" Roa shivered slightly. "Yes! You're a genius, doctor! Time to show her what I'm made of!"

"That's...a lot of confidence."

Realistically, Roa didn't stand a chance—but without the match, the girl herself would never understand that. While Zenos could secretly offer support with protective and enhancement magic so Roa could put up a decent fight, this was about her proving her own strength, so he intended to mostly watch.

"Do your best, but if it doesn't work out, I want you to actually give up, all right? It'll mean that now's just not the right time yet."

"O-Okay," Roa agreed, nodding solemnly.

Now the biggest problem was getting the Sword Saint to accept the challenge...

"U-Um, excuse me," came an anxious voice as Zenos looked around for Aska. "You're one of the specially summoned guests, right...?"

He turned around to see a plain-looking female adventurer standing nearby. Misery Ren, if memory served—a Bronze Class beast tamer.

"Sorry to interrupt. We haven't met, but... Are you, by any chance, close with Lord Baycladd?"

"Close? No," Zenos replied bluntly. "If anything, I'm not exactly his fan."

"Huh? Oh. I see..." she said, a bit taken aback.

The young woman looked like she wanted to ask more questions,

but Zenos didn't really want anyone probing into his background too much, so he excused himself by claiming he had things to attend to and walked away.

He found the Silver Wolf sitting by a campfire apart from the group, with her knees hugged to her chest. Standing before her was a slender boy in a traveler's robe.

"Jose?" Zenos called out.

"Oh. Hi," the youngest of the elite healers replied, turning to look in the other healer's direction.

"What are you doing?"

"I was just asking the Silver Wolf why she joined this expedition. But she just mumbled, 'Curiosity,' and fell right asleep..." Jose gave an exasperated shrug.

"She was curious?"

Aska was resting her chin on her knees, dozing off. Maybe her habit of sleeping whenever she had the chance was a way for her to conserve her focus and energy for the heat of battle?

"Move it, brat," a rough voice commanded. Veego, the mohawked leader of the Skull Dogs, grabbed Jose's head with one hand and pulled him away from Aska.

"What are you doing?" Jose demanded with a pout. "I'm not gonna heal you if you act like this, you know."

"Huh? I don't remember asking you to do anything," Veego replied, scowling. He then smirked arrogantly as he looked down at Aska. "Hey, Aska. Did you see me out there today?"

But the swordmaiden didn't respond. She didn't even stir, and just continued breathing softly in her sleep.

A vein visibly throbbed on Veego's forehead. "Y-You little...! How dare you—"

"Step aside," came a deep voice.

A large figure pushed Veego away and stepped forward. Wrinkles were etched across the figure's face, showing his age. He had an unkempt white beard, and his arms, thick as tree trunks, were covered in scars telling of a long history of battles. This was Kaiser Donner, the Platinum Class spearman. The seasoned warrior, well over sixty, held his spear at the ready.

“Aska Follix, the Silver Wolf,” he said. “I challenge you to a duel.”

“Huh?”

Roa and Zenos exchanged glances. The man had beaten them to the punch, asking for the exact thing they’d been wanting.

Aska, however, remained as unresponsive as ever.

“Hah!” Kaiser shouted, suddenly thrusting his spear forward with force.

The wind roared as the spear stopped just shy of striking Aska’s forehead, making the nearby crowd hold their breaths. The campfire’s flickering flames reflected off the razor-sharp silver blade at the spear’s end.

“Impressive,” Kaiser said with a small chuckle. “So you sensed I had no intent to harm you.” He slowly withdrew his spear, his already low voice dropping even lower. “Next time, though, I won’t hold back.”

“What do you want?” the Silver Wolf asked, opening one eye slightly as though recognizing the man’s resolve.

Keeping his spear pointed at her, Kaiser replied, “I wish to test my skill.”

“Why?”

“I have dedicated my life to the art of combat. Over the decades, I have vanquished countless foul creatures. My spear has reached the mountain’s summit, yet its tip falls short of the heavens. I wish to see if you truly stand above me as a warrior. It is my final wish as a soldier in his twilight years.”

Though Kaiser’s phrasing was florid, his meaning was clear: He’d reached Platinum Class, the practical peak for adventurers, but had not attained Black Class. Given his age, he wanted to see if a mere “girl” like Aska was truly superior to him. Aska avoided groups and generally operated solo—the fact she’d joined this expedition was highly unusual. For Kaiser, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“Hee hee hee... This is taking quite the interesting turn,” Carmilla said from the bracelet.

“Oh. You’re here.”

“Of course I am! I will have you know my presence can command entire crowds!”

“Doesn’t having a powerful presence defeat the point of being a ghost?”

As Zenos continued to banter with the wraith, he sensed Aska glancing his way for a moment.

“Very well,” the Sword Saint unexpectedly replied to the older spearman.

Kaiser was practically radiating a warrior’s aura. “Truly? Then let us begin—”

“But I have a condition.”

“What is it?”

Aska’s gaze turned directly toward Zenos this time. “First, you fight him. If you win, I’ll take you on.”

Zenos took a long pause. “What?”

***

The crackling firewood scattered sparks into the air. Sensing the tension, other adventurers had silently gathered around the campfire.

Kaiser glared intently at Zenos. “You got a special summons, did you not? What is your adventurer class?”

“Uh, I’m not even an adventurer, actually.”

The old warrior’s thick brow twitched in surprise. “And you dare to challenge a master spearman such as myself? What manner of mockery is this?!”

“No, no, *I’m* the one who should be complaining here. Explain this, Silver Wolf?”

As both men gave her scornful looks, Aska parted her pale pink lips to speak. “I...have a hard time remembering faces and names. I can only remember those who leave a strong impression on me. But for some reason, I could remember you after only one meeting. I want to know why.”

“And I have to fight a Platinum Class spearman because of that?”

What sounded like uproarious laughter from the wraith came from Zenos’s pack, and so he casually tossed it a good distance away.

Taking this as a sign of agreement, Kaiser began to approach slowly. “Hmph. A farce. But very well—if taking down this man means I get my duel, then so be it.”

“I’d rather not get taken down, thanks!”

“Hold on one moment,” Jose said, stepping between the two and spreading his arms. For a moment, Zenos thought the boy had come to stop the fight, but Jose instead grinned smugly and held up a finger. “You should at least set some proper terms for the duel. We don’t want anyone whining about it after, do we?”

“Hey!”

Jose seemed a little too enthusiastic about this. Although, he *had* once mentioned he had no interest in healing magic but loved hearing about other people’s reckless adventuring...

In the end, it was agreed that the first person to land a strike on their opponent would be the winner. Since they couldn’t risk actually killing each other, Kaiser would wield a spear-like stick, and Zenos a wooden sword made out of a branch. After all, Lord Baycladd’s mission was the priority, and they couldn’t afford to waste any resources.

Zenos gave a big shrug and looked over at the Sword Saint. “Fine. I’ll do it. But I have a condition too.”

“Which is?”

“If I win, you have to duel Roa here and decide whether she’s worthy of being your disciple. If I’m going to take on this ridiculous challenge, you have to agree to my terms too.”

“Doctor Zenos...” Roa murmured behind him.

Their biggest issue had been whether Aska would consent to dueling Roa and considering her request to be a disciple. This was the best bargaining chip he had.

“Very well,” Aska replied after a moment of silence, nodding. She seemed to realize that if Zenos lost, she’d have to spar with the spearman anyway, so to her the level of effort might as well be the same.

“This is pointless,” Kaiser scoffed. “There’s simply no way I would ever be defeated by an unknown like this man.” He twirled the branch he was using in lieu of a spear in his hand, testing its feel

before gripping it firmly and getting ready. And then, sharply, suddenly shifting into a combat stance, he said, "Do not underestimate me, boy."

Facing the spearman directly, Zenos felt an overwhelming pressure, as though massive invisible walls were closing in on him. Kaiser's aging yet steely body emanated a warrior's aura, making his already large frame appear even more imposing. Some of the onlooking adventurers, overwhelmed, dropped to their knees.

A Platinum Class adventurer was truly on another level.

"Real warriors are nothing like Aston, huh," Zenos muttered under his breath. Honestly, there was no way an ordinary healer would've stood a chance against this man.

"Hah!" Kaiser shouted, suddenly lunging forward with the makeshift spear. A deafening roar thundered through the air, and the force of the impact sent Zenos flying.

"Whoa!" Helpless, Zenos was thrown backward, tumbling two or three times across the ground.

"Gah ha ha! That was over in a second!" Veego said. He watched, cackling loudly, as Kaiser turned his back on Zenos.

"Now then, Silver Wolf, I believe it's time for our du—"

"Wait a moment," Zenos said behind Kaiser.

The old adventurer paused, then slowly turned around.

Zenos brushed the dirt off himself, then placed his hands on the ground and pushed himself to his feet. "The first to land a strike wins, right? You haven't hit me yet."

Kaiser's brows furrowed.

"That's right. It didn't hit him," Aska confirmed quietly. "He blocked it with the wooden sword. You noticed, didn't you?"

"I didn't think the boy would get back up," Kaiser admitted. He gripped the stick again, approaching Zenos with casual steps.

That was close. Exhaling slowly, Zenos raised his wooden sword.

He'd used enhancement magic to heighten his kinetic vision to its limit, enabling him to track the thrust's trajectory and block it with the wooden sword. Normally, such a flimsy weapon would've easily snapped under the impact of Kaiser's powerful thrust, but Zenos had quickly switched to protective magic, enhancing the sword's

hardness. Although that type of spell typically only worked on living things, it could apply to anything in direct contact with the target, like their weapons and clothing.

The force of the blow had been greater than he'd expected, so he'd still been thrown back despite blocking.

Kaiser took a long step forward. "Hah!"

The fight resumed as the old adventurer's spear thrust at Zenos once more. Holding the middle of the wooden sword with both hands, he now focused part of his mana on strengthening his legs and braced for impact.

Kaiser's lethal thrusts continued relentlessly, with Zenos managing to intercept each one. The wooden weapons clashed against each other, each fierce blow echoing through the air. The crowd, which had initially been murmuring and jeering, gradually grew silent. They watched every move of the unknown man holding his own against a Platinum Class powerhouse. They were so enthralled they couldn't even remember to breathe.

Zenos was struggling, though. The repeated vision enhancements strained his eyes, and he felt them beginning to redden. He couldn't keep this up much longer.

"Gaaah!" Kaiser shouted, perhaps frustrated, as he pulled his weapon far back. The next moment, he thrust it forward with full force, the movement faster and stronger than any before.

That's my chance!

Zenos moved as though he were about to meet the blow head-on, then twisted his body dramatically, swerving out of the thrust's path.

"What?!"

Instead of using a defensive spell, this time he diverted all of his mana toward his lower body to enhance its strength. Spinning to evade the attack, he used that momentum and aimed for Kaiser's side with the wooden sword in his right hand.

"Pathetic!" Kaiser spat, swinging his spear horizontally to counter Zenos's move. The spear would reach Zenos before the wooden sword could reach Kaiser.

Just as the shaft of the spear was about to hit the healer's torso,

however, Zenos chanted, "*Scalpel!*"

A pure-white blade appeared in Zenos's left hand and sliced cleanly through the middle of the wooden spear. The centrifugal force of the swing sent the severed tip of the weapon flying far into the bushes.

Kaiser stared in stunned disbelief at his split spear as Zenos tapped his side with the wooden sword.

"There. Got him. Not exactly by the book, but I got him," he said with a sigh. A few small cheers broke out from the onlookers at the unlikely victory.

An ordinary healer would've never stood a chance against Kaiser in direct combat. An *ordinary* healer.

Zenos's one advantage was that Kaiser hadn't had any idea what he could do. He'd found an opening by using defensive spells to guard against the spearman's thrusts until Kaiser had overextended, then attacking at just the right moment. Knowing that Kaiser's weapon was just a makeshift wooden spear, Zenos had figured he could cut through it with Scalpel.

"I've...lost?" Kaiser muttered in disbelief. "I didn't expect an ace up your sleeve... What was that white blade?"

"Just a little trick," Zenos replied. "If you'd used your real spear, there was no way I could've blocked or cut through it. The special 'first to strike' rule let me squeeze out a win by playing dirty."

"Hmm..." Aska hummed, her lips curling slightly into the first semblance of a smile Zenos had seen from her.

"Seriously, who in blazes *are* you?" Jose asked. His mouth hung open as he tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Wow," murmured Misery, the beast tamer.

Veego clicked his tongue, walking away in frustration.

After a moment, Kaiser let out a booming laugh. He gazed up at the starlit sky for a moment, then looked back at Zenos. "What's your name?"

"Zenos."

"Zenos. I see. What a vast world this is. You called this 'playing dirty,' but under a different set of rules, I'm sure you'd have fought differently. That's not all you can do, is it?"

"You're giving me too much credit. I just barely managed that."

"Pfft... Ha ha ha! I'm glad I've lived long enough to witness this." Kaiser gave Zenos a hard slap on the back with his large hand, then walked away in high spirits.

"Ow! That nearly broke my spine..."

As Zenos rubbed his back in pain, Aska rose gracefully to her feet. "You're an interesting one," she said, now smiling sweetly as she held her sword, still sheathed in its white scabbard, in her right hand. Her silver gaze fixed on Roa. "Now, then. A promise is a promise. Let's begin."

***

The tension in the air quickly dissipated. Everyone was thinking the same thing: *This is pointless.* There was no way an ordinary girl could stand a chance against the Sword Saint. The onlooking adventurers began to disperse.

Aska stood there, looking almost dazed. Which was to say, she wasn't putting any effort into it. Her sword remained in its scabbard, and her fingers weren't even touching the hilt. She gave off the opposite vibe to Kaiser's overwhelming presence. There wasn't even the slightest hint of a will to fight. She was calm. Still as a windless sea.

Roa stood about ten paces away from her opponent, wearing a slightly tense expression.

Jose, who had somehow ended up as the match's unofficial referee, raised his right hand. "Now then, let's start the— Huh?"

The second Jose gave the signal to start, Roa was already gone from her spot. There was a brief pause, and then she dropped onto her back a little ways away.

"Uh... What?" Jose mumbled, perplexed. He looked over at Aska, who gave him a sidelong glance.

"All set. If this is all she can do, I—" The Silver Wolf stopped mid-sentence as Roa slowly sat back up, rubbing her back.

"Ow... Ow, ow, ow..."

Aska's expression shifted minutely. "I thought she wouldn't wake

up until morning...”

Unlike the match between Zenos and Kaiser, this duel was meant to test Roa’s potential as an apprentice, so there were no rules that the first to strike won. The duel ended only if Roa could no longer fight or if Aska deemed her unworthy. Aska’s plan had been to knock Roa out instantly and bring the fight to an immediate end.

“Hmm, I don’t know about this,” Zenos muttered to himself as he watched the two face off.

Roa needed to earn the right to become Aska’s apprentice, so Zenos had planned on limiting his assistance to just enough enhancement and protective magic to prevent any serious injury. He’d considered a protective spell to block Aska’s strike, but the Silver Wolf’s first move had been so fast that the healer couldn’t activate the spell in time.

“Oho... The girl is doing better than anticipated,” Carmilla whispered right by Zenos’s ear.

“Yikes!”

The sun had already set, so the wraith had emerged from the bracelet to watch. At least she’d had the sense to turn invisible, so no one around them noticed.

“I *told* you to stop sneaking up on me like that!”

Carmilla chuckled. “Yes, yes. Either way, the Kumil girl is more skilled than expected, is she not?”

“I guess so, yeah...”

Roa’s quick recovery hadn’t been solely due to Zenos’s delayed protective spell. The girl’s own quick reflexes had allowed her to avoid a direct hit.

Aska held her sheathed sword loosely, letting it dangle from her left hand as her arm gave a barely noticeable twitch.

“Ugh!” Roa groaned, once again sent flying as the delayed wind whistled through the air.

Aska’s speed was incredible. Even with his vision enhanced by magic, Zenos could barely follow the rapid jabs of the tip of her scabbard.

Roa, who had tumbled across the ground, managed to rise once more. “I-I can still do this! This fight isn’t ov— Guh!”

She was struck down again before she could finish, only to get back up. This happened two, three, four times. Zenos hadn't used any additional protective magic, yet Roa's sharp senses as a member of the Kumil hunting tribe allowed her to instinctively avoid a direct hit each time.

"You're stubborn," Aska muttered, her eyelids half shut. "And I'm getting sleepy..."

For the first time, her right hand reached for the sword's hilt.

"Oh no..." Zenos murmured, extending his right hand forward. If Aska drew her sword, Roa wouldn't stand a chance. He realized he'd have to use his full magic this time to protect the girl's life.

But...

"Yeah, I'm pretty stubborn!" Roa declared. "I'm the Sword Saint's daughter, after all!"

At the girl's bold statement, the air around the Silver Wolf shifted. Her half-lidded eyes blinked open, and her gaze locked directly onto Roa. "The Sword Saint's...daughter?"

"That's right!"

"That's not a very funny joke."

"Why would I joke about that?! I have the Thunder God's blood! I do!"

Dismissive laughs rose from the remaining onlookers, but Aska remained silent. Her right hand returned to her side as she slowly approached Roa, stopping at a close distance. She stood there quietly for a few moments, then turned on her heel.

"I don't take apprentices."

"W-Wait! I'm not done ye—"

"I'm tired. We're done for today," Aska cut in. "But..." She paused, then resumed her walk toward the carriage. "I'll accept your challenge when I'm awake."

"R-Really?!" Roa's face brightened instantly and she jumped up and down with excitement. Bruised and battered, she threw herself at Zenos, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

"I did it, doctor! I did it! I mean, I'm not her apprentice yet, but she's giving me another chance! It's all thanks to you! Thank you, thank you! You're so awesome!"


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Maybe Aska had been moved by Roa's persistence. Maybe something about the girl's declaration had stirred something within the Sword Saint's heart. Either way, the Silver Wolf's stance seemed to have softened a bit.

Whatever the case, Roa was one small step closer to her dream.

"Good for you. Can we go home now?" Zenos asked. Also, it was a little difficult to breathe with Roa clinging to him like that.

"I'd love to go home, myself," Jose interjected coolly, "but the carriages won't turn back."

"I know, all right? I know! It's just wishful thinking!"

With Roa still hugging him, Zenos looked up at the night sky and sighed. They were now far, far away from the clinic, deep into the middle of nowhere.

A lone star shot across the pitch-black heavens.

***

Meanwhile, back at the clinic in the ruined city, a young elf girl and three demi-humans sat around the dining table.

"The doc's not back yet, huh..." Zophia murmured with a sigh, her chin on her hands. "I went to the Hundred-Year Tree Plaza, but everyone was already gone. He must've left with them." She scratched her head, looking up at the ceiling. "Uuugh, this is all because I asked him to take care of Roa..."

"I agree," Lynga said pointedly.

"If Zenos doesn't come back, it's on *you*, Zophia," Loewe said accusingly.

"Urk..." At Lynga and Loewe's hounding, Zophia's shoulders uncharacteristically sagged.

Lily approached the table carrying a tray with a teapot. "Don't blame Zophia," she said. "I asked him to take care of Roa too. And even if we hadn't asked, Zenos wouldn't have stood by and done nothing. That's just not the kind of person he is."

Holding her head in her hands, Zophia turned her gaze to Lily. "You know, Lily, I dunno how you manage to keep your cool at times like this."

“Same,” Lynga said. “She was even calm when Zenos faced off against the Black Guild executives.”

Loewe grunted. “She has the grace and confidence of a lawful wife.”

“H-Huh? That’s not true at all!” Lily stammered, flustered, as she set the tray down on the table. “I had a feeling when Zenos went to look for Roa, so...”

That was why she’d given Zenos the pack—Lily had known Carmilla had snuck the bracelet inside.

Lynga and Loewe exchanged glances, then shrugged.

“Well, Lady Carmilla is with him, so he’ll be fine, I think,” Lynga said.

“Agreed. He’ll come back like nothing happened, as he always does,” Loewe added.

But Zophia remained silent, staring off into space.

“What’s wrong, Zophia?” Lily asked.

“Oh, it’s just... I agree he’s fine. But that expedition, it was headed for Zagras, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what the paper said,” Lily confirmed with a nod.

Zophia looked pensive as she continued. “I’ve met a few Kumil people, and since they’re hunters by birth, they’re really sturdy physically. Individually they’re already strong, but in groups especially, they’re unparalleled.”

That was why they could establish settlements in mountainous areas crawling with magical beasts.

“What are you trying to say?” Loewe asked, tilting her head.

“Well... In spite of that, Roa’s village was destroyed in a magical beast attack.”

The others fell silent.

Essentially, Zophia was implying that whatever magical beast had descended upon the village must’ve been exceptionally powerful.

Lynga took a sip of her tea. “I’m not sure what that has to do with anything.”

“Roa was very little when her village was destroyed, so I’m not sure she remembers much about her birthplace, but...” Zophia’s voice lowered slightly. “Her village used to be somewhere in Zagras.”

Chapter 4: Zagras

"Everyone, get out of your carriages."

It had been three days since the group's departure from the royal capital, and after several battles with magical beasts along the way, they had finally reached a point where proceeding by carriage was no longer possible.

The narrowing road gave way to a rugged wilderness, steep mountains covered with trees towering ahead. In the depths of the densely packed forest stood the dormant volcano, Daios, its blackened slopes looming quietly in the background.

"So this is Zagras," Zenos mused, shading his eyes with a hand.

"Ugh," Jose groaned grumpily as he climbed out of the carriage. "I hate bugs."

"Huh. This is strange," Roa murmured. She stood there for a moment, gazing at the mountains ahead.

"What's wrong?" Zenos asked.

"Oh, just... I feel like I know this place..." she mumbled quietly, as though speaking to herself. The others couldn't hear her clearly.

The carriages turned back, the staff inside planning to spend a week in the nearest village before returning to pick the group up. The adventurers, meanwhile, divided their supplies so that each of them got enough food and water to last them for the time being, then formed a line and began the trek into the mountains.

Dense trees and overgrown weeds crowded the narrow mountain path, making it look more like an animal trail. The group was physically capable enough that they had no trouble carrying their heavy loads, but the familiar thrill of adventure had sweat trickling down their cheeks.

"Halt," commanded Kaiser, the Platinum Class spearman, who had taken point. The seasoned adventurer was effortlessly carrying about three times as much as everyone else. He turned to address

the group. “I sense a magical beast about a hundred paces northwest of here.”

Deeper in the brush lurked a B+ Rank magical beast—an iron kong. But, perhaps out of wariness of the group’s strength, the beast didn’t attack and instead vanished further into the forest.

“Aw, it got scared and ran,” an adventurer mocked.

“Well, even if it hadn’t, this many of us would’ve made short work of that thing,” another pointed out.

A few E Rank beasts attacked the group afterward, but the experienced adventurers quickly dispatched them and continued their ascent into the mountainside.

Zagras was known for its thriving mining industry, and there was reportedly a base camp used by miners somewhere nearby. But due to an increase in magical beast attacks, the mining operations had come to a halt and the previously well-maintained roads had reverted to rough trails. That was part of the reason the government had been eager to take action.

“Doctor, look,” Roa said, pointing.

“I see it,” Zenos replied with a nod.

A short distance ahead, at the base of a tree, lay the unmoving body of a medium-sized magical beast. The creature bore gashes in several places, and judging by the state of decomposition, it seemed to have perished a few days ago.

“That’s a brown boar,” an adventurer pointed out.

“They’re Rank C, right?” another asked.

“Think bloodsuckers got it?” a third ventured.

Bloodsuckers were small magical beasts that burrowed into the bodies of others and ate their way out from the inside.

“At least those things only eat other magical beasts,” someone said. “No skin off our backs.”

As they chatted, the thirty-odd adventurers continued along the mountain path. After crossing a suspension bridge, they encountered no further attacks from magical beasts, and an eerie silence settled over the mountain.

Roa suddenly stopped ahead of Zenos.

“What’s wrong, Roa?”

“I think I was right.”

“What about?”

“I feel like I know this place. I think...my village was somewhere around here.”

Zenos gazed pensively at Roa’s face. “So, does that mean...”

Rumor had it that a powerful magical beast had been sighted in Zagras a few years ago. And a few years ago, Roa’s village had been destroyed in a magical beast attack.

As the dots began to connect in Zenos’s mind, Jose, who’d been walking behind them, spoke up impatiently. “You’re holding up the line.”

“Right. Sorry.”

They resumed walking. The young healer scowled, muttering complaints as they went. “Uuugh. This tall grass is so prickly. It sucks. I’m an elite healer! Why do I have to put up with this?”

“This is what real adventure looks like,” Zenos pointed out. “It’s good experience for you.”

“I get all my adventures from books, thank you very much.”

Ahead, Zenos caught a glimpse of an adventurer’s robe, barely visible through the dense grass. The small figure was unmistakably Misery, the beast tamer. With her petite build, she understandably lacked stamina and had fallen quite a bit behind the group.

“Heeey,” he called out from where he stood. “You good?”

“Oh! I-I’m sorry for holding you all up,” she replied. “Please, don’t worry about me. Go on ahead.”

A few adventurers noticed her and ran over to help carry her load. She bowed her head repeatedly in gratitude.

An hour of climbing the mountain path later, just as the sun passed its peak, they finally reached an area with a mountain lodge —their first destination, the miners’ base camp. The area looked like an artificially created clearing. The group of adventurers took a moment to catch their breaths and talk to one another.

“Phew. Finally.”

“Don’t go and relax just yet. We’re only getting started.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve been an adventurer for ages, you know.”

Jose wrinkled his brow as he walked into the lodge, muttering,

"Not as bad as I thought, but I wouldn't want to stay here for long..."

The building, used by countless miners in the past, was permeated by a faint musty smell and showed its age—but it was spacious enough to accommodate about fifty people. In addition to a large communal room, there were several smaller rooms and even a simple kitchen. Behind the lodge, deeper into the forest, was a spring for washing up. The spring was likely the main reason this place had been chosen as a base camp.

After everyone had stored their provisions and water in the building's warehouse, Kaiser gathered the group in front of the lodge.

"Now then, we have about a week's worth of supplies," he said. "We should decide on our strategy for this mission."

Given his age, his extensive adventuring experience, and his Platinum standing, Kaiser had naturally fallen into a leadership position among the group. He kept glancing over at Zenos as though waiting for input, but the shadow healer, who wasn't even an adventurer himself, pretended not to notice.

"What do you think, Sir Zenos?" Kaiser asked directly.

Dang it.

"What do I think?" Zenos echoed. "Why? What's the point of asking for a nobody's opinion?"

Kaiser laughed heartily. "Now, don't be modest. A dark horse who wins against *me* is no ordinary man. I can tell you're hiding your true identity for a reason."

"No, I'm not hiding anything, actually..." *No, I* am *hiding something, actually. But it's not something good. Not at all.* "You should decide on a strategy. You're a career adventurer with way more experience than me, so..."

"So. What's your opinion?"

"Do you not have ears?!" Was this old man just the kind of person who didn't listen sometimes?

"Oh, my apologies. My hearing is starting to go, you see..."

"Stop acting like a frail old man, Mr. Platinum Class." Zenos breathed a heavy sigh, then glanced around at the assembled

adventurers. “Let’s see... The quest asked us to investigate the cause behind the increase in magical beasts in Zagras. And the unspoken objective, as we all know, is to find and take down whatever magical beast is behind it so that the mining operations can resume as soon as possible.”

Kaiser and many of the others nodded in agreement.

“The assumption is that a powerful magical beast is the cause because strong beasts tend to attract other dangerous creatures. So, since we have this many people, I think we should split up, search the mountains, and report any sightings of magical beasts. Then, we focus on the areas where people have spotted stronger beasts, follow those trails, and eventually reach the root of the problem.”

Kaiser laughed again. “I knew you’d come up with a good plan, Sir Zenos.”

“Well, it’s a best-case scenario sort of thing...”

Veego, the leader of the Silver Class party Skull Dogs, who’d been leaning against the lodge’s wall with his arms crossed, scoffed and spat out, “Tch. Dumbass plan. We’re doing our own thing. Whoever kills the big bad gets the lion’s share, and you want us to hold hands? Please. We’re taking what’s ours, period.”

Zenos had figured someone would say something like that, given the nature of the task.

Aska, whom Veego’s scornful gaze had been directed at the whole time, ignored the mohawked man and said, “I’ll be operating on my own as well.”

“Wait, what?” Roa said, startled. “Take me with you, then! You said you’d accept my challenge!”

“Not during the mission. I don’t need deadweight.”

“Ouch! I’m your apprentice, you know!”

“No, you’re not.”

As the two argued, Jose casually raised his right hand. “I’ll stay here at the lodge. I’ve had enough of mountain trekking. I’ll be turning one of these smaller rooms into my personal quarters and clinic, so if you get hurt, come find me. I guess I’ll patch you up.”

Misery, who’d fallen behind, had finally reached the camp with the help of a few others. “Th-Then I’ll prepare a meal for everyone. I

owe you all that much for your help, at least. I managed to catch a wild rabbit on the way here, so I'll make it into a soup."

So that was why she'd been late. A small round of applause rose from the group.

As they all went their separate ways, a quiet voice emerged from Zenos's pack. "Ah, is that the smell of trouble ahead?"

"How many times do I need to ask you to quit the ominous premonitions?"

"Ah, this is no premonition. This is a guarantee." Carmilla's voice dropped. "As that cockscombed fellow said, this mission comes with the promise of an enormous reward from the seven great noble houses. We are at the heart of a monster-infested mountain, away from prying eyes. 'Tis only natural to consider that some might be considering eliminating the competition for a better share, no?"

"Can you stop coming up with the absolute worst scenarios?"

The wraith chuckled eerily. "Such deductions are only natural for the great Carmilla, once known far and wide as a paragon of wisdom."

"People far and wide knew you as a paragon of wisdom? Really?"

"No."

"No?!"

And thus, with the weight of each member's motivations bearing down upon the group, the true adventure began.

***

"*Heal*," Jose chanted, holding his hand over an adventurer's wounded arm. The injury quickly sealed shut.

"Whoa. Amazing," the adventurer said. "Never seen a wound heal so cleanly and so fast..."

"It's only natural. I'm an elite healer, and don't you forget," Jose replied in a mildly annoyed tone.

Only the Silver Wolf and the Skull Dogs had decided to operate alone; the others had split up under Kaiser's leadership, with each group taking responsibility to hunt down magical beasts in an assigned area. The plan was to reconvene each night, share their

findings, and map out the types and distributions of the beasts encountered, thus narrowing down the potential locations of their primary target: the powerful magical beast behind the disturbance.

Kaiser had instructed everyone to turn back if they encountered a particularly dangerous magical beast, but some of the adventurers were too proud to retreat easily. As a result, many returned with injuries sustained during combat.

"Ugh, I can't get any rest at all," Jose muttered. His chambers, which doubled as a clinic, saw a constant stream of adventurers in need of healing. He shot a resentful look at Zenos, who stood in a corner of the room, arms crossed. "So, uh, Zenos, why are you in my room again?"

"Well, you don't get to see an elite healer at work every day."

"Are you amazed at how fast the wounds heal? For me, this is normal. I honestly don't understand why everyone struggles with something so basic."

"Yeah, I used to think it was normal too."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing."

Jose was a member of the Royal Institute of Healing. As a shadow healer operating illegally, Zenos figured it was best not to draw too much attention to himself. But there was one thing that had caught his notice.

"Are you sure that's the most efficient way to heal, by the way?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been watching you. You heal every wound the same way. Wouldn't it be better to assess each wound individually for extent, type, and depth, and adjust your spell accordingly?"

Jose's chosen method for healing was, essentially, overkill. He would pour an incredible amount of healing power into the wounds to close them up, regardless of whether they were cuts or punctures. The approach seemed somewhat wasteful. Zenos figured it would benefit Jose to consider more careful adjustments, such as conserving mana and improving precision.

"Are you seriously trying to lecture an elite healer on healing magic?"

"Sorry. That's not my intention. I don't know much about common healing magic practices, so I was curious what the usual approach is."

In battle, there wasn't enough time to carefully assess each injury, so Zenos relied on the same brute-force method. But when he had the luxury of focus, he preferred to adjust the spells to each individual's needs.

"Hmph," Jose responded indignantly. "Professor Shalbart told me something similar once. He even snidely gave me a basic healing magic textbook. But as long as the patient's healed, who cares how I do it? Something this simple won't exhaust my mana, and even if it's not precise, their natural healing will do the rest. It's not like it'll impact their lives or anything."

"In day-to-day healing, sure. But right now, we're on an adventure. You never know what might come up. It's best to make doubly sure that—"

"Ugh, shut up already. Aren't you a fighter? Leave the healing advice to professionals."

"I'm not, actually..."

"You could keep up with a Platinum Class spearman and you're not a fighter? Yeah, right."

Irritated, Jose didn't bother listening to Zenos and kicked him out.

"That didn't go very well," the shadow healer muttered. He'd hoped to observe more of the elite healer's techniques, but his approach had clearly backfired.

As he reflected on this, he stepped out of the lodge to find the sky already tinged with twilight. Out in the clearing was Roa, practicing her sword swings and wearing a determined expression.

"Doctor, did you finish treating people?"

"Nah, I wasn't needed, apparently. And you? Still at it?"

"Of course! That was the deal!"

After the initial meeting in the lodge, Roa had challenged Aska to a duel. The Silver Wolf had agreed, but on one condition: Roa would need to withstand three of Aska's attacks. If the girl was rendered unable to fight by one of those attacks, she would give up on monster hunting for the day and spend time practicing her swings.

Predictably, the duel had ended in an instant, and so Roa's day had been spent on sword practice. It had been a relief for Zenos—it meant the girl wouldn't be rushing off on her own to hunt monsters.

Roa raised her sword high as she spoke. "I need to train hard. I've got a rematch against my mentor tonight!"

"You're dedicated."

"Of course I am! I mean..." Roa trailed off for a moment, then spoke slowly, as though sorting out her own thoughts. "Doctor, do you think the magical beast causing trouble is the same one that attacked my village?"

"I don't know..."

It had been nearly ten years since the attack on the Kumil village. A lot of time had passed, so this could be unrelated. But, of course, the possibility couldn't be ruled out completely.

The tip of Roa's sword sliced powerfully through the air with a sharp *swoosh*. "Then I'll have to try even harder," she said. "I'll land a blow on the Sword Saint. Then she'll acknowledge my strength. And then I'll avenge everyone!"

Zenos didn't respond. The breeze brushed against his cheek, making it tingle with the chill of the mountain air.

***

As night fell, the adventurers gradually returned to the communal room. The only ones absent were those who'd chosen to work alone. The members of the Skull Dogs had taken over a small room at the back, while the Silver Wolf remained outside the mountain hut, sitting by a campfire on the edge of the clearing.

Lying on her back next to Aska was Roa, who had once again been defeated in an instant. So much for her earlier enthusiasm.

Thanks to the support of the elite healer Jose, no one had died or been severely injured. When Zenos made eye contact with the teenage healer, however, the boy quickly looked away, seemingly still hung up about their earlier conversation.

Still, everyone being safe was something to be grateful for.

"Looks like you missed the mark this time," Zenos murmured to

his pack.

"A bit early to say that," Carmilla replied.

"What do you mean?"

"If anyone here is waiting for their chance to whittle down the competition to increase their share of the reward, they would likely wait until just before or immediately after the objective is complete. Making a move too early would be reckless. It would compromise the group's strength and risk jeopardizing the mission entirely. That would be quite counterproductive."

"I see... Wait, why are you assuming people will fight each other, anyway?"

"Hee hee hee... I have seen far more of the dark side of humanity than you. I have not lived for three hundred years for nothing."

"You're dead, though..."

As Zenos rehashed the same old banter with the wraith in his pack, Kaiser clapped his hands to get the group's attention.

"Listen up, all of you. Feel free to eat as we go over the day's events. Now, area by area, report the magical beasts you've encountered."

At their leader's urging, the adventurers began to report their findings one after the other. The food they were eating had been made by Misery, the Bronze Class monster tamer, using the provisions supplied by Lord Baycladd. The meal consisted of staples like bread and dried meats alongside a savory soup made from fresh rabbit meat and mountain-foraged herbs. The air was filled with an appetizing aroma.

"This is so great!"

"Can't believe we're eating this good at a place like this."

"Hey Misery, will you marry me once this quest is done?"

"You're jinxing it, man."

The quip elicited laughs from the group and Misery bowed her head, blushing slightly.

As that was happening, the large map spread across the wall was gradually being filled with markings, denoting the names of the magical beasts the adventurers had encountered in each location.

Kaiser stroked his beard, staring intently at the map.

"Hmm... Judging by this, I'd say the northwest looks promising." There had been curiously few sightings in other areas.

After the night watch rotations and the areas for tomorrow's investigations were decided, some adventurers headed toward the spring in the forest to freshen up, others started drinking, and a few retired early to rest.

"Ooh, hand over some of that rabbit soup right this instant, Zenos," the voice from his pack whispered mischievously.

"You don't even need to eat!"

"I wish to try adventure food! 'Tis part of the very essence of adventuring, after all!"

"Is 'adventure food' even a thing?" Zenos muttered.

Kaiser approached the shadow healer. "Come now, Sir Zenos. Let us spend the night conversing about the warrior's path!"

"I'll pass."

"No need for modesty. I know you must be itching to discuss the art of combat."

"I'm not a warrior."

The spearman laughed. "What else could you be, standing toe to toe with me like that?"

"Will you just listen to me, old man?!"

After managing to escape the persistent Kaiser, Zenos decided to step out of the lodge. He spotted Aska at the edge of the clearing, dozing off as usual by the campfire, her head bobbing sleepily. Nearby, Roa was on her back, but at a different angle from before, suggesting she'd gotten up and been knocked back down. Tenacious, that one.

"Thanks for indulging Roa, Silver Wolf," Zenos said as he stepped closer.

Aska opened her eyes slightly and murmured, "It's fine. I used to be like this myself."

Although Aska had claimed she didn't take apprentices, it seemed Roa's stubborn challenges had become a valuable training experience for the Kumil girl, if nothing else. Whether Roa could become the next Sword Saint was anyone's guess, but sparring daily

with the current one would no doubt benefit the girl. Maybe the fire in Roa's belly had touched Aska's heart a bit.

"Also, aren't you gonna eat?" Zenos asked.

"I don't eat much when on a hunt. An empty stomach sharpens my senses," Aska explained.

Zenos glanced over at the prone Kumil girl. "Roa looks like she'll be out for a while."

"She's so stubborn I had to hit a little harder. She probably won't wake up until morning." She gazed intently at Roa, who lay unconscious with her eyes rolled back slightly. "Is this girl really the Thunder God's daughter?"

"Oh, the thing about the old Sword Saint? I don't know, really, but I don't think Roa would've made that up. She's not the type."

"You say that so casually. It's actually quite a big deal."

"Is it? It doesn't matter to me who her parents are. Roa's Roa."

Aska's eyes widened slightly, and a faint smile crossed her lips. "You're a strange one..."

Night went on in the mountains, a unique stillness hanging in the air like the calm before the storm.

The next day, the unexpected happened.

Chapter 5: The Elite Healer and the Shadow Healer

"Yeaaah!"

Roa's shout echoed through the morning mist as Zenos stepped out of the mountain lodge, wondering what was going on. He spotted the Kumil girl jumping around excitedly in front of the campfire's remnants.

"What's with the racket, Roa?" Zenos asked.

"Doctor, doctor! I lasted three rounds!" Roa exclaimed, puffing out her chest proudly.

Apparently, she'd challenged Aska again right after waking up, and on her ninth attempt, she'd managed to withstand the Sword Saint's attacks, albeit barely.

"You're so stubborn. And I was half asleep..." Aska mumbled, irritated, rubbing her eyelids.

Roa beamed. "But you said you'd allow up to ten attempts this morning!"

"I was barely awake when I said that."

"Well, you still said it, so! That means I can join you on the hunt today, right, Master?"

"I'm not your master." Aska's shoulders drooped as she looked over the exuberant Roa. "Just don't get in my way, and don't act on your own."

"Yes, Master!"

"I said, I'm not your master." Aska mumbled, "I should've taken this more seriously..." then turned her gaze toward Zenos. "You come too."

"Huh? Me?"

"You brought this girl here in the first place. I'm not used to having people with me, so I want you to keep an eye on her."

“Uh, right...” Bringing Roa along hadn’t exactly been his decision, but it was true either way, so he couldn’t argue.

With Kaiser as their leader, the other adventurers were once again split into teams to search for the beast responsible for the disturbance. Since the elite healer Jose was here to cover medical needs, Zenos didn’t have much to do at the lodge. He decided to join Aska and Roa. While the others were still working on setting out and starting their day, the trio slipped quietly into the forest.

***

“Yeaaah! That’s five down!” Roa declared, raising her sword in her fist triumphantly.

The sun was just reaching its peak over the mountain path. Magical beasts had occasionally attacked them as they walked, and by her own request, Roa had been tasked with handling them. Zenos had been at the ready to assist when needed, but so far, Roa had held her own, and his backup hadn’t been necessary. She truly did have the instincts of a born hunter.

Aska’s training had probably had a hand in it as well. But Roa’s new mentor had only criticisms for her apprentice.

“You make too many unnecessary movements,” Aska chastised. “That’ll wear you out quickly and slow your reaction time.”

“R-Right, got it.”

“Your center of gravity is off. If you get attacked from the opposite direction, you won’t be able to respond in time.”

“Yes, Master!”

“I’m not your master.”

From the perspective of this generation’s Sword Saint, Roa still had a long way to go, it seemed.

“You’re very involved in her training,” Zenos commented.

After a brief pause, Aska replied, “I don’t want to drag deadweight around.”

That had indeed been her stance from the beginning, which made Zenos curious about something. “Why did you join this quest, then, if you hate working with others so much?”

Another pause. “There’s something I wanted to check.”

“And what’s that?”

Zenos remembered her reply to Jose had been along those lines too. She’d said she would come along out of “curiosity.” Aska didn’t seem like she wanted to elaborate any further, however, so Zenos decided to focus on the task at hand for now. He took a sweeping glance around the dense forest.

“Something feels off, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes,” Aska agreed.

Roa approached the two, curious. “What do you mean? What feels off?”

“Well, we came here to investigate the cause of the increased magical beast attacks in Zagras, right?” Zenos said.

“Yeah.”

“So why are there so few beasts around?”

Roa’s eyes widened. “You’re right...”

They’d left the royal capital nearly a week ago. Under Kaiser’s leadership, the adventurers had split up to cover more ground and searched the mountains, recording the types and locations of magical beasts they’d encountered. So far, the beasts seemed to be concentrated in the northwestern area, so the search had expanded in that direction. But even there, the number and rank of the magical beasts was lower than one would’ve expected.

“What does that mean?” Roa asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Zenos replied. “Either the main beast has moved to a different area, or...it’s gone dormant.”

“Huh...”

“Why do you sound so disappointed?”

“Well, it could be my chance to prove myself...”

“Our target is a very dangerous magical beast. It’s a good thing if it stays quiet.”

“Yeah... You’re right. Sorry, doctor.” Perhaps recalling the attack on her village, Roa lowered her head apologetically.

Either way, this *was* a magical beast they were dealing with. From Zenos’s experience, things rarely went to plan on a hunt.

He looked at Aska. “What do *you* think?”

"I'm not sure, but...I have the feeling something's still here."

"Yeah..."

A heavy, oppressive air seemed to hang over the entire mountain, giving it a creepy vibe. Carmilla might've had some insight on that, but Zenos had left his pack—and her with it—back at the lodge.

"Wait... Do you smell that?" Roa asked. She crouched low, sniffing the air intently.

"What is it?"

"There!" She pushed through the bushes and took off running.

Zenos and Aska exchanged glances, then followed after her. A short distance ahead, they found the Kumil girl crouched in a patch of thick weeds.

"What's going on, Roa?"

"Look, doctor. There are tracks here."

Peering at the forest floor littered with decaying leaves, visible through the gaps in the grass, Zenos spotted a large footprint about the size of a human head. The indentation revealed five toes with very sharp claws.

"Is this...?"

"I think it's an iron kong," Roa said, tracing the edge of the footprint with her fingers.

That was the same B+ Rank magical beast they'd encountered in the mountains beyond the slums. It was generally classified as a high-risk creature, and typically required several skilled adventurers to defeat. Zenos recalled seeing signs of one when they'd first entered the mountains.

"You can tell?" he asked.

"I remember its scent from before." Indeed, Roa's sense of smell was impressive, almost like a dog's. She leaned in even closer to the footprint, sniffing intently. "It's fresh. It was just here."

Zenos exchanged glances with Aska again. They'd come to Zagras to investigate the increase in magical-beast-related incidents, yet they'd barely seen any beasts at all, and now they'd found iron kong tracks in a completely different part of the mountains than the first one they'd spotted. An eerie feeling crept over them, as though something was quietly shifting in the shadows.

At that moment, they heard voices from a nearby thicket.

"Hey, your arm's hurt."

"Huh? Oh! It is. When did that happen?"

A party of about four adventurers was talking further into the forest. One of them was bleeding from near his left elbow.

"Maybe I cut it on some grass. It's nothing serious."

"That's not true. Small cuts add up, you know. They slow you down."

"Yeah. We have an elite healer back at the lodge, so go get yourself treated."

"All right, all right."

Being the veterans they were, they'd given solid advice. Even small injuries could dull one's reflexes and slow down movements, and with enough of them, a critical mistake was bound to happen. It was why, back when he'd been with a party, Zenos had healed his allies' wounds immediately. Ironically, that had made them think he wasn't doing anything at all.

Zenos quietly reflected upon this as he watched the adventurer's figure retreat back toward the mountain lodge.

***

"Ugh, I want to go home already..." Jose muttered, letting out a deep sigh.

The youngest among the elite healers was currently staying at a mountain lodge which served as a base of operations for a group of adventurers. He had forcibly been assigned to the expedition to Zagras by Professor Shalbart, the director of the Royal Institute of Healing.

"You're young," he'd told Jose. "You can't just stay cooped up in safety and comfort forever. Succeed at this mission, and you're sure to gain something from it."

And with that, the young healer had been sent off against his will. Thus far, he had yet to gain anything at all.

The mission was backed by the seven great noble houses, so the group had been provided with transportation and plenty of food.

There was even a spring near the mountain lodge where they could wash up. The other adventurers had mentioned this quest was far more comfortable than what they were used to, but Jose was dissatisfied.

Although the summer heat was less intense in this mountainous area, the beds were hard, the entire place was covered in dust, and there were way too many bugs. Misery, the beast tamer, was a good enough cook, but Jose missed his favorite treat: toast slathered with plenty of butter and honey. And on top of all that, some random man had criticized his healing methods!

"Just thinking about it makes me mad. I'm an elite healer. An elite healer!"

The only lesson he'd learned was that adventures were best read or heard about, not experienced firsthand.

"Hey, can I get some help?" an adventurer asked.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Since morning, adventurers had been coming in nonstop to Jose's chambers, which doubled as an infirmary. He'd already treated over fifteen people, most of them bearing simple cuts, when all he wanted to do was lie down and take it easy.

"*Heal,*" Jose chanted as he held out his hand. The wound on the man's arm quickly closed up.

"Wow! That really was fast. You're amazing!"

"Of course I am. I'm an elite healer." And these nobodies had best be grateful that they could receive top-notch treatment in the middle of nowhere like this.

As the man left in high spirits, another adventurer walked in. "Yo, can you patch me up?"

Jose frowned suspiciously. "Haven't I already taken care of you today?"

"Well...yeah."

Most of the adventurers looked like thugs and Jose had a hard time telling them apart, but he recognized this one from earlier this same morning. The man had a long cut on his lower leg now.

Jose sighed. "Get it together already. You guys are supposed to be seasoned adventurers, but you can't handle one or two magical

beasts without getting injured? Don't keep making me heal every little thing like this."

"Oh, shut it. I'll have you know I haven't taken a single hit in battle today."

"Then how did you get hurt twice?"

"I dunno. I just felt a sting and boom, there was a cut right there."

It was probably from walking through bushes and getting scratched by random plants. Seasoned adventurers. Right.

"There. All done," Jose said. After the man left, the young healer sat down on the edge of the bed in the infirmary. He flopped down onto the hard surface, muttering bitterly, "Ugh, I want a nap... I want to go home..."

But then, he heard someone outside the lodge say, "Huh?" and shortly after, the same man came running back into the room. "Hey! Healer kid! What's this about, huh?!"

"Oh, come *on*," Jose groaned. He sat up with an annoyed frown. "What now? I already healed you."

"Yeah, but see, there's the wound again!"

"Huh?" Jose took a closer look at the man's leg and, indeed, the wound he'd just healed had reopened, fresh blood oozing out. "Did you trip or something? Seriously, what are you doing?"

"I didn't! I was just walking and it split open again. I bet you didn't heal it properly."

"What? Are you questioning the skills of an elite healer?"

Granted, Jose hadn't been overly meticulous—it had been a minor wound, after all—but he was absolutely certain he'd closed the cut. As he and the man exchanged glares, the other adventurer whose arm Jose had just treated burst through the door.

"Hey, healer! I'm hurt again!"

Jose paused, confused, as he saw blood spread from the same spot where the man's wound had been earlier. "Huh?" *What's going on?*

It wasn't just these two. More adventurers kept pouring in one after another, all of them with cuts somewhere on their bodies.

"Wh— How?" Jose muttered in bewilderment.

This made no sense. For a moment, he wondered if they were all cutting themselves to prank him, but surely these people wouldn't be *that* bored. He could feel the air growing thick with the men's suspicion, and being looked down on like this was something he as an elite healer could not tolerate.

"All right already. I'll just heal all of you again. Line up."

Jose had the adventurers stand in a line and began casting healing magic on them one by one. This time, he used more mana than usual, making absolutely certain their wounds closed up completely.

Zenos's words echoed in the boy's mind. *"Wouldn't it be better to assess each wound individually for extent, type, and depth, and adjust your spell accordingly?"*

"Whatever," he muttered.

As long as the blood vessels and skin were regenerated and sealed, the bleeding would stop. The cause of the wound didn't matter. Taking extra time to carefully analyze such minor injuries would be a blow to his ego.

"There. All don—" After healing the twenty-odd people in the blink of an eye, Jose was about to turn around triumphantly when he suddenly froze. "What...?"

The arm of the first adventurer he'd treated had a fresh new cut. The men exchanged uneasy glances and raised their voices in alarm.

"H-Hey!"

"What's happening here?"

"Th-That's what I wanna know!"

As Jose hurried back to the front of the line, the other adventurers began to grunt and groan.

"Ack!"

"Ow!"

Cuts were forming all over their bodies. To Jose's shock, the new injuries were larger and deeper than the initial ones; wounds reappeared as soon as they were healed, and before long, blood was pooling on the floor. The hemorrhaging was becoming severe.

"*Hi-Heal!*" he chanted quickly, both hands raised. Expanding the high-tier spell's range, he enveloped everyone in the room in a

healing light.

"Ugh!"

"Hey!"

"Wait—"

Jose's healing magic closed the wounds as they formed, but the moment his spell weakened even slightly, they reopened. A fierce struggle ensued between the recurring cuts and the powerful magic.

"Hey, what's—"

"Don't talk! You're distracting me!" Jose snapped, keeping his hands extended forward. It was obvious now that something was seriously wrong. These were clearly no ordinary wounds.

And then—

"Ngh!" Jose himself groaned as a sharp pain ran through his arm, making him wince.

What?

He looked down and saw a red gash running across his own outstretched arm. "Wh-Why am I...?"

"Ugh!"

"Aaargh!"

Damn it!

The moment his concentration slipped, his spell faltered, and blood began gushing from the adventurers' bodies again.

"*Hi-Heal!*" he chanted again, focusing first on his own injury before turning his attention back to the adventurers' wounds. But... "Ow!"

Another crimson gash appeared on his freshly healed arm.

His mana reserves were still adequate, but the sharp pain was throwing off his ability to control the magic. Because of this, he couldn't fully stop the bleeding from the adventurers' wounds. Some were groaning in pain still, and others had already collapsed into growing pools of blood on the floor.

"Wh-What is happening...?"

Pain ripped through not just his arms but his back and legs as well, each new stinging sensation accompanied by the feeling of something slick and wet spreading across his skin. Even as he sealed one wound, another would open, and the bleeding wouldn't stop.

The relentless cycle of pain and blood loss began to erode his ability to think and concentrate.

Gradually, even his consciousness began to fade. Jose fell to his knees, then collapsed forward onto the floor. *This...shouldn't be...* Through his blurred vision, he saw a pitch-black form approach. A beast? A monster?

The reaper?

"Jose," the reaper called out. No, not the reaper. This was a human man, cloaked in garments so dark he could easily have been mistaken for death itself.

Jose exhaled weakly, barely able to speak between fading breaths. "I had a feeling...that someone might try to take out the other adventurers...to hog the rewards..."

The figure held a glowing white blade in his right hand.

"Your name's...Zenos, you said. Did you...do this...?"

"Don't move."

The white blade swung down, stabbing into Jose's back.

***

Far away from the rugged mountains of Zagras lay the royal capital. In one corner of the special district, where extravagant buildings stood in rows, was a lounge that served as a gathering place for upper-class nobles. In one of its rooms, which overlooked a grassy, beautifully pruned garden, stood two figures.

One of them, a gentleman with lush facial hair, spoke first. "I wonder what will come of this."

The other, a well-dressed gentleman standing by the window, turned around. "'This' being what, exactly?"

"The investigation you arranged on the cause of the increase in magical beasts, of course."

The two men were Albert Baycladd, heir to the foremost noble house among the seven greats, and Lord Fennel, known for his moderate stances.

Lord Fennel rose and stood next to Albert by the window. "The prophecy regarding the coming of a 'most severe rot' is ominous

indeed. I do hope the mission in Zagras concludes without issue, but I nevertheless worry."

Although the skies above the royal capital were clear, dense gray clouds loomed in the distance. A flash of lightning streaked through the clouds, followed by a low rumble of thunder that resonated within the men's chests.

"It will be fine, I'm certain," Albert replied. "Two of the finest in our nation are with them." His gaze was fixed on the landscape beyond the window.

Lord Fennel blinked. "Two, you say? One of them is the Silver Wolf, no doubt..."

Albert nodded wordlessly.

"I have heard that the swordmaiden isn't one to mingle with others, however," Lord Fennel continued. "That she agreed to participate at all is a surprise. Do you have a personal connection with her?"

"No. She's not the type to bow to authority. It seems something about the nature of the mission happened to pique her interest."

"Hmm..." Lord Fennel stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And the other? Are you referring to the Platinum Class adventurer? Or perhaps the elite healer sent by the Royal Institute?"

"Ah... Let's just say the other is the type of person who can make the impossible possible."

Lord Fennel turned a slightly astonished gaze toward Albert, who had a faint smile on his lips. It was rare for the younger man, who seldom revealed his true feelings, to show such genuine excitement. Albert looked almost like a boy, eagerly anticipating a grand event.

***

"Ahhh!"

Back in Zagras, halfway up a mountain range housing a dormant volcano, a scream echoed through the air. The voice belonged to the young elite healer who, upon feeling the cold edge of a blade pressing into his back, glared up at Zenos from where he lay collapsed.

"A-Are you trying to kill me?! So you *were* responsible for these strange wounds!"

But the black-clad man—Zenos—shook his head in clear irritation. "What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with me."

"B-But you just clearly stabbed me!"

"Oh, that? I was just removing this."

"Huh?"

Jose took a closer look at Zenos's hand, and saw that the man had something about the size of a pinky pinched between his fingers. Zenos crouched in front of Jose and held the thing out. It was a wriggling parasitic creature, its bluish-white circular mouth lined with rows of tiny, pointed teeth that resembled small thorns.

"What's that...?"

"A bloodsucker."

"Bloodsucker...?"

"Haven't you heard of them? They worm their way into a creature's blood vessels and tear through those and the skin from the inside. They're a type of small magical beast."

Jose suddenly recalled the carcass they'd seen on the way to the mountain lodge. It had been covered in wounds, likely the work of bloodsuckers.

"I-I've heard of them, but they parasitize magical beasts, don't they? They can't survive inside humans."

"Normally, yeah."

"What do you mean?"

"This is a real adventure, you know. Books don't tell the whole story. If wounds keep reopening no matter how many times you heal them externally, you need to consider that the cause might be internal."

"I... Ugh." Jose bit his lip. "I could have dealt with it if I'd had more time to think! But this isn't something you see in patients at the royal capital, and the pain made it impossible for me to focu—"

"I told you. This is the real deal. Some things you don't learn by sitting in a clinic at the royal capital."

Jose didn't respond.

"Now then, since you're all better, get up already."

"What?" Now that he thought about it, the intense stinging pain was completely gone. Jose's arms, legs, even his back where he'd just been stabbed—all of his body was in *perfect* condition.

And it had all happened in an instant.

As the young healer sat there dumbfounded, Zenos turned his left hand toward one of the collapsed adventurers and chanted, "*Diagnosis.*" A white flash passed through the adventurer's body. "This one has a bloodsucker in his lungs. We need to act fast."

"W-Wait a second!"

"What? This is kind of an emergency."

"A-Aren't you a combat specialist? How is it that you can heal? And what was that spell just now?"

"That was a spell to examine the inside of the target's body. And I've told you over and over that I'm neither a fighter nor an adventurer."

"Seriously, who the hell..."

"Just a plain ol' shadow healer."

"The heck is a shadow healer...?"

"Come on. We need to hurry. I'll extract the bloodsuckers, and you handle the wounds. You're a healer, right?"

Jose clenched his teeth, his fists tightening against the floor for a moment before he pushed himself to his feet in one swift motion.

"An *elite* healer," he gritted out.


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***

"Got this one. Close the wounds."

"I know! You don't have to order me around."

Zenos pinpointed the bloodsuckers' locations with Diagnosis, then used his Scalpel to cut open the adventurers' skin and remove the parasites. Jose followed behind, healing each patient as Zenos moved on to the next. The warm light of repeated advanced healing spells—rarely seen even in the royal capital—filled the space, setting it aglow.

In the end, not a single person died, and the treatment was successfully completed.

"You were a big help, Jose. This wrapped up faster than I expected, thanks to you."

Still looking somewhat irritated, Jose replied between ragged breaths, "No, really, who *are* you? You treated all of them without even breaking a sweat. You're *better* than elite healers. I've never heard of anyone like you."

"Well, I've got my reasons to stay out of the public eye."

"That just raises more questions..."

"Anyway, I'm glad no one died, but they've lost a lot of blood. They'll need to take it easy for a while."

In the communal room of the lodge, a dozen or so adventurers were lying down. Their skin had regained some color, and regeneration magic had been cast on their bone marrow to improve blood production, so their lives weren't in immediate danger. Still, they'd need to rest for at least a day.

"...ry," Jose mumbled at the adventurers, his gaze slightly downcast.

"Huh?"

"I-I said, I'm sorry. For...taking so long to heal you..." His voice was so quiet that the end of his apology was almost inaudible, but the message got across.

The adventurers exchanged glances, then grinned broadly.

"Hey, don't sweat it. I don't remember much of what happened,

but you did save us, right? So thanks."

Jose let out a small sigh of relief. Adventurers, it seemed—exceptions aside—were good-natured people.

In the meantime, Zenos picked up his pack, which he'd left at the edge of the communal room, and slung it over his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Jose asked.

"To the private rooms," Zenos replied.

The mountain lodge was divided between a large communal area where everyone slept together and a narrow hallway leading to a handful of private rooms. These rooms, originally storage spaces for mining tools and food supplies, were being used as private quarters. One of them served as Jose's makeshift infirmary.

Trailing behind Zenos, Jose muttered complaints wearily. "That was seriously awful. I'd never heard of a mutated bloodsucker before..."

"A mutation, huh," Zenos mused. "Maybe..."

He thought back on a seasoned adventurer he'd seen in the mountains, bleeding despite the absence of nearby magical beasts. The sight had bothered him enough to leave Roa to deal with Aska's fault-finding and return to the lodge—and his hunch had been correct.

"What? You don't think it's a mutation?" Jose asked, suspicious, as he continued to follow Zenos down the hallway.

"Well, I guess you could call it a mutation, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

"Mutations are rare, right?"

"Yeah, and?"

"Well, what are the odds that this many bloodsuckers mutated all at once?" Zenos asked, turning back to look at the younger healer.

Jose nodded along.

"And don't you wonder how they got into the adventurers' bodies in the first place?" Zenos continued.

"Uh... Maybe through their skin when they were walking through bushes?"

"All of these adventurers got parasitized at the same time? Despite being split into different teams?"

Jose paused for a moment, then gulped. “Right... So you’re saying...”

“Exactly. They must’ve gotten into their bodies some other way.”

“The food...”

“That’s my guess. The bloodsuckers’ eggs were in the food. They’re small, and they don’t taste or smell like anything. If they were mixed into something like a soup with other ingredients, they’d be hard to notice. No one realized what they were eating, and after about half a day, the eggs hatched inside their bodies. Bloodsuckers can’t normally survive inside human hosts, but someone must’ve done something to them to make it possible.”

And once the parasites had matured, they’d begun tearing through the blood vessels and skin of their hosts from the inside. Had this gone on any longer, they might’ve shredded internal organs as well.

“But, wait... The one who made the food was...”

“...Yeah.”

Zenos nodded, his gaze fixed on the door of the room ahead of them. Three of these rooms were being used as private quarters: one by Jose, another by the Skull Dogs, and a third by one other adventurer.

Misery Ren.

The Bronze Class adventurer was also a skilled beast tamer, which made her quite familiar with handling magical beasts. Not only that, but she was also the one who’d volunteered to prepare a meal for the group.

Jose brought a hand to his forehead and murmured, “Come to think of it, when we first entered the mountains, we saw the corpse of a beast, covered in wounds. Was that from bloodsuckers?”

“The boar, yeah. That was when I realized there had to be a bloodsucker nest nearby.”

And Misery had conspicuously fallen behind the group, supposedly hunting a rabbit for dinner—when in reality she’d likely been gathering eggs from the nest. She likely had performed some sort of special procedure on the eggs afterward to make them viable for human hosts.

“So...what are you going to do?” Jose whispered.

“I’m just gonna ask her about it,” Zenos replied nonchalantly.

“What? Just like that?”

“Sitting here overthinking it won’t solve anything.”

“Well, no, but...”

“Hello? Misery? You got a second?” Zenos asked, knocking on the door.

There was no reply, however.

Misery had stayed behind to provide support and wasn’t part of Kaiser’s exploration team. She should have been in the lodge. Zenos knocked a few more times to no avail, so he placed his hand on the doorknob. He exchanged a glance with Jose and slowly pushed the door open. The young healer took a hesitant peek inside.

“Sh-She’s gone!” Jose exclaimed.

The dimly lit room was empty, with no sign of anyone. Even Misery’s personal belongings were nowhere to be found. It was practically a signed confession.

“Ugh! She got away!” Jose complained, stomping his feet in frustration.

Zenos silently folded his arms.

“What?” Jose asked.

“I’m just wondering what her plan was.”

“I mean, isn’t it obvious? She wanted to keep the reward all for herself. Fewer participants mean a bigger share.”

“Sure, that’s the obvious explanation, but...”

But, as Zenos had discussed with Carmilla last night, the group had yet to locate the magical beast responsible for the increase in activity. It seemed too early for Misery to make her move. All this did was weaken their team before the mission could even be completed. Perhaps she’d realized there weren’t as many beasts in the mountains as originally expected and concluded the source beast was either absent or dormant? In that case, eliminating the others meant she could report the problem as resolved and claim all the credit.

Still, something about it seemed off. That was why he’d wanted to ask Misery herself about it, but...she was already gone.

"Well, I suppose she couldn't have been sure that the bloodsuckers would finish everyone off and fled without bothering to verify it. Which means...this was all very shoddily done."

Jose tilted his head, frowning. The story of Misery's former party being wiped out came to mind, nagging uncomfortably at him. "By the way, Zenos, how are *you* fine? Weren't you affected?"

"I happened not to have any soup, that's all."

Aska, who never ate anything during a hunt, and Roa, who had been passed out all night, also hadn't had any. The only others who might not have eaten it were the members of the Skull Dogs, who were operating on their own.

"Ugh! I can't believe she got away!" Jose protested. "I want to slap myself for being so careless." He stomped his feet in frustration a second time.

Zenos gave the boy a sidelong glance. "Well, she may still get what's coming to her."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing..."

The reason why Zenos hadn't tried the soup was the fact that a certain translucent stowaway in his pack had commandeered it. And said soup requisitioner was no longer detectable in the bracelet within the bag.

Looking out the window at the dense green forest, Zenos shrugged. "She's spiteful, that one."

***

Elsewhere, a shadow ran down the mountainside, weaving in between the tightly packed trees and stumbling through the undergrowth.

"Ha! Men are so simple. Just act like a damsel in distress and they fall right for it," sneered the Bronze Class beast tamer and mastermind behind the egg-laced soup, Misery Ren.

The woman's previously reserved and unremarkable demeanor was gone, replaced by an air of cunning. Her lips were curled into a sly, villainous smile.

"That should take care of at least half of them."

Misery had initially considered poisoning the water or food supply, but not everyone would've consumed those at the same time. If only a few people had begun to suffer suddenly, it would've aroused suspicion. She'd been pondering what method to use when she'd stumbled upon a nest of bloodsuckers, prompting a change in plans.

She'd taken a special powder—acquired through a certain unusual means—and dissolved it in water, which she'd then soaked the bloodsucker eggs in. This procedure had allowed the parasites to survive for a limited period inside human hosts. She'd then mixed the eggs into a soup with other ingredients. Upon being consumed, the eggs would hatch within about half a day and the bloodsuckers would begin to tear the adventurers apart from within.

Although there was an elite healer accompanying the group on this expedition, he didn't seem used to the harsh reality of adventuring. She'd figured the boy would take some time to figure out the truth.

"This will make me rich," she said to herself, chuckling as she brushed aside the branches in her path.

"Hold it right there!"

"What?"

Misery instinctively stopped moving at the sudden voice coming from behind her. *Damn it. Is someone chasing after me?* Panicking, she spun around, but there was nothing there—only the dense overgrowth of wild vegetation.

Still, something felt off. It was summer, yet the air seemed unnaturally cold. Goose bumps had risen all over her arms without her noticing.

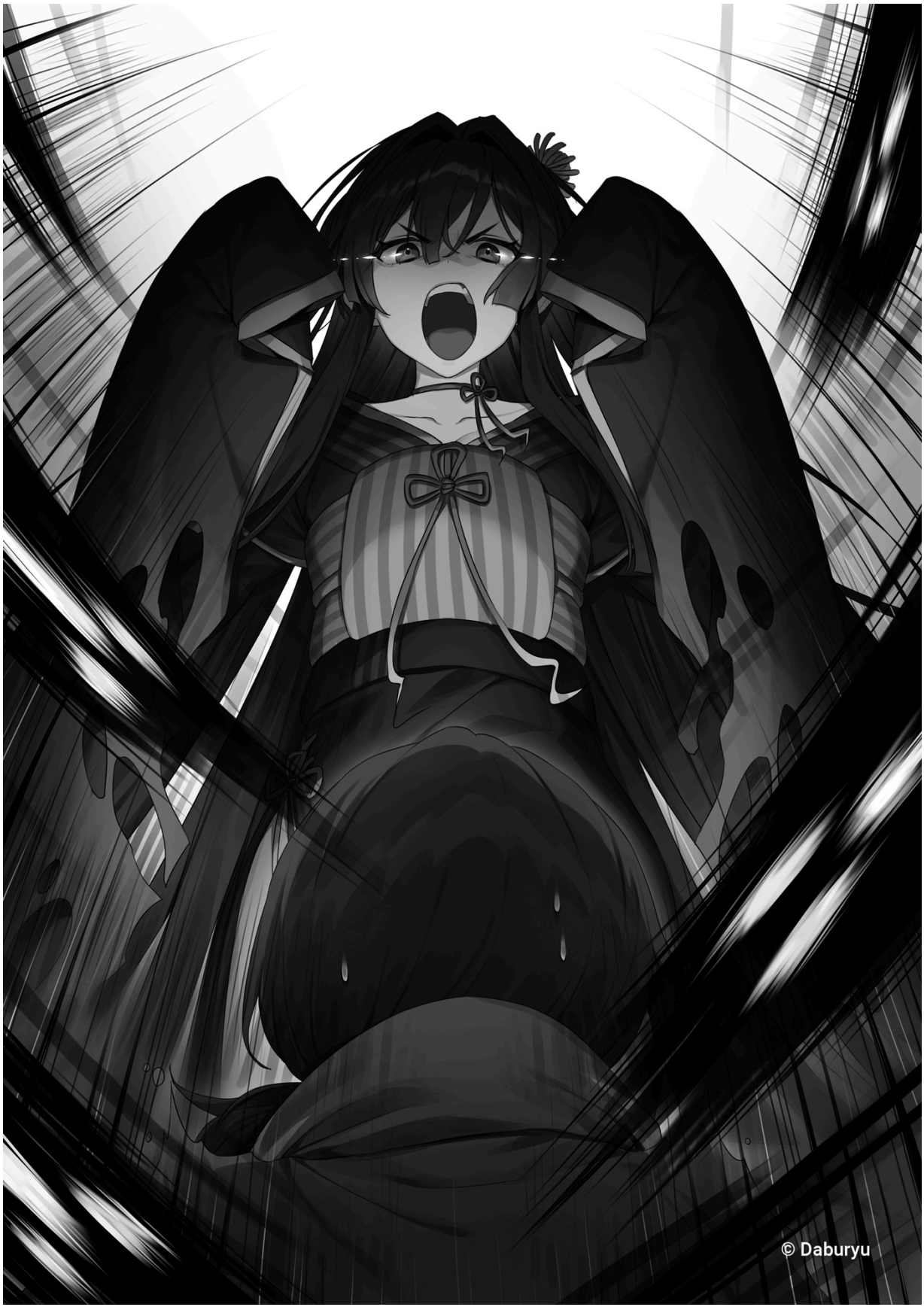
"Wh-Who's there?" she called out into the bushes.

A bone-chilling voice replied, "Yooouuu... You *dared* to put strange eggs in the meal I was looking forward to! You made me consume that foul concoction!"

From the shadow of the trees, a translucent woman clad in pitch-black robes slowly emerged. Misery's legs gave out beneath her and she slumped to the forest floor.

"I...will...*never*...forgive...yooouu!!!"

“E-Eeeeeeeeeek!”


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“A-A wraith! There’s a wraith! How?! Why?! Oh no. Oh no, no, no __”

Misery desperately tried to flee, but her legs wouldn’t respond. All she could manage to do was slowly drag herself backward.

It was common knowledge to all adventurers, not just beast tamers, that wraiths were the highest-ranked undead monster. Simply encountering one was already synonymous with death—and those capable of speech, like this one, were even more dangerous. Normally, they couldn’t appear during the day, but this deep in the mountains, most of the sunlight was blocked out by thick branches and foliage.

“Eek! P-Please, s-someone hel—”

“I will admit. Something is bothering me.”

“Huh...?”

Misery tried to crawl away on all fours, but the wraith just floated there, not drawing closer. Instead of trying to drain the beast tamer’s life away, she just seemed lost in thought.

“Wh-What is bothering you?” Misery stammered.

“If your plan was to hog the reward, why make a move this soon? Was there another reason?”

Misery gulped loudly, steadying her breath as she remained slumped on the ground. The terrifying creature seemed intrigued by her actions for...some reason. If she could keep the conversation going, maybe she’d find an opening to escape.

“U-Um, I was...”

“Do not spoil the answer, imbecile!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! I’m so sorry, ma’am!”

“Keep it to yourself! *I* will solve this. There is no mystery that I, the greatest sage in all of the land, cannot unravel.”

“Y-You’re the greatest sage in all of the land? R-Really?”

“No.”

“I-Is this the time for such jokes?!”

This wraith was incomprehensible. Misery had never seen or heard of anything like it. And the unpredictability was terrifying in its own way.

Folding her arms, the wraith tilted her head at an awkward angle

before breaking into a low, eerie laugh. “Hee hee hee... I see now.” She gracefully descended to the earth, the soil around her feet freezing soundlessly. The wraith pointed a pale finger right at Misery, and said, “You! Terrible cook! ’Tis not the reward from this mission you are after, is it?”

“Um...”

“Do not interrupt me, imbecile!”

“I-I’m so sorry, ma’am!”

“A significant number of skilled adventurers from the Kingdom of Herzeth are participating in this expedition. Your goal is to eliminate as many of them as possible!”

Misery didn’t appreciate being called a terrible cook, but she could do nothing but stare in return.

“Your true purpose is to weaken this kingdom. Skilled adventurers are a boon to any nation. You are not from this country, are you?”

Misery gasped, slowly shifting onto her knees. “And what if I’m not?”

“It would be none of my concern. I am content in knowing I am correct.”

“So you’ll let me go?”

“You think you can feed me slop and then walk away?”

“It wasn’t slop! Stop implying I’m a bad cook! I’m a *great* cook! I just added some bloodsucker eggs to the soup, that’s all!”

The wraith brought a hand to her cheek, as though bored by Misery’s protests. “Either way, something does not quite add up. Not everyone ate the garbage you concocted, and you left the lodge before checking that the eggs had been effective. If you *are* trying to assassinate all the skilled adventurers in one fell swoop, well, your execution is awful. Sloppy, really.”

“You’re still going on about how bad it is! You’re doing this on purpose!” Misery snapped as she pushed to her feet, glaring at the wraith.

Feeling the strength return to her legs, she took a deep breath and carefully gathered her thoughts. The wraith had a point—it *was* true that some of the adventurers, like the Silver Wolf and the members of the Skull Dogs, hadn’t touched her food.

"Honestly, I was going to wait a bit longer. I wanted to gain more trust and ensure everyone ate the soup. But...it's dangerous here."

"Dangerous, you say?"

"The moment I stepped foot on these mountains, my whole body shivered. I'm a beast tamer. I could sense something right away. I knew that if I didn't leave this place soon, things would take a turn for the worse. No, for the *worst*. I wasn't expecting to run into a wraith, but you're probably not the most outlandish thing here. There's something else. Something even more outlandish. Hurry... Hurry... Leave...this...place... Hurry..."

Misery continued to speak in a slow, steady tone, almost like she was singing a lullaby. The wraith's eyelids began to droop, her eyes slowly hooding. Her head lolled forward, and her limbs hung limp as she stood there, listless. The chilling stillness of the surroundings mixed with the heat and the hum of insects—a reminder that it was still, in fact, summer.

"Heh heh..." Misery giggled quietly. "I did it! The wraith is mine!"

Wraiths capable of speech were extremely rare, and considered practically on par with catastrophe-level monsters. They weren't foes that one could hope to defeat through conventional means. But, thanks to their high intelligence, they were sometimes vulnerable to beast tamers' magic. Misery had disguised her chant as an explanation and embedded a servitude spell in her words.

"Now, lift your head."

At Misery's command, the wraith's chin slowly lifted. Her flat, emotionless voice filled the air. "Mis...tress..."

"Listen closely. My words are absolute. You must obey my every command."

"As you wish..."

Satisfied, Misery gazed at the now submissive monster and issued her next order in a calm, deliberate tone. "Now, kill the remaining adventurers."

"Kill...them all..."

"Ah, but wait. Before that..." Misery looked around cautiously and lowered her voice. "First I want you to say, 'Mistress Misery's cooking is absolutely delectable.'"

The wraith nodded slowly and said, “Mistress Misery’s cooking is absolutely detestable.”

“Ah ha ha! That’s right! My cooking is— What?” Misery froze, her eyes widening in shock as the wraith before her smiled sweetly. “No, but... My spell should’ve been flawless!”

In a panic, she turned to flee, but in an instant a beautiful translucent face appeared inches from her own. “As if that pathetic trick would ever work on me!”

“Eek!”

“A lowly worm like you, trying to enslave the Lich Queen?! Come back in three million years, you fool!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Foaming at the mouth, Misery collapsed onto her back in the weeds, out like a light.

Carmilla looked down at Misery’s white-eyed, limp form with disdain. “Hmph. This overconfident fool. All I did was play along for a bit. Lily’s cooking is a hundred times better.” She raised her hands over the unconscious Misery and murmured a spell. “I don’t usually meddle in the affairs of the living, but you *dared* feed me that abomination. This curse is a punishment. Whenever you try to commit evil again, today’s trauma will resurface, and your entire body will be paralyzed.”

Floating gracefully upward, Carmilla turned her gaze toward the mountain’s summit.

“‘Something even more outlandish,’ she said...” Indeed, even Carmilla’s spectral form could sense an oppressive, suffocating presence blanketing the entire mountain. With a snort, she brought her black sleeve to her lips. “Well, our side happens to have a number of rather outlandish people as well. Hee hee hee... This is going to be interesting.”

She paused mid-thought, her attention caught by distant roars and screams carried on the wind from higher up the mountain range.

“Ah... It seems like things are finally getting started.”

Chapter 6: Attack and Pursuit

The savage roars of beasts and the battle cries of adventurers mingled in the air around the mountain lodge.

Just as the treatment for the bloodsucker-inflicted wounds had completed and everyone had begun to tend to the weakened adventurers, a group of magical beasts had appeared and attacked. Everyone had grabbed their weapons in a hurry and engaged in a desperate fight.

"This is the worst!" Jose complained, burying his head in his hands. "They keep coming! I need a break!"

"This is what adventuring is really like," Zenos told him. "Magical beasts aren't going to be considerate."

"And that's why I hate actual adventuring!"

The two healers were on the roof of the lodge, accessible by a ladder inside the building. From that vantage point, they watched a number of creatures with bristling fur like steel and gleaming eyes the color of blood. Their heavily muscled arms swung around like windmills, wreaking havoc on the battlefield.

Roa had found iron kong tracks in the forest earlier, and now the B+ beasts had finally revealed themselves.

"Dammit!" an adventurer holding a sword cursed through gritted teeth. "Iron kongs aren't supposed to travel in groups!"

Indeed, iron kongs were known for being solitary creatures—yet they could see at least five of the massive steel apes rampaging around.

"That *is* strange," Zenos mused as he observed the battle. "Is this related to the increase in magical beasts?"

"We don't have time for speculation! The Sword Saint and Kaiser aren't here to save us!" Jose snapped, his voice sharp with panic.

He was right. Aska and Roa hadn't returned from their search of the mountain yet, and Kaiser, the Platinum Class adventurer, was

also unaccounted for. Not only that, but though Aska and Roa had avoided the bloodsucker egg soup, Kaiser had eaten it heartily. Was he all right?

Zenos surveyed the chaotic battlefield below as he spoke. "Did the iron kongs deliberately wait to attack when the strongest adventurers weren't around?"

"I *just* said we don't have time for speculation!"

"Well, we should be able to handle five of them with our current strength."

"How can you be so calm?! B+ monsters are serious threats! Most of the adventurers here are still recovering from their injuries! It's only a matter of time before they're wiped out and the iron kongs come for *us*—" Jose's frantic rambling stopped, and he blinked rapidly in surprise. "Wait. We're pushing them back? One of them just fell over..."

Of the five attacking iron kongs, one was already dead on the ground. The remaining four, noticeably injured, were struggling to fend off the adventurers.

"Hey, what's going on?" an adventurer asked. "My body feels so light!"

"I dunno, but we're definitely fighting better!"

"Yeah! Just now I was so tired I couldn't even move..."

"Hah! A sword in my hand just gets my warrior's blood flowing!"

Even the adventurers who had been on the verge of collapse earlier were now brimming with confidence, raising their weapons high.

Jose shot Zenos a sidelong glance. "You did something, didn't you?"

"A little, yeah."

Since taking on all five iron kongs at once would've been an impossible task, Zenos had deliberately moved to a spot with a clear view of the battlefield so he could focus on enhancement and defensive spells to support the adventurers.

At that explanation, Jose's eyes widened with astonishment. "What? But everyone knows you can only master one type of magic."

"I haven't 'mastered' anything. Healing, defense, enhancement—

everything works by improving bodily functions, so they're pretty similar, no?"

"They're *totally* different! Seriously, what is with you...?" Once more, Jose buried his head in his hands in frustration.

Regardless, most of the adventurers were still recovering, so pushing them too hard wasn't an option. As Zenos readied to join the fray himself, reinforcements burst out of the mountain lodge.

"Ah! The Skull Dogs," Jose said. Indeed, it was the four members of the Silver Class party.

Wielding curved blades with unique designs, they launched themselves at the remaining iron kongs. One of the apes, already on the brink of death, had its throat slashed open. Dark red blood gushed forth as the creature let out a low groan and collapsed to the ground.

The battle was soon over.

As the cacophony of combat gave way to silence, the adventurers collapsed to the ground, completely spent.

"Huh? What?"

"What's happening? My strength is gone..."

"I-I can't move..."

Zenos had lifted his supportive spells, returning everyone to their original weakened state.

The leader of the Skull Dogs, Veego, looked down at the exhausted adventurers and said, "Listen here. *We* took down those four iron kongs. They're our kills, got it? Don't you forget."

"What are you talking about? You guys showed up right at the end and just finished them off when they were already weakened," Jose protested as he cautiously descended from the roof, pursing his lips in annoyance.

Veego gave the boy a cold, dismissive glance. "We dealt the killing blows, didn't we?"

"W-Well, yes, but..."

"So we did, yeah? That means those kills were ours."

"Where have you guys been, anyway?"

"Taking it easy in our room. Recharging."

"What?! Didn't you hear all the commotion outside?! Wait, were

you guys just lazing around during the bloodsucker fiasco too?!”

“So what if we were? That had nothing to do with us,” Veego declared. He walked up to Jose and leaned in. “Listen, brat. You wanna know how we got to Silver Class so fast? We let others do the hard work and then swooped in at the end to take credit. *That’s* the Skull Dogs’ way.”

Veego’s admission of cheating was brazen—not a shred of guilt in his tone. Jose recalled hearing about the Skull Dogs’ history of banditry before they became adventurers.

The collapsed fighters began to grumble in annoyance, but Veego turned his back on them, clearly unbothered. “All right, then. Showtime.” He drew a knife from his belt and threw it at the first iron kong that had collapsed. “Hiyah!”

The blade struck the beast’s exposed stomach, and suddenly, the supposedly dead iron kong sprang to its feet.

“Huh?”

“Dammit! It was still alive!”

As the adventurers struggled to get back up, Veego smirked confidently, his voice dripping with condescension. “Heh heh... You idiots. Did you forget iron kongs are masters at playing dead? You gotta finish them off right, or this happens.”

Now that Veego mentioned it, none of the adventurers could recall how they’d defeated the first beast. For someone who’d made a name for himself by stealing others’ glory, Veego was surprisingly sharp.

Jose instinctively ran toward the adventurers. “W-We need to finish it off! Someone—”

“Hold up, kid,” Veego said, grabbing Jose’s head with one hand and yanking him back.

“Wah!” Jose yelped, toppling over. “Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Don’t do anything stupid. Be a good boy and watch.”

The iron kong, now bleeding from its stomach, glared furiously at them. Then, with a bellow, it turned on its heels and ran back into the mountains.

“Did it just...run away?” Jose asked.

“After it!” Veego commanded.

He and the other members of the Skull Dogs began to chase after the fleeing iron kong. Left behind were Jose, Zenos, the utterly exhausted adventurers, and the four unquestionably dead iron kongs.

Jose tilted his head, furrowing his brows in confusion. "They killed four of them. Then they let the last one escape. And now they're chasing after it? Why? They could've just finished it off."

"They probably let it go on purpose," Zenos said.

The boy's brow wrinkled further. "And why exactly would they do that?"

"Think about it. Up until now, no major magical beasts have shown up in this area. Suddenly, a beast known for being solitary attacks in a group. Something's definitely happening in these mountains. The iron kongs may be related to whatever it is."

"So you're saying the one that just fled may have headed toward the cause of all this...and so they let it go on purpose to follow it?"

"That's my guess."

"Wh-What the heck?! So they're just trying to hog the glory again!"

"Does that bother you?"

"I mean, it's the guys here who risked their lives to fight!"

"Look at you, sounding admiring for once."

"W-Well, excuse me if a brush with death made me more aware of how difficult adventuring really is!" Jose snapped with a pout, puffing out his cheeks.

Zenos let out a chuckle before his expression turned serious once more. "Still, this could be trouble."

"Trouble how?" Jose tilted his head in confusion again.

Just then, a large figure emerged from between the mountainside trees. The figure had arms as thick as logs, and a broad, muscular chest—it was Kaiser, the seasoned sixty-something adventurer. "Ugh. It appears I'm late."

Moments later, Roa and Aska also pushed their way through the underbrush, joining the group.

"Oh! Doctor!"

"Is it over already?"

The trio went on to explain that they'd made their way back after hearing a commotion coming from the direction of the lodge. Zenos then recounted everything that had happened.

Kaiser stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Hmm... That's concerning indeed."

"It is," Aska agreed, narrowing her eyes.

Jose and Roa, meanwhile, still looked completely lost.

"So, what did you mean by 'trouble'?" Jose asked.

"Yeah!" Roa added. "Explain it to me too!"

And now the two teens were teaming up, apparently.

Zenos exchanged glances with Kaiser and Aska, then turned back to Jose and Roa. "Well, the iron kong attack was kind of strange."

"How so?"

"We'd had no significant magical beast appearances, but then the second our group was weakened, a pack of them suddenly attacked. And they did it when neither Aska nor Kaiser were here."

"So...it wasn't a coincidence?"

"We don't know yet. But one of them did play dead, then bolted right out of here without a fight." As he spoke, Zenos shifted his gaze toward the direction the injured iron kong and the Skull Dogs had gone.

Jose and Roa instinctively looked that way too. "Maybe it just knew it couldn't win?"

"Maybe, yeah. But think about it. The whole reason we're here is to investigate why there was an increase in magical beasts in Zagras. Yet somehow we've barely seen any. And the ones we've seen were largely concentrated to the northwest."

"So..."

"And those guys just ran off to the northwest."

Jose and Roa exchanged uneasy glances and hesitated before Jose said in a cautious tone, "You think they're being lured there?"

After a brief silence, Aska abruptly turned around and began walking toward the northwest. "We'll know if we go there. And if that's where the source is..." She paused. "Either way, I'm off."

"Wait, master! Take me with you!" Roa pleaded in a hurry, running after Aska.

The Silver Wolf turned back with a cold, stern look. “This isn’t training anymore. You’ll be in the way.”

“I’ve been serious about this from the start, master!”

“I’m not your master.”

“But, uh, how exactly are you going to track them?” Jose interjected, interrupting their bickering. “They’re long gone by now...”

Aska’s expression turned blank.

Roa, meanwhile, grinned smugly and rubbed her nose. “My time to shine! I’ve got a good nose, remember? I can follow the injured iron kong’s scent. Looks like you need me!”

Aska turned her sharp, unimpressed gaze at Zenos.

“Uh, why are you looking at me?” he asked.

“You’re her guardian.”

“All right. Fine. I’ll go...”

Since Aska clearly had no intention of looking after Roa, that responsibility fell squarely on Zenos’s shoulders.

As always, Roa bounded toward him and hugged him cheerfully. “Thanks as always, doctor!”

“I’m keeping a tab, you know,” Zenos grumbled. “Once you make it big, you’re paying me back with interest.”

Kaiser began to roll his arms in wide circles.

“What are you doing, old man?”

“The attack means the magical beasts are getting desperate. The final battle must be drawing near. If the Silver Wolf and Sir Zenos are heading there, I couldn’t possibly stay behind.”

“You really don’t have to come,” Zenos muttered. “By the way, how did you handle the bloodsuckers?”

“Bloodsuckers?” Kaiser echoed. “Oh, those creepy-crawly little pests? They were annoying me, so I shoved my fingers into the wounds and dug them out. Problem solved! Bah ha ha!”

“What are you ‘bah ha ha’-ing for?! Weren’t you bleeding like crazy?!”

“A little bit. But I tightened my muscles to seal the wounds. Nothing to worry about.”

“Are all Platinum Class adventurers this monstrous?”

"Gah ha ha! *You're* the one who beat this monster in combat!" Kaiser's hearty laughter filled the air.

"Hold on a second!" Jose said quickly. "What if we get attacked again? With all of you gone, what are *we* supposed to do?!"

The exhausted adventurers slowly pushed to their feet, forcing themselves to appear strong.

"Don't worry about us. Our wounds are healed. We're just a little sluggish, that's all."

"Yeah. We're not so far gone that we need babysitting. If beasts attack, we'll drive them off."

"Besides, leaving people behind instead of finishing the quest would just be a smear on all our reputations. Everyone who's still in good shape needs to go and finish this."

Zenos nodded silently before turning to Jose. "And you? What are you going to do?"

Once they went into the forested mountainside, visibility would drop dramatically. Having an extra healer in the chaos of battle would certainly be helpful.

"I don't...want to go," Jose replied.

"I'm not going to force you, so you can sta—"

"But," Jose interrupted, "I'm an elite healer. I can't just leave a debt to a 'shadow' healer unpaid."

"I see..." Zenos's lips curled into a small smile.

Roa thrust her right fist enthusiastically into the air. "All right! We've got the ultimate team! Let's gooo!"

"Why are you so fired up, Roa?" Zenos asked.

"Gah ha ha! My arms are itching for action!" Kaiser declared.

"Ugh, what a bummer..." Jose whined.

"Why are there so many of you?" Aska complained. "Just don't get in my way."

A Kumil girl, a shadow healer, a Platinum Class spearman, the youngest of the active elite healers, and lastly, a Black Class Sword Saint. As each person voiced their thoughts, this unusual, impromptu team prepared to embark on its first mission.

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At that same time, the members of the Skull Dogs were still chasing the injured iron kong through the mountains. The sound of rustling foliage up ahead signaled something had just pushed through the overgrown bushes.

"Hey! This way!"

Thankfully, with its injuries, their prey couldn't move too quickly, giving the Skull Dogs an advantage in their pursuit. Not only that, but the trail of blood splatters along the path made it nearly impossible to lose track of their quarry.

"Heh heh. A beast is just a beast, after all," Veego remarked with a grin.

"No one's taking our credit," another member said.

This quest had been commissioned by Lord Baycladd, a member of one of the seven great noble houses. Getting results here was about more than just the monetary reward—it would also bring them recognition from a high-ranking noble family. The benefits would be immeasurable.

That was why they'd been conserving energy since their arrival in Zagras, avoiding unnecessary effort until an opportunity presented itself.

"Hey, Veego."

"Yeah?"

The Skull Dogs came to a halt. Beyond the densely packed trees, a moss-covered rock face came into view. A gaping hole was in its center, and the iron kong's blood trail led straight into the cave.

Veego licked the blade of his curved sword, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Just you wait. We're getting it all. The money. The fame. *And* the Sword Saint."

***

"This way!" Roa called back over her shoulder as she led the group. "Hurry!" She moved over the mountain terrain with the speed of a wild animal—unsurprising given her background as someone from a tribe of hunters.

Close behind her was Aska, wearing a somewhat sour expression,

still displeased about having to travel with such a large group. Behind the two women were Zenos and Kaiser, and far behind everyone else, struggling to keep up, was Jose.

"W-Wait! Wait for me," he called out weakly from deep within the bushes.

"You're too slow, Jose!" Roa shouted, suddenly seeming very comfortable with the elite healer. She stopped to wait for him.

"You people are in the way," Aska said nonchalantly, as though that weren't a cruel remark to make.

"Are you all right?" Zenos asked the boy. "Let's take a breather."

The whole group stopped. After a while, a completely exhausted Jose finally emerged from the bushes, panting.

"Normal people...can't sprint up...mountain paths," he wheezed. "You're...all insane... Are you sure...you're human?"

"That's why I offered to use an enhancement spell on you," Zenos said.

"I told you... I can't just...be indebted...to a shadow healer..." he managed to say as he doubled over, breathing heavily. He forced himself to lift his head. "Besides...there might be...a major battle ahead. You should...conserve...your mana..."

"Oh, look who's sounding more and more like an adventurer."

"Shut...up..."

At that moment, a large, calloused hand reached for Jose.

"I'll carry you," Kaiser said.

"Were you...listening? We should...conserve our...streeength?!" Before Jose could finish complaining, Kaiser's fingers closed around his arm, and he was hoisted onto the veteran adventurer's back. "H-Hey!"

"Bah ha ha! Relax, lass. You're light as a feather. This is no effort at all."

Jose's face immediately turned beet red. "L-Lass?! I-I'm a guy!"

"Bah ha ha! I've never heard of a lad this cute!"

"Listen to meee!"

"Don't bother, Jose," Zenos said with an awkward smile and a shrug. "The old man loses his hearing when it suits him."

If nothing else, it seemed like Jose was feeling a little better. The

group, with Roa at the lead, pressed forward, pushing through the untamed wilderness until they arrived at a moss-covered rock face with a large, gaping opening in the middle.

"A cave...?" Jose asked, still slung over Kaiser's back and wearing a resigned expression.

Roa nodded firmly. "The scent continues deeper in."

Sure enough, a trail of dark red blood—likely the iron kong's—led inward as though marking the path, seeping into the rocky ground.

Roa crouched, bringing her nose close to the bloodstains. "They're still fresh. Probably from moments ago."

The group exchanged glances before stepping forward in unison. The moment they entered the cave, a chill enveloped them. The rock walls were rugged and the floor littered with rubble, making their footing somewhat unstable.

"Wait...this cave..." Roa glanced around, her expression suddenly thoughtful. But before she could say anything...

"Ugh!" came a groan from deeper within. It reverberated off the cave walls, floor, and ceiling, echoing eerily in the group's ears.

"That voice is— Ack!" Jose's sentence was cut short when the group immediately started running.

Roa, seemingly able to see in the dark, sprinted ahead and led the way. The others followed close behind, guided by the sound of her footsteps. The cave sloped sharply downward, which made the path quite treacherous.

"*Heal!*" Zenos chanted, his right hand slightly raised.

"Huh? Why are you suddenly casting healing magic?" Jose asked, puzzled, as he craned his neck from his perch on Kaiser's back.

Zenos's spell, aimed at the cave's ceiling, scattered a soft white glow over the area. "It gives us a bit of light, see?"

"I've never heard of anyone using a healing spell for that!"

"Hey! Over there!" Roa shouted, pointing ahead at several men collapsed on the ground.

One of them had purple hair, spiked like a rooster's comb—these were the members of the Skull Dogs, including their leader.

"Hey! What happened?" Zenos asked as he knelt behind Veego.

Jose hopped off Kaiser's back. "Is he breathing?"

"Yeah. He has a pulse too, but he seems to be barely conscious."

Veego only groaned weakly in response.

"Jose, check him for external injuries," Zenos ordered.

"I know!" Jose protested. He quickly ran his hands over Veego's form. "Doesn't look like there's anything."

"I tried using Diagnosis, but his internal organs don't show anything out of the ordinary either."

"Which means..."

"Yeah. It's bad."

Zenos and Jose both pushed to their feet at the same time.

"What is it? What's bad?" Kaiser asked, furrowing his brows.

"Oh!" Roa exclaimed. "I just remembered why this cave looked familiar! I came here as a kid and got an earful for it!" Her words were hasty, her voice tinged with urgency. "This cave slopes down, right? There's poison gas at the bottom! You can't tell, because it doesn't smell like anything."

Right. Roa had mentioned that her village had been located somewhere in Zagras. Either way, Zenos had assumed poison was the likely explanation given the lack of external and internal injuries, and this confirmed that suspicion. Fortunately, their group had moved quickly and hadn't been in the cave long enough to absorb much of the toxin yet. In contrast, the Skull Dogs must've been tracking the fleeing iron kong carefully, and by the time they realized anything was amiss, the poison had already spread throughout their bodies.

"So the iron kong deliberately led them here?" Jose asked, astonished. "Are they that smart?"

"What do we do?" Kaiser asked, glancing behind them as he clenched and unclenched his fists. "Should we head back?"

Roa shook her head vigorously. "No. We'd be climbing back up, and that takes too long. I remember hearing about an exit that's closer by if you keep going forward. It's faster that way." She went on to explain that the poisonous gas was produced by the fermentation of a unique type of moss. It wasn't very potent and wouldn't be harmful as long as they minimized exposure.

"Good thing you're from around here, Roa," Zenos said. "This is

an emergency, so we don't have to conserve mana. *Enhance Strength!*"

With Zenos's chant, a pale blue light enveloped the group.

"Whoa! What's this?" Roa asked. "It feels amazing..."

"How can you use this many types of magic? Honestly!" Jose said.

Roa, Jose, and a silent Aska stared in wonder at the glow surrounding their bodies.

"Ah ha ha! I can feel my strength surging!" Kaiser exclaimed as he hoisted the four members of the Skull Dogs onto his shoulders, carrying two on each side.

"Let's go," Zenos urged.

With their legs strengthened, the group ran through the cave like the wind. After a steep downhill stretch, the path leveled out. They continued on without slowing.

"There's the exit!" Roa shouted, pointing toward a bright opening leading outside.

The group burst out of the cave and stopped briefly to catch their breath.

"Anyone feeling unwell?" Zenos asked.

"I'm all right. Just a little sluggish," Roa said, lightly hopping in place.

The others nodded in agreement. Fortunately, the poison seemed to have had minimal effect.

Kaiser dropped the four members of the Skull Dogs onto the ground beside the cave, put his hands on his hips, and let out a booming laugh.

"Gah ha ha! Sir Zenos saves the day! Do you need a bride, perchance? I have a granddaughter!"

"Let's not get *too* familiar, old man," Zenos retorted.

The place where they'd found themselves was a clearing of sorts, sparsely dotted with weeds. It was surrounded by towering rock walls, and felt more like a pit than an open space.

"So. We're out of the cave," Jose began wearily. "But how do we get out of *here*?"

"We just climb the rock wall!" Roa replied matter-of-factly.

"And that's supposed to be easy?!"

"It *is* easy! Watch." Roa gripped the protrusions on the rock wall and climbed up with the agility of a monkey.

"How is *that* easy?!" Jose shouted, flustered.

Behind them, Aska had been standing silently, deep in thought.

"What is it, Aska?" Zenos asked.

"Something's off," she replied.

"Yeah..."

First of all, the iron kong had led its pursuers to a poisonous cave. While they were said to be intelligent magical beasts, such a calculated move was unheard of. Was it a coincidence? Or evidence of something more?

Secondly, they still didn't know the cause of the sudden increase in magical beasts in Zagras. They'd hoped to find answers in the direction the iron kong had fled to, but...

As Zenos pondered, idly staring up at the towering rock wall, he spotted a large figure looming from the cliff above. There stood the iron kong, lifting a boulder with one hand and taking aim at the Kumil girl.

"Roa!" Zenos shouted.

Reacting instinctively, Roa kicked off the wall, managing to avoid a direct hit. She spun twice in midair, then landed at the bottom of the pit.

"Aw, come on!" she protested, sulking. "I was almost there!"

"Was it lying in wait for us?" Zenos pondered, bringing a hand to his mouth. Something wasn't right. This didn't seem to be the kind of thing a B+ beast could pull off.

"Hey! Look!" Jose called out in a panic, pointing skyward.

Massive silhouettes were beginning to gather on the cliff above. Three. Five. Ten. Twenty. Before long, their numbers had easily surpassed a hundred.

Even Kaiser, a veteran warrior, widened his eyes in astonishment. "I've never seen a horde like this."

Aska's right hand slowly reached for the sword at her waist.

"A-And, what is this...shaking?" Jose stammered.

Just as the boy had pointed out, a faint tremor could be felt

beneath their feet. The sound of a distant rumble grew closer, making fragments of dirt and rock tumble down the cliff walls. Finally, the iron kongs lined up along the cliff parted down the middle.

From the center of the gap between them emerged a massive black ape—at least twice the size of the already large iron kongs. It had fierce, bloodred eyes, and its enormous body was clad in thorny vines, wrapped around it like a robe.

"The Forest Devil..." Kaiser murmured, gripping his spear. "An emperor kong."

Emperor kongs were rare and extremely high-ranked at A+, with only a few sightings ever reported. Even from a significant distance away atop the cliff, the emperor kong's presence was overwhelmingly intimidating.

"That thing...is the cause of all this?" Jose muttered in a trembling voice. "Ha ha... I knew I should've stayed behind..."

The strangely low number of beasts they'd encountered in Zagras despite reports of an *increase* in attacks. The sightings were largely limited to the northwest—the group attack on the mountain lodge when the expedition's strongest were absent, the surviving iron kong luring the Skull Dogs into a cave filled with poison gas, and now the horde of iron kongs waiting in ambush at the cave's exit.

All of this had been orchestrated by the ruler of the forest.

"Its fur is pitch-black," Roa muttered, her hair standing on end as she glared at the emperor kong. She gripped the cloth pouch containing the black down of the beast that had destroyed her home village.

"Watch out!" Zenos warned just as the iron kongs began unleashing a barrage of boulders upon them. "*Scalpel!*"

"Haaah!" Kaiser shouted.

"What a pain," Aska muttered.

Zenos brandished his enlarged magical blade, Kaiser swung his massive spear with both hands, and Aska swung her sword with blinding speed. Their combined efforts cut through the rocks as if slicing through a storm.

"Ah! Ahh!" Jose yelped, crouching down and clutching his head to

shield himself amid the falling debris.

"Ugh!" Kaiser groaned with a click of his tongue. "And we can't easily climb the cliff and strike back either!"

Finding an opening among the onslaught of boulders was nearly impossible, but retreating back into the cave meant dealing with the pervasive poison gas. The enemy's goal was clear: They wanted to eliminate the core members of the expedition.

"This is why I didn't want deadweight," Aska muttered angrily. With Zenos's enhancement magic sharpening her kinetic vision, her strikes deflected more rocks than anyone else.

"Aska!" Zenos called out from behind. "Don't worry about us! Adventuring is all about personal responsibility, remember?"

The Silver Wolf's sharp, almond-shaped eyes flicked briefly in his direction.

"You're a front liner. Do your job. Keeping people safe is my job!" He leaped in front of Aska, slicing an incoming boulder clean in half with Scalpel. "I'm the healer!"

"Healers don't go around destroying massive boulders!" Jose mumbled in exasperation, still on the ground.

Zenos placed a hand on Aska's shoulder. "We may not be friends, really, but you can trust other people sometimes."

"Be careful!" Kaiser warned. "A big one is coming!"

Atop the cliff, the emperor kong was lifting a boulder the size of a hill. The rock was massive enough to block out the sunlight as it was hurled downward, plunging the bottom of the pit into shadow and filling the group's entire field of vision.

"We're so done," Jose muttered in resignation.

"Huh?" mumbled Veego, who had apparently just regained consciousness. "Wh-What... What the hell?!"

Returning to the cave and hiding despite the poison gas would've been an option, had the repeated rockfalls not already piled layers of debris at the entrance, blocking it. That, too, had likely been part of the emperor kong's plan.

The massive boulder crashed down upon the trapped adventurers with a thunderous roar, the force of the impact making the earth shake. The shock was such that it sent flocks of birds flying from the

surrounding areas, akin to a natural disaster.

Finally, the vibrations subsided, and an eerie quiet enveloped the area.

The emperor kong stared intently at the pit below, then pointed a bony finger downward. The iron kongs hurriedly began to lower thick vines halfway down the cliff wall.

Using the vines like ropes, the magical beasts descended into the pit one after another. Once they'd all made it down, the emperor kong itself gripped a vine and followed them to the bottom. It wanted to confirm that the adventurers were dead, haul up their corpses, and use them as offerings.

It clasped its hands together and slowly raised its arms overhead. A shrill sound echoed through the air as its hairy arms swelled to three times their size, preparing to smash the massive boulder underneath with full force. But...

"Graaah!"

Before its fists could connect, a vertical line split the surface of the boulder. In an instant, the rock broke cleanly in half, and the adventurers burst forth from the crack.

"I was *so* sure we were done for," Jose gasped.

"Gah ha ha!" Kaiser bellowed. "Sir Zenos saves the day *again*! Forget my granddaughter—marry *me* instead!"

"Okay, that's getting a little weird, grandpa," Zenos muttered as he landed gracefully atop the boulder, his black cloak fluttering in the wind. He then turned his attention to the iron kongs, giving them a smug look. "Sorry, you guys aren't the only ones who can play dead."

Zenos had shielded the whole group with protective magic at the time of the boulder's impact. They'd all held their breaths, waiting for the beasts to come down into the pit.

"I suppose you helped," Aska mumbled. She crouched slightly, her unsheathed, gleaming white blade sparkling in the sunlight. "*Dancing Wind.*"

A storm tore through the air with a sharp *whoosh*, slicing through about twenty of the iron kongs in one fell swoop, bisecting them easily.

Jose gasped, gaping at the sight. “Holy crap.”

“Graaah!” Wary, the emperor kong took a large step backward. Deeming its opponents too dangerous, it tried to retreat by leaping toward the vines dangling from the cliff.

But the vines suddenly gave way, and the massive ape plunged right back into the pit.

“Huh? Roa?”

Roa had made it to the top of the cliff in the blink of an eye. She must’ve taken advantage of the chaos to keep her presence concealed as she climbed the rocky walls—quite the crafty maneuver—then severed the vines.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she declared, pointing a finger at the emperor kong below. “This is for my village!”

The emperor kong bared its fangs, letting out a sharp cry. “Screee!”

In response, the remaining iron kongs quickly formed a protective wall in front of their leader. They resumed their assault by breaking off chunks of the boulders underfoot and hurling them at the party.

“Rocks again,” Aska grumbled, furrowing her brow. Kaiser and Zenos sprinted past on either side of her.

“You need time to charge up for a powerful strike, don’t you, Silver Wolf?” Kaiser asked. “I’m not in the best of shape, thanks to those bloodsucker critters. I’ll be leaving the boss to you. So let us take care of the small fry!”

“I don’t think you can call a bunch of iron kongs ‘small fry,’” Zenos interjected. Had all Platinum and Black Class adventurers been dropped on their heads as children? He kept his gaze ahead and shouted back at Jose, “Hey, Jose! Handle the healing!”

“Oh! Right! Yeah!”

Dodging the stones coming his way, Zenos struck at the leaping iron kongs with his Scalpel. He figured he might sustain injuries when switching on and off his protective magic, but an elite healer could handle those without any issue. And Kaiser’s support was...well, it was what it was.

With such formidable allies, he could focus entirely on his own battle. He hadn’t felt this way in a while.

“Groooar!” roared the emperor kong, its cry echoing across the mountains.

Thanks to Kaiser’s and Zenos’s efforts, cracks began to form in the defensive ring the iron kongs had made around their leader.

“Aska, go!” Zenos shouted.

“*Weaving Wind*,” Aska chanted.

Like a needle threading through a narrow slit, Aska’s invisible thrust carved a clean path through the air, leaving a gaping hole in the emperor kong’s flank. The beast gripped its wounded side in bewilderment, then let out a pained shriek and collapsed onto its back.

Wordlessly, Aska sheathed her white blade and turned on her heel.

“Not yet, master!” Roa shouted from above the cliff. She leaped down and drove her blade straight into the fallen emperor kong’s chest.

“Graaaaaaaaaargh!”

“These things are experts at playing dead!” the girl exclaimed. The emperor kong swatted at her, shaking her off and sending her flying.

“Roa!” Zenos yelled, moving instinctively to catch her.

“That’s right...” Aska murmured. “You saved me. Thank you.” She gripped the hilt of her sword once more. “But I’m not your master.”

The enraged emperor kong drove its massive hands into the boulder beneath its feet, tearing off a colossal slab of stone and flipping it with incredible force. The slab spun through the air toward Aska, but the current Sword Saint didn’t so much as flinch, merely lowering her stance ever so slightly.

“*Cutting Wind.*”

An upward swing of her blade unleashed a sharp shock wave, cleaving the massive rock cleanly in two. Beyond it, the emperor kong was struck from its groin to the crown of its head. A vertical line split its body, and red-black blood sprayed from the fissure as its dying cries echoed through the mountains.

It fell backward with a thunderous crash. It wouldn’t be getting back up this time.

Silence returned to the mountain. Wind, still swirling in the pit below, kicked up a cloud of dust.

"Wow... That was...a real adventure," mumbled Jose, who had been healing the party's wounds from the back line. He took a seat, breathing heavily.

Zenos set Roa down and approached the young elite healer. "Not quite the same as reading or hearing about one, is it?"

"It...really isn't," Jose agreed, looking up at the sky.

"That was exhausting," Kaiser said, cracking his knuckles. "The wounds I'd forced shut with my muscles kept reopening. But thanks to you, lass, I made it through."

"I told you, I'm not a— Ugh, forget it." Jose gave up and, still on the ground, let out a resigned laugh.

The hundred or so iron kongs under the emperor kong's leadership were all dead as well.

Zenos turned an exasperated look at the sixty-something adventurer. "How are you even fighting like that in your condition, Kaiser?"

"You say that, but you killed a lot more of them than I did," Kaiser retorted.

"Well, I guess that's a wrap—" Zenos stopped mid-sentence as his gaze found the young Kumil girl.

She was standing beside the fallen emperor kong, staring intently at the black down she'd pulled from her pouch. Her expression was dazed as she muttered, "This isn't right..."

Aska watched Roa in silence for a moment before stepping closer. Placing a gentle hand on the girl's head, she said softly, "Let's get going."

Startled, Roa nodded. "Oh! Y-Yes, let's!"

Still sitting on the ground, Jose spoke up wearily. "Get going? You're not suggesting we go through that poisonous cave, right?"

"Of course not," Zenos replied. "We'll climb the rock wall."

"Gah ha ha! Sounds like a good workout to me!" Kaiser exclaimed.

"Never mind!" Jose grumbled. "Adventures suck!"

The group continued their lighthearted postbattle banter. Behind

them sat the frustrated members of the Skull Dogs, all of whom had regained consciousness by now. Their leader, Veego, was clenching his teeth in annoyance.

Their usual strategy of swooping in at the last second to steal credit had utterly failed this time. Not only had they not managed to get any of the glory—they hadn't been able to do anything at all. Veego's bitter gaze was fixed on the radiant figure of the Sword Saint, whose face indicated she didn't even remember they were there.

"Hey, Veego," one of the members said. "What now?"

Veego was quiet for a moment before responding in a low voice. "Well, the mission's target is dead, so the quest is done. And we handled it, didn't we?"

"What?"

Veego's dark eyes scanned the group of adventurers. "This isn't over yet. I always take the credit, remember?"

Chapter 7: The Sword Saint's Lineage

As night fell, dusky hues spread over the mountains of Zagras. The adventurers made their way back to the lodge and informed the others, who had been waiting on standby, about the appearance and subsequent defeat of the emperor kong.

"An emperor kong? Seriously?"

"Damn, and just the handful of you took it down?"

"Man, I'm glad I stayed here..."

Those were the general reactions the group got from the experienced adventurers.

With a rank of A+, emperor kongs weren't just physical powerhouses, but also possessed remarkable intelligence and leadership. Foes that possessed the full package like that were exceptionally dangerous. Tales of adventurers who had fallen victim to their lethal cunning were common, yet reports on such creatures were rare—proof that most parties that encountered one didn't make it back alive.

"They have a Black and a Platinum Class fighter, plus an elite healer," many pointed out. "No wonder they pulled it off!"

But Kaiser and Jose were displeased with the praise.

"How vexing. It was you, Sir Zenos, who made this possible. Your actions in the cave and during the boulder incident kept us safe. And yet these people focus only on titles and fail to acknowledge your contributions..." Kaiser muttered, crossing his arms in discontent.

"It's fine," Zenos said. "It's not like I did all that much."

All he'd done was what had once been second nature to him during his time with his old party. In fact, far less effort had been required this time compared to back then. Zenos almost felt guilty.

Jose looked at Zenos in disbelief. "No, really. Seriously. Who in

blazes are you?”

“Just a guy who wants a quiet life in the shadows.”

“You do know you could gain some serious fame with your skills, right?”

“Fame sounds like a hassle. I just want to get paid.”

“Oh, so you’re going to accept a reward?”

“Of course. I believe in fair compensation, you know.”

“Hah!” Kaiser interjected. “Fortune over fame. There’s something admirable about that.” He scratched his white hair and let out a tired sigh. “Well, I must admit that watching you has made me reconsider my own petty obsession with labels such as Platinum or Black. As for the reward, we can discuss your share later when the Silver Wolf is present.”

“Sure. Appreciate it,” Zenos replied. “Speaking of, where is she?”

Jose looked around, then tilted his head. “Who knows? She said something about being sweaty and wandered off somewhere.”

“Hmm.”

Zenos left it at that. He took a walk around the lodge for a while and spotted the Kumil girl practicing sword swings by the campfire.

“Hard at work, Roa?” he asked.

The girl wiped the sweat from her brow and turned to face him. “Hey, doctor. I promised my master I’d practice my swings every day.”

Zenos turned his attention to the sword in her hand. “Wait, that sword...”

“Yeah, it’s my master’s,” Roa replied. In her grip was a slender sword with a pure-white blade. Zenos recognized it as the same one Aska had been using.

“Why are you using it?”

“I asked if I could hold it for a bit. My master said she was going for a bath and didn’t mind, as long as I gave it back afterward,” Roa explained, gazing fondly at the white blade.

“Huh...”

For someone who hated being around others, Aska sure seemed to have softened over the course of this adventure. The change had been subtle, but noticeable.

Zenos reminded Roa to make sure she got enough rest and turned to leave when she called out, stopping him.

"Wait, doctor!"

"Yeah?"

"Um... It wasn't the emperor kong," Roa said solemnly, holding the sword overhead as she practiced.

"Ah, you're talking about the object of your revenge?"

"Yeah. The emperor kong isn't the beast that destroyed my village."

Earlier, by the emperor kong's carcass, Roa had been clutching the pouch holding the scrap of down from the beast she sought vengeance against. The emperor kong's black fur did resemble that down, but she must've noticed subtle differences upon closer comparison.

Roa shook her head a few times as if trying to compose herself. "But if I can become a real adventurer, I'll definitely have my chance at revenge, right?"

"Do you think you'll manage to become the Silver Wolf's apprentice?"

"She's still unsure, but I'm not gonna give up!"

Zenos gave her a strained smile. "Well, don't count on me to keep helping you."

"Yeah, I know. Thank you so much, doctor," Roa replied, lowering her sword slowly. "When I grow into a curvy lady, I'll be your girlfriend, okay?"

"Don't forget the dowry."

A thought crossed Zenos's mind as they continued their banter. Just what had drawn Aska into this adventure? She'd mentioned being curious about something. What might it have been? He stood in silence for a moment, lost in thought, but came to the conclusion that he wouldn't figure it out by overthinking it.

Ultimately, he decided to leave Roa to her practice and head back to the mountain lodge.

"Zenos."

"Ack!" He turned around to find a translucent woman floating in the twilight. "How many times do I need to tell you to stop sneaking

up on me and whispering into my ear, Carmilla?!”

“Hmph. You did not even have the decency to wait for me before going off and finishing this exciting adventuring event,” she grumbled, standing with her arms crossed in displeasure.

“What choice did I have? We had to chase after that iron kong and the Skull Dogs. It couldn’t wait. Also, where the hell have you been?”

“Hmm? Oh, I was just dishing out some punishment.”

“Punishment? Wait, did you really—”

“Hee hee hee...” Carmilla let out a triumphant chuckle for a moment before her expression turned serious again. “Be vigilant. Trouble is afoot, at home and abroad. Problems upon problems everywhere.”

“Spare me the ominous predictions. I *just* finished dealing with a small mountain’s worth of trouble.”

While he was busy here with this expedition, his clinic back in the ruined city was closed. Lily and the others had to be worried, and the school in the slums had only just opened. He had so much he needed to do.

Carmilla tilted her head, puzzled. “Finished, you say? But I sense...”

“Huh? What?”

“Never you mind. I am not entirely certain, myself, so I shall spare you the ominous predictions. For now.” She floated around to Zenos’s back, murmuring softly, “By the way, the Silver Wolf is taking a bath, is she not?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Roa mentioned something like that.”

“And you are not going to go peep?”

“Oh, I don’t need this nonsense right now,” Zenos retorted, brushing off her insinuations as usual. He turned toward the lodge.

Carmilla leaned in close to his ear once more. “Are you *sure*? Because I am very certain I just spotted a number of men sneaking off toward the spring deeper into the forest...”

“Wait, what?”

***

“Phew...”

In the spring deep in the woods sat the beautiful Sword Saint, submerged up to her shoulders. The faint moonlight streaming through the gaps in the leaves cast a soft glow over her pale, white skin as she scooped water from the spring with her right hand, causing ripples to slowly spread across the surface.

“Do you need something?” she asked quietly.

Nearby bushes rustled, announcing the arrival of four men. Leading them was a rough-looking adventurer, his spiky hair reminiscent of a rooster’s crest.

“Ha ha! It figures,” the man said. “Thieves like us are pretty good at stealth, but you still noticed us. Heh heh, what a great view—”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Oh, enough with that crap already!” he snapped, stomping his foot in frustration. He huffed and puffed for a moment, then began to take slow steps forward. “Fine. I’ll introduce myself *again*. I’m Veego from the Skull Dogs, and I’ll make damn sure you remember my name after tonight!”

Grinning broadly, Veego crept closer to the edge of the spring.

“Hey, Silver Wolf...why don’t you just give us credit for killing the big bad, eh? Just put it in writing. Right now. Say the Skull Dogs took it down.”

“Why?”

“Well, you could refuse. But are you *sure* you want to find out what happens then?”

“I don’t care,” Aska replied calmly, tilting her head.

The man narrowed his eyes, watching her. “Come on, now. No need to act tough. I saw you hand your sword over to that Kumil girl earlier. Not very smart, are you? A warrior giving up her blade is practically asking for trouble.”

“I did, yes. But the girl is worthy of touching that sword.”

“What?” Veego furrowed his brow momentarily before licking his lips. “Well, whatever. Point is, without a sword, you’re just a weak woman. Heh heh heh... You’ll pay for every single time you mocked me.”

“I didn’t mock you. I just don’t remember unremarkable people.”

"That's mockery right there, damn it!" Veego clenched his teeth and glared angrily at Aska before barking orders to his men. "Enough! We're teaching you a lesson! You guys, hold her down!"

But there was no response from the men behind him.

"Hey! Hurry the hell u—"

Veego turned around to see all three of his companions were passed out on the grass. Standing nearby was a man, his cloak so dark that it blended into the shadows.

"The Silver Wolf is the MVP, not you. Let her bathe in peace," the cloaked man said.

"Oh. Zenos," Aska murmured.

Veego's anger flared. "And why the hell do you remember *his* name?!"

"He's memorable."

"I'm way more memorable than that guy!"

"In appearance, maybe," Zenos interjected.

"Screw this! I've had enough of you two!" Drawing his curved blade, Veego lunged angrily at Zenos.

For a moment, a blue glow enveloped Zenos, and in the next instant, the leader of the Skull Dogs was lying neatly beside his unconscious companions.

"Good grief," Zenos mumbled with a sigh as he looked down at the four men. How they still had the energy to cause this much trouble after being exposed to all that poison in the cave was beyond him.

Still casually soaking in the spring, Aska tilted her head slightly. "Why are you here?"

"Well, I heard these dudes were tailing you. Since Roa had your sword, I figured you might be unarmed. Thought I'd check in, just in case."

"Oh. Well, I could've bested them with a branch."

"Uh. Right. Sorry for butting in, then. I'll just...go."

As Zenos turned to leave, Aska quietly called out, "Wait." He turned back around, and she remained silent for a moment before continuing with a small smile, "For some reason, I don't mind. I've never wanted any help from anyone, nor have I ever wanted to help

anyone, but...you did assist me in this quest. And that girl, Roa, did too."

Zenos nodded silently.

Soft splashes echoed through the night air as Aska began to wade out of the spring, her pale figure emerging from the water under the soft moonlight.

"Can you not suddenly get out of the water?" Zenos chided, turning his back to her.

"Why?" she asked curiously.

"You need to ask?"

"I figured I was just about done, so I got out."

"Right. That...sounds like something you'd do."

"Now that I think about it, my master used to scold me all the time to hurry up and put on clothes."

"Your master...?" Still facing away, Zenos raised a brow.

Aska was silent for a moment before replying, "I studied under the Thunder God."

"What?" In his surprise, Zenos instinctively turned to face her—only to be met with the sight of Aska still completely naked. He quickly spun back around. "Just get dressed already."

"I'm doing that now," she muttered in a slightly pouty tone. "You sound just like him."

Curious, Zenos pressed further. "So? What do you mean, you studied under the Thunder God?"

The Thunder God had been the Sword Saint before Aska, and allegedly was Roa's father. Zenos did recall hearing rumors about the Thunder God taking on an apprentice, but the man had then vanished entirely. Not even the Adventurers' Guild knew of his whereabouts.

Aska picked up her clothes from the edge of the spring. "I lost my parents when I was little," she explained. "I had nowhere to go, so I wandered through the woods and got attacked by a magical beast."

Aska explained that she hadn't particularly cared whether or not she died at that moment, but the next thing she'd known, she'd been picking up a nearby branch and fighting back. Her latent survival instincts must've taken over.

“That was when my master happened to pass by and save me.” Perhaps the Thunder God had seen the spark of a talent for the blade in Aska’s movements. She wasn’t sure. Whatever the reason, he’d taken her in as an apprentice. “He said he had a feeling I could learn the Sword Saint’s techniques. I didn’t really understand what he meant at the time, though...”

Thus her days of travel and intense training had begun. Her master had been a laid-back man most days, but when it came to the sword, he’d been incredibly strict. Still, Aska had found joy in her growing skills, and she’d never come to view practice as a chore.

Over time, however, the Thunder God’s health had begun to deteriorate.

“I didn’t know at first, but my master had been sick all along. He didn’t have much time left.”

Zenos listened quietly, his arms crossed. Behind him, the soft rustling of fabric seemed to indicate Aska had finally begun to get dressed.


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She continued her story in a subdued tone. “I noticed his movements began to grow sluggish, so I pressed him about it, and...that was when he told me.”

“About his illness?”

“Yeah. That, and about a woman he loved.”

Zenos blinked in quiet surprise.

“My master told me that, before meeting me, there was someone he’d promised to cherish for life. But once he realized he was sick, he’d decided to leave. The illness progressed slowly, but it wasn’t curable. He said he didn’t want to become a burden to her.”

After that, the Thunder God had planned to live in quiet isolation, away from people, until his final breath. But his encounter with Aska, who was talented enough to become the next Sword Saint, had changed that. He’d decided that, while he still had time, he wanted to pass down the techniques he’d honed over a lifetime.

“Wait a minute,” Zenos said. “This woman he’d promised himself to...”

“...Was a Kumil tribeswoman, yes,” Aska confirmed. “He said he’d met her in a Kumil settlement in Zagras.”

“I see,” Zenos mused. “So it’s true that the Thunder God lived in a Kumil settlement for a while. Which means Roa—”

“She resembles him,” Aska interrupted. “Their features are similar.”

That confirmation made a lot of pieces fall into place. “I see. So that’s why...”

Zenos recalled how Aska’s demeanor had changed the moment Roa had mentioned, during their duel at the camp, that she was the daughter of the former Sword Saint. That must be the reason Aska had begun to teach Roa anything at all—the girl was the daughter of Aska’s own teacher. The Silver Wolf had wanted to pass on a little of the Thunder God’s legacy.

“At first, my training consisted mainly of practice swings and sparring matches. My master always defeated me, but over time, I started to hold my ground. But...I think that was because my master was growing weak.”

Aska was certain her own sword skills hadn’t yet reached the

level of the Sword Saint's. That was why she hated being called by that title now. She fell silent for a while, reminiscing about the past.

"By the way," Zenos began, "did the Thunder God know about Roa?"

"He never mentioned anything. I think he didn't."

By the time Roa had been born, the Thunder God had already left the village. Roa herself had mentioned in camp that the former Sword Saint likely never knew he had a child. If he'd known, things might have been different.

"When my master told me about his illness, I told him we should go see his beloved," Aska said.

"You wanted them to see each other before his death?"

"Partly, yes, but... Honestly, I think I was just curious about what kind of woman had captured my master's heart."

Aska went on to explain that, although the Thunder God had been reluctant at first, she had more or less dragged him to Zagras, taking advantage of his weakened state.

"But we arrived too late."

"Too late," Zenos echoed. A sense of unease crept over him, prickling at his skin.

"When we got to the village, it was already in ruins."

"What?" He turned to her again in shock, but since she'd finally put on clothes, he could keep his gaze fixed on her now. "Was it a magical beast attack?"

Aska silently nodded. She and her master had, by pure coincidence, visited Roa's birthplace the very same day the village was wiped out. Roa had mentioned that all she'd found among the fire-razed remnants of the village was the black down of a beast. Aska and her master, however, had found something much more significant.

"We spotted the figure of a magic beast flying away from the settlement and gave chase immediately."

Zenos stared wordlessly at Aska as her gaze shifted toward the mountain peaks, where the dormant volcano, Daios, stood silently in the darkness of the night.

"We managed to corner it near the summit of the volcano, but..."

Aska looked up at the dark sky, biting her lip in frustration. “During the fight, my master protected me and was gravely injured. He was already weak from his illness, and then he got hurt because of me...”

That had been when the battle, evenly matched up until that point, had quickly turned in the beast’s favor. The Thunder God, with what strength had remained in his battered and broken body, had dragged the magical beast with him into the crater. Aska’s slender hands balled into tight fists as she recounted the missing Thunder God’s final moments.

Zenos exhaled lightly. “So that’s why you work alone.”

Aska didn’t want any burdens. She didn’t want to be helped, nor did she want to help.

“I held my master back,” she said. “I’m through with holding others back. I’m through with being held back.”

She’d joined this mission, despite its many participants, because of the reports of increased magical beast activity in Zagras. She’d wondered if the magical beast that had destroyed the Kumil village and fallen into the crater with her master had returned.

“But in the end, we found an emperor kong, not that beast...” She sighed and closed her eyes. The reason why the lone swordmaiden had joined this quest—what she’d been “curious” about—had finally become clear.

“I get it now. But why tell me any of this? You’ve been pretty tight-lipped this whole time.”

“Why, indeed,” she murmured. “Maybe I’ve let my guard down now that things have calmed down. But also...you remind me of my master, just a little bit.”

“I do?”

“You don’t look like him, and you’re not the same age, but the air about you is somewhat similar. When I was attacked by a magical beast as a child, he came to my rescue. And you did too, just now.”

“Unnecessarily, I might add,” Zenos said with an awkward smile as he scratched his head. “By the way, what kind of magical beast was it?”

As Aska recalled the magical beast that had destroyed Roa’s village and taken her master’s life, her eyes brimmed with a quiet

resolve. “It was an S Rank beast. A dark gri—”

“Zenos!” came a sudden voice.

“Yikes!” Zenos yelped.

“Huh? What is it?” Aska inquired.

“Oh, uh, nothing. Sorry, excuse me for a second.” Zenos stepped away from Aska and moved to the shade of a nearby tree. “Floaty snake! Seriously, I’ve told you a million times not to start talking to me out of nowhe—”

“Save that for later!” Carmilla interjected, making herself faintly visible in the dim moonlight. Her expression was unusually tense. “Something major is happening.”

“Something major?” Zenos echoed.

“Yes. My gut feeling was correct after all. Your mission is not over yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even in spirit form, I can feel it clear as day. It has made its move. The emperor kong you fought was, itself, drawn to this one.”

“Wait a second. Are you sayi—”

“Here it comes!”

Zenos looked up, following Carmilla’s gaze. Through the gaps in the jutting branches were patches of dark sky, dotted by countless stars—and a black spot, darker than the night itself. Goose bumps rose on his skin, and a chilling sense of dread washed over him.

“Something’s coming,” Aska warned as she rushed toward him.

Within a moment, what had been a small dot became clearly visible as it rapidly descended into view: a beast with the fierce head of an eagle and the body of a lion. Its jet-black wings, glowing ominously and spread wide, cut through the night air.

Even at a glance, it was obvious this was no ordinary magical beast. No, this was something utterly otherworldly.

A calamity.

“The dark griffin!” Aska exclaimed, her expression changing in an instant.

“Wait, isn’t that what you were just talking abou—”

Before Zenos could finish speaking, a scorching heat wave swept across the forest, engulfing their surroundings in a fiery dark-red

inferno. The raging flames, left in the wake of a single, devastating attack from the dark griffin's maw, made it clear who this beast truly was. The scourge of Roa's village. The killer of Aska's master. The monster Zenos had only just learned had fallen into a volcano with the Thunder God, returned after a decade.

The sudden reemergence of this calamity was the true cause behind the recent increase in magical beasts.

"Aska!" Zenos shouted, scanning the flames for any signs of her. "Are you all right?!" He'd cast protective magic in the nick of time, so he hoped—

"Raaah!" Aska shouted, clutching the fallen Veego's sword. Her expression twisted with fury as she ran at full speed after the black harbinger of death.

"Wait!" he called out. "Don't run out of range!"

The further away she got, the weaker the protective spell's effect would become. But Aska, having found her nemesis again, wasn't listening.

Zenos was about to follow her when he stopped abruptly at the sight of thick black smoke billowing into the sky, coming from the direction of the mountain lodge. Faint screams could be heard in the distance.

The dark griffin hadn't just targeted them.

Zenos hesitated for a moment as he watched the shadowy beast cut across the sky toward the mountain's summit. *What do I do? Go after them? Check on the lodge?*

After a split second, he chose the latter. Many of the adventurers at the lodge hadn't fully recovered, and he figured he'd be of more help there.

Zenos sprinted through the burning forest and arrived at the clearing where the lodge was located. It was carnage. The lodge's charred remains were barely recognizable, with flames blazing everywhere. Pained groans rose from all directions.

"Sir Zenos!" Kaiser called out as he ran up to the shadow healer. The veteran adventurer's right arm was blackened and burned, and blood was pouring from a deep gash in his side.

"Gramps! Are you all right?" Zenos asked.

“I got careless. I wasn’t expecting a legendary beast to attack out of nowhere. I managed to fend it off for a moment, but it got me.”

“Honestly, how are you even walking?” Zenos held his hands over Kaiser’s injuries and chanted a healing spell.

“Kaiser was protecting me,” said Jose as he hurried over in a panic, stumbling over himself. “Hurry, let me see that wound. If I don’t, it’ll be too la—”

“I got it,” Zenos pointed out coolly.

“What?”

“I...do seem to be healed, indeed,” Kaiser murmured, looking curiously at his right arm and side.

Jose scratched at his bobbed hair in disbelief. “You healed that massive wound instantly? What’s wrong with you?!”

“Well, I wasn’t taught how to heal properly.”

“I mean, I’m kind of getting used to all the insanity, but still!” Jose stuck his lips out in an annoyed pout.

“Where’s Roa?” Zenos asked, quickly scanning the landscape of swirling smoke and flames. She’d been at the lodge earlier, practicing her swings, but now there was no sign of her.

“That Kumil girl?” Kaiser asked, concerned. “I believe she took off after the magical beast.”

“What?”

“I saw her dash past,” Jose said. “I tried to call out to her, but she said something about returning a sword.”

“I see.” Zenos nodded.

Aska had left her sword with Roa before heading for the spring. Right now, she only had Veego’s strange curved blade with her. Not only that, but this was the dark griffin that had destroyed Roa’s village. The Kumil girl had sharp eyesight and had likely realized that this beast was the very same one she’d been searching for all these years.

As Zenos silently surveyed the chaos and despair around them, Kaiser placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Go, Sir Zenos,” said the old adventurer.

“But...”

“I’ve lost too much blood today. As much as it pains me to admit,

I would be a burden if I were to go with you. Besides, there's no guarantee that the beasts up in the mountains won't take advantage of the situation and strike here. I'll stay and defend this place."

"Kaiser..." Zenos murmured, still hesitating.

Jose gave an exasperated snort. "Just go already! You think the injured here won't survive without you? I'm still here, in case you forgot! Don't underestimate me."

"You're right," Zenos acquiesced with a small smile as he turned on his heel. "Do your thing, elite healer!"

He sprinted across the burning clearing, his gaze shifting toward the night sky.

"Carmilla! You there?"

"You need not shout," the wraith protested as her faint figure appeared. "I can hear you perfectly fine."

"Do you know where the dark griffin went?" Zenos asked. Aska and Roa would be there, no doubt.

Carmilla floated beside him as he ran, casting him an annoyed glance. "What am I, a convenient tracking device? Honestly. I will have you know I can only accurately locate other undead. Beyond that, I can sense vague presences, nothing more."

"But you can figure it out, right?"

She glared at him sharply. "Hmph. 'Tis true that its aura is malevolent enough that I can sense it, even if only to an extent. Besides, dark griffins have homing instincts." She lifted her pale arm and pointed at the dormant volcano standing silent against the night sky. "It is likely headed for the crater of that volcano."

***

"Oh..."

In a clandestine clinic in the royal capital, far away from Zagras, a young elf girl was sighing to herself. The demi-human leaders, eager to offer assistance, poked their heads into the kitchen one after the other.

"What's wrong, Lily?" Zophia asked.

"I'll handle any trouble!" Lynga volunteered.

"I'll help!" Loewe added.

"It's nothing serious," Lily said with a chuckle. "You're all like mother hens."

The three demi-humans exchanged glances.

"Well, the doc and Carmilla aren't here," Zophia pointed out.

"Yeah!" Lynga exclaimed. "So it's our job to take care of you."

"Zenos has been gone for ten days, huh..." Loewe muttered.

The trio sighed in unison and began to walk back to their seats.

Zophia looked over her shoulder and asked, "So, what were you sighing about?"

"Hmm? Oh, we just ran out of tea leaves."

The three demi-humans froze.

"Tea leaves?" Zophia echoed.

"I-It could be a bad omen," Lynga stammered nervously.

"What?!" Loewe exclaimed. "Could it really?!"

"Oh, come on. You're all paranoid. Things run out when you use them," Lily pointed out, shaking her head with an awkward smile. She then glanced out the window at the night sky and stared into the pitch-black darkness for a moment. The corners of her mouth lifted into a smile, and she chirped, "All right, let's have some dinner. I'll go grab more tea leaves from the pantry."

***

The dormant volcano Daios, located among the steep mountains of the Zagras region, was known for its relatively gentle slopes, which made it easy to climb. Still, deep within the crater at its summit lay a magma reservoir—dormant, but waiting to reawaken. Few dared approach it without good reason.

Near the gaping mouth of the crater, a pitch-black beast cloaked in an eerie aura of malevolence faced off against the strongest swordmaiden in all of the land.

"You killed my master. I won't let you escape," Aska declared, glaring directly at the dark griffin as she gripped the curved blade she bore.

The calamity-class magical beast remained perfectly still, its eagle

head and lion body slightly lowered.

Although the ranking system for magical beasts looked linear, with ranks going from F to A, then S, and finally the retired Z rank, in reality the jump in power between each rank was exponential. This disparity was especially pronounced at higher ranks. So, while A and S ranks were adjacent, the threat levels of the beasts they classified were on entirely different orders of magnitude.

The sparsely vegetated area near the mouth of the volcano provided a clear view of the dark griffin's striking form. Its immense black wings, seemingly absorbing even the dark of the night itself, stretched wide to either side. From the creature's beak emanated a searing black heat, making the air itself grow unbearably hot to the point it singed Aska's skin.

"Screee!" it shrieked, the sound so shrill it went beyond human auditory range. A torrent of dark crimson flames burst forth, hurtling toward Aska.

"*Cutting Wind.*" Reacting instantly, Aska slashed vertically through the flames, sending a supersonic shock wave toward the beast that left deep gashes on the ground.

In the blink of an eye, the dark griffin leaped up. The wind howled around them as the blazing-hot black beast launched itself at Aska with explosive speed.

"Tch!" The Silver Wolf narrowly dodged the attack, swinging her sword with one hand mid-evade.

Her strike failed to connect, however. The beast had shifted its trajectory at the last second. It landed a short distance away, the impact sending clods of dirt and mud flying into the air.

"This won't be easy..."

Aska steadied herself and adjusted her stance, waving her sword-wielding arm a few times to loosen it for the next strike. She'd borrowed this sword from the man who'd interrupted her bath, but she wasn't used to its curved blade. Had this been an ordinary beast, it wouldn't have been a problem. But against an S Rank foe, even a slight discrepancy could lead to reaction times being too slow for comfort. Still, she had no choice but to learn to use the blade during combat.

The one silver lining was that the dark griffin showed no signs of wanting to flee. On the contrary—it seemed so overwhelmingly intent on killing her that the pressure emanating from it had her heart in a vise.

"You recognize me," she said, staring into the beast's dark eyes.

Ten years ago, at this very spot, the Thunder God had cornered the dark griffin. It had likely recognized Aska as the girl who'd been with him on that fateful day. Back then, Aska's dying master had dealt a desperate final strike to the dark griffin, sending both him and the creature into the crater. The dark griffin had likely needed a decade of slumber to recover from its grievous injuries.

This fight was a matter of reclaiming lost honor—for both Aska and the beast.

Aska steadied her breathing and murmured, "Let's end this."

She launched herself forward, colliding with the dark griffin over and over. The violent clash of supreme forces generated a massive surge of heat that blazed across the night sky. Aska managed to navigate the battle by the slimmest of margins—a single misstep would mean being reduced to ash. But...

This isn't good...

The first to sense her disadvantage was Aska herself. Her unfamiliarity with the curved sword had caused the battle to drag on far longer than she'd expected. Most of her encounters with magical beasts ended within mere seconds, and she wasn't used to prolonged combat like this. Gradually, fatigue began to build up, dulling her senses and precision. As a result, she could no longer deflect all of the dark griffin's attacks, and small cuts and burns steadily accumulated all over her body. The stinging pain began to disrupt her concentration and ability to stay on the offensive.

But the biggest issue was the durability of the sword itself. The blade couldn't withstand the full force of Aska's strength, forcing her to carefully rein in her power while wielding it. Despite her efforts, the blade was now covered in countless fine cracks and was nearing its breaking point.

"No way..." she murmured in disbelief. She could've sworn she'd seen the dark griffin *smirk*.

Now that she thought about it, the beast wasn't recklessly charging in. Instead, it was using a hit-and-run strategy, keeping just out of range while whittling away at her stamina and focus. This was a far cry from the simple, straightforward attacks it had used a decade ago.

"It's learning..."

Aska swallowed hard. The S Rank magical beast had clearly grown smarter from its past experience of being cornered by the Thunder God. She shifted her stance, lowering her body and reversing her grip on the sword.

She'd been holding back in an attempt to preserve the blade's durability, but this would be the final strike, regardless of the sword's condition. She would pour all of her strength into this last attack and strike from a range the beast wouldn't expect—one it couldn't anticipate based on their combat so far.

This attack will end this.

The dark griffin lightly flapped its pitch-black wings and ascended higher into the air. Sensing a shift in the atmosphere, the beast hovered for a moment, observing Aska. Then, slowly at first, it began its descent. It picked up speed as it went, targeting her directly.

A little closer...

Folding its wings, the dark griffin shifted into a steep dive. Black miasma poured from its beak as it prepared to unleash a devastating attack. Even as she felt the immense pressure bearing down on her, Aska kept her eyes trained on her enemy.

Now!

The beast was just out of the range it would've been able to anticipate. But as Aska's right hand tightened around the sword's hilt —

"Master!" called a voice from behind, followed by the sound of someone bursting forth through the underbrush. Aska glanced briefly over her shoulder to see Roa running desperately toward her, carrying a sheathed sword. "Your sword!"

"No!" Aska shouted.

"Scree!" the dark griffin cried out, adjusting its posture and

shifting its focus to the new arrival.

A scorching beam erupted from its mouth, burning through the air and shooting toward Roa with incredible speed.

"*Dancing Wind!*" Aska yelled, redirecting her blade.

The full-force strike unleashed a shock wave that tore sharply through the air, slicing through the dark griffin's heat ray. But in the process, the already weakened curved blade, unable to withstand the immense force, shattered into fragments.

The collision of the Silver Wolf's desperate attack and the catastrophe-level beast's scorching wave created a massive explosion. The force of it sent Roa flying backward.

"Ahh!" she cried out. The sword she'd been holding spun through the air, landing far away.

The next moment, Aska dashed toward the Kumil girl. The dark griffin's eyes remained locked on the fallen Roa, and more black miasma oozed from its maw as it readied another strike. Still reeling from the explosion, Roa struggled to push herself up, groaning in pain.

"Run!" Aska shouted, her voice strained. But Roa's movements were still sluggish. Aska kept sprinting, muttering through gritted teeth, "Why is it targeting her...?"

The dark griffin wasn't targeting Aska, who had lost her curved blade, nor the discarded sword which could serve as a replacement weapon. Instead, it was focusing on Roa—the smallest of the threats at this moment. Its priorities were wrong. There was no way it couldn't tell that much.

No, that's not right...

A chill ran down Aska's spine. The dark griffin, focused on Roa, seemed to almost be smirking again. It knew exactly what it was doing.

Ten years ago, the Thunder God had been fatally injured because he'd shielded Aska—who at the time had been too inexperienced to contribute meaningfully in battle. The dark griffin had learned that targeting the weak could cause the strong to drop their guard.

"Run! Now!" Aska yelled.

"Ngh... Ah..." Roa groaned, finally managing to get to her feet.

Still dazed, she turned around.

She was finally running, but it was too late.

The dark griffin unleashed its scorching heat ray, aiming it squarely at Roa's back. "Scree!"

Aska knew that the rational choice was to abandon Roa and retrieve the fallen sword. That was the optimal decision. She knew that.

She knew, but...

"Ngh! Raaah!"

Aska sprinted at full speed, positioning herself in front of the fleeing Roa, blocking the beam's path. The curved blade had shattered, and her own sword, which Roa had brought, lay far out of reach. She was defenseless, with no way to fight back—using her body as a shield was all she could do. It was foolish. Of course it was.

But...

Her master had sustained a fatal wound to protect her. She couldn't bear to watch his daughter die too. The searing red-black mass of heat approached rapidly, and Aska reflexively closed her eyes.

Master, I...

The beam flashed harshly as it burst, and a raging wave of heat blew against Aska's entire body. She braced herself for the inevitable, praying that Roa had escaped safely. But instead of losing consciousness, she could still feel her feet firmly planted on the ground.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was a jet-black cloak, aflutter in the wind.

"Don't just run off, damn it," chided a man with black hair, extending his hand forward. He turned to glance back at her with a small smile. "I told you. You can trust other people sometimes."

***

"Zenos..." Aska murmured in shock, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Glad I made it in time,” he replied, exhaling briefly. He’d sprinted his way to the summit of the dormant Daios, breaking through the underbrush just in time to see Roa down and Aska preparing to rush forward.

Though he could’ve cast protective magic on Aska and Roa from afar, Zenos had ultimately decided the safest option was to take the attack himself, since he wasn’t sure how intense the dark griffin’s heat ray would be. He’d assumed Aska would protect Roa, and so he’d magically enhanced his speed and launched himself in front of the two, shielding them both.

“That burned. A lot,” Zenos muttered as he recalled the damage from the beam, furrowing his brow. “I guess there’s a reason that thing is ranked S...”

The heat ray had indeed been quite potent, far more than he’d anticipated. Even with protective magic, he’d sustained burns—which he’d immediately healed.

“A normal person would’ve been incinerated instantly. ‘Burned a lot’ doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Aska pointed out, half exasperated. Then she asked suspiciously, “And why did you assume I’d protect that girl?”

“That’s just what mentors do,” Zenos replied casually.

Aska fell silent for a moment before whirling around. “Wait, she —!”

Ahead, on the mountain slope, was Roa. She hadn’t retreated from the battlefield. Now fully conscious, she ran toward them with steady steps. “Master! Here!”

Seeing the familiar sword extended toward her, Aska murmured in disbelief, “You...went to get this?”

Roa hadn’t turned to flee. She’d gone to retrieve the fallen sword.

“I told you to run,” the Silver Wolf chided.

“That’s just what apprentices do,” Zenos interjected.

“Yeah, it is,” Roa agreed.

After a moment of silence, Aska turned her silver gaze toward the two of them. Carefully, she gripped the hilt of her sword, testing its weight in her palm. “Well...thank you.”


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“Screeeeeeeee!”

The dark griffin’s furious screech echoed piercingly across the mountains now that its plans had been thwarted. The air trembled, and the night sky seemed to reverberate with its rage.

After giving a worried Roa a brief glance, Aska turned to Zenos. “Take care of this girl. Or rather, my apprentice.”

“Y-Your apprentice...!” Roa echoed, her eyes widening with emotion.

Zenos gave a knowing grin in response. “Do you need support, Silver Wolf?”

“I don’t need help.” She paused. “Not right now.”

“Understood. I’ll take care of Roa. You go and show that thing what for.” He grinned. “Just know it’s gonna cost you.”

“You really are strange,” Aska remarked with a faint smile before turning back to the dark griffin, which was now poised to unleash another heat ray.

“Screeeeeeeee!”

“*Tearing Wind.*”

An invisible strike carved through the heat ray just as it was unleashed, splitting the air itself. The unexpected attack, coming from a range beyond the beast’s expectations, caused it to hesitate for a split second before reacting. A gush of dark red blood erupted from the dark griffin’s abdomen.

“Scree!”

“Too shallow...” Aska murmured, lowering her stance and charging forward.

The dark griffin used its own flames to cauterize the wound before spreading its pitch-black wings wide and soaring into the air. Blending seamlessly into the night sky, it suddenly twisted in a sharp spin, flapping its wings.

Aska reacted quickly, leaping sideways. The ground where she’d just stood burst into a flurry of dirt and mud.

“What was that?” Roa asked in shock.

“It probably shot its feathers as projectiles,” Zenos explained calmly, keeping his kinetic sight enhanced to keep track of the beast’s movements.

One would've expected feathers to be fragile, but these seemed capable of piercing through boulders instantly. To make matters worse, they were dark enough to be nearly invisible under the moonlit sky. The fact Aska had been able to dodge them was remarkable.

"*Weaving Wind.*"

"Scree!"

Light, heat, and a deafening noise reverberated through the area. Dirt flew everywhere, carried by the howling wind, and the atmosphere glowed red. The clash between the Sword Saint and the calamity-class beast unfolded by the crater of the dormant volcano, with only the Kumil girl and the shadow healer, standing at a distance on the mountainside, to witness it.

"She's incredible," Roa marveled.

"It doesn't even look like a fight between a human and a beast," Zenos mused as they observed the battle.

No, this was more like a pair of beasts—or something even greater, perhaps.

Roa clenched her fists. "Doctor, I'm going to go help her."

"Don't be ridiculous," Zenos said. "You'll get in the way."

"But...that thing destroyed my village! I can't just stand here!"

"Stop. Think about why Aska told me to look after you."

Roa bit her lip and lowered her gaze in silence.

Even as the dark griffin fought against the Silver Wolf, it seemed to be stealing glances at them, likely looking for an opportunity to exploit Aska's weaknesses. It was only due to the Silver Wolf's relentless attacks that it couldn't act. Even then, it had managed to fire heat rays in Zenos and Roa's direction twice, though the shadow healer's protective and healing spells had mitigated them.

Frustrated, Roa grabbed Zenos's arm. "Then at least help her with your magic! She's hurt!"

"I can't afford to drop our defenses," Zenos countered. "The griffin's next attack could come our way at any moment." And Aska herself had said she didn't need help.

"But...!"

"Just wait," Zenos murmured, keeping his gaze fixed on the

unfolding battle. *For now, just wait.*

"This is rough," Aska murmured as she faced the dark griffin. She exhaled, rolling her neck.

With her usual sword in hand, she'd been able to fight at full strength and keep the beast at bay, but the finishing blow still eluded her. While this was partially due to the accumulation of wounds and fatigue, it was likely also because the dark griffin was actively learning. That was probably why her long-range strike had fallen too short: The creature remembered not only its fierce duel against the Thunder God, but also the younger Aska's moves. Though her skill had improved significantly since, her habits hadn't changed. And so she was still just shy of finishing it off.

To fatally wound this foe, she'd need to do something truly novel.

The dark griffin moved slowly, circling in the night sky as though observing her. Black miasma poured from its beak, indicating that its heat ray was ready. It, too, had taken a good bit of damage, and likely wanted to end this battle soon.

Aska flexed her fingers one by one, checking that they still moved correctly. Still, her breathing was labored, her body riddled with cuts, and her agility had clearly taken a hit. Her next full-power strike would likely be the last.

She briefly glanced behind her, locking eyes with the man cloaked in jet-black garb. His words echoed in her mind: *"You can trust other people sometimes."*

Aska gave him a nod, then dashed toward the beast.

But the unstable mountain ground, loosened from the fierce clash, caught her right foot. The dark griffin, not one to miss such an opening, screeched as it immediately fired its searing beam. Though Aska managed to twist her body away from the attack, it grazed her right arm and, before she could even register the heat, turned the outer side of her left arm to ash.

It was only a moment later that the searing pain struck.

"Ugh... Aaaaaaaagh!"

"Master!" Roa shouted, her scream echoing through the dark night.

Sensing an opportunity, the dark griffin folded its wings and dove

down in a sharp descent. Instead of preparing another heat ray, it opted for a direct attack with its razor-sharp talons. The beast swooped down like a bullet, its claws—sharp as honed blades—closing in.

At that moment, Aska calmly lifted her head. "Got you."

The dark griffin's pitch-black eyes widened in shock.

Aska's severely burned arms had somehow completely healed. She hadn't been caught off guard—she'd deliberately thrown herself off-balance and taken a hit from the heat ray. Aska had assumed that if her pain and screams were real, the dark griffin would surely go in for the kill. By enduring the agony, she'd created a once-in-a-lifetime opening.

She'd trusted that *he* would catch on to her intent without needing an explanation. She had also purposely left Roa in the dark. That way, the Kumil girl's genuine concern would help convince the griffin that this was its chance to win.

"*Cutting Wind.*" With a flash of her white blade, Aska delivered a horizontal slash.

But the dark griffin had anticipated even the possibility of a counterattack—it managed to float upward just in time.

When Zenos had protected Aska from the scorching beam, he'd used a combination of protective and healing magic. The dark griffin had likely seen this and been aware of the possibility that Aska's burns could be healed.

Aska's strike ended up cutting off only the tips of the catastrophe-level beast's talons.

It let out a high-pitched screech as it attempted to ascend once more.

But Aska smiled at the sight. "I thought you'd do that."

"Master!" Aska felt a presence directly behind her, and a moment later, Roa's foot pressed against Aska's lowered back. "Doctor Zenos told me to do this!"

"I've been waiting," Aska replied.

Roa kicked off her master's back and launched herself into the air. At the same time, Aska threw the white blade straight up.

"You've practiced your swings, right?"

"Yeah!"

Roa gripped the sword with both hands, raising it high above her head as she soared above the ascending dark griffin.

This was a two-step strategy. First, Aska had deliberately taken a hit to lure in the dark griffin, while Zenos had healed her at the last moment. Next, anticipating that the beast might catch on, Zenos had sent Roa—who excelled at concealing her presence—toward Aska. If the dark griffin dodged Aska's strike, Roa would be there to deliver a follow-up.

"*Enhance Strength,*" Zenos chanted, causing Roa's body to glow a faint blue.

Knowing about the dark griffin's extraordinary ability to learn, Zenos had withheld his support, thus avoiding showing his hand too early. Understanding that this was the right moment for a coup de grâce, he'd healed Aska, sent in Roa, and strengthened the girl.

"I don't need help," Aska had said. *"Not right now."*

Ten years ago, Aska had been nothing but a burden to her master, who had sacrificed himself to help her. Now, having grown into a formidable swordmaiden in her own right, Aska didn't need saving anymore. But she knew she had an ally—someone she could trust to understand the meaning of her words, and to know when to step in.

"And I have you too," she murmured as her gaze fell on the girl carrying the spirit of the Thunder God.

"This is for everyone!" Roa shouted.

The dark griffin made a sharp turn, but Roa, empowered by Zenos, was a split second faster. Her lightning-quick downward slash severed one of the dark griffin's black wings cleanly in half, causing the beast to plummet diagonally into the ground.

"Screeeee!"

"Master!" From above, Roa dropped the sword, and Aska caught it with her right hand.

Immediately, Aska's body was engulfed in a blue light. Thanks to Zenos's enhancement magic, power surged from the depths of her body. She'd held back her earlier strike deliberately. This time, she would unleash everything she had left.

"*Cutting Wind.*"

The strike, overtaking sound itself, tore through the atmosphere, gouging into the earth and slicing through the body of the black beast as it desperately tried to flee.

"Eee..." Unable to even screech, the dark griffin, newly awakened from its ten-year slumber, fell into a sleep it would never recover from.

The scorched earth lay silent. A sudden gust of wind swept away the lingering heat, and the air around the dormant volcano Daios once again fell still. Thus ended what could have been remembered as the most incredible battle in human history—in quiet secrecy.

"That was exhausting," Zenos murmured, slumping his shoulders. With a sigh, he watched as Roa ran to Aska.

"Master, I... I..."

Aska placed a gentle hand on Roa's head. "You did well. I'd expect no less from my apprentice."

"M-Master...!" A smile spread across Roa's tear-streaked face as she nodded.

The enemy that had destroyed Roa's village and taken Aska's master—Roa's father—had finally been defeated.

Aska sheathed her sword and offered it to Roa. "I'm leaving this sword to you."

She went on to explain that she'd been the Thunder God's apprentice. That he'd left Roa's village due to illness, and that he'd died in battle against the dark griffin ten years ago. Aska also confirmed that there was no doubt that the Thunder God was Roa's father.

Roa's mouth was agape with shock for several long moments before she managed to shake her head slowly. "No, I...don't want it. My father abandoned my mom. There's no point in me holding on to his sword." She paused briefly before adding firmly, "I'm going to find my own sword."

"I see..." Aska closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again with a faint smile. "Your own sword..."

The group then moved near the edge of the volcano's mouth. Aska drew her glowing white sword from its sheath and gazed at its

blade, etched with endless marks from countless battles.

"My master," she began softly. "The Thunder God...he's officially listed as missing, isn't he?"

"That's right," Zenos confirmed with a nod.

"I could never accept his death," Aska said, still staring at the sword. "That's why I never reported it to the guild. But now, finally..."

She paused, then plunged the sword into the edge of the crater.

"Master... I'm returning this to you."

The faint rays of the morning sun broke over the distant ridges, reflecting off the sword's surface and making it glimmer. The blade was both a grave marker for the previous Sword Saint, who'd lived by the blade, and an offering—like a flower forged of steel.

"Doctor! Thank you!" Roa exclaimed, wrapping her arms tightly around Zenos in a sudden hug, causing him to stumble slightly.

"Whoa!"

"You were right! Dreams really do come true! It's all thanks to you!"

"Yeah? Wait. Hey!"

Just as Roa let him go, Aska stepped forward and hugged him tightly as well.

"It really is thanks to you," Aska said. "Thank you."

Zenos stood there in stunned silence.

The long night came to an end as the morning light shone on the current Sword Saint and the shadow healer. Her silver hair brushed lightly against Zenos's nose, and he gave his cheek an awkward scratch.

"I'm gonna want my reward, you know," he said with a smile.

Epilogue I

Feeling the gentle rattling of the carriage, Zenos let out a big yawn.

"You seem sleepy, Zenos," came the voice of a floaty entity within his bag.

"Well, yeah," he muttered. "I sprinted around the mountains all night and fought an S Rank magical beast. Can you blame me?"

"Hmph. I, for one, was bored." Due to the approaching dawn, Carmilla had been forced to retreat to a shady spot during the showdown and missed witnessing its climax up close. "Still, it was...pleasant, to experience the thrill of adventure again after so long."

"'After so long,' huh? You mentioned something similar before. What, were you an adventurer three hundred years ago?"

"Hee hee hee... Indeed I was. A legendary adventurer, known only to a select few."

"Really? A legendary adventurer?"

"No."

"No?!"

Having completed their mission in Zagras, the adventurers were now riding back in the same carriages Lord Baycladd had prepared for their trip to the mountainous region. But there was one notable difference—the seat to Zenos's right, which had been occupied by one loud girl during the outbound trip, was now empty. Roa, the Kumil girl, had set off on her own journey as Sword Saint Aska's apprentice.

Zenos turned his gaze to the window as he recalled their exchange before parting ways.

"You owe me, don't forget," Zenos had told her.

In response, Roa had proudly said, "Sure. When I'm all grown up into a proper woman, I'll let you date me, doctor!"

"Uh, I'll take my payment in coin, thanks."

"You're mean!"

And thus Roa had left with Aska.

Kaiser would be handling the reports to Lord Baycladd. The old adventurer had somehow ended up sharing Zenos's carriage for the return trip, and was now seated opposite the shadow healer. He gave Zenos a puzzled look.

"Are you certain you don't want your contributions reported?" Kaiser asked. "The Silver Wolf delivered the final blow, but there's no doubt in my mind that you're the real hero of this mission."

"I just did what I used to do every day back when I was an adventurer. Nothing worth making a fuss about. Besides, Aska said she'd make sure to send me my share of the reward."

Without the Silver Wolf's incredible swordsmanship and Roa's surprise attack, the battle against the S Rank magical beast wouldn't have ended in victory. And it had been thanks to Kaiser and Jose handling the injured at the mountain lodge that Zenos had been able to provide support for the Silver Wolf during the fight.

"Letting others have the credit," Kaiser mused with a wry smile, folding his arms. "That's twice now that you've bested me."

The mission's reward would be deposited into each adventurer's account with the Adventurers' Guild, with each receiving a share in accordance with their contributions. Since Zenos couldn't set up an account due to his status as a poor man, it had been arranged for Aska—whose share would be the largest for landing the killing blow on the dark griffin—to deliver the payment to him once she returned from her travels.

Aska had told him she'd wanted to do it this way because "I want to see you again."

Carmilla chuckled eerily from within the bag. "Ah, the spark of new romance."

"You're having fun, huh?" Zenos muttered, shooting his pack a sidelong glare.

Incidentally, Veego and his Skull Dogs had all gotten off their carriage during a stop at a town along the way and fled somewhere.

"I'm so done with adventuring," Jose muttered from his seat to

Zenos's left. The youngest of the elite healers wore a sulky expression as he sat engrossed in a book.

"What are you reading?" Zenos asked.

"A textbook on the basics of healing magic. Professor Shalbart made me bring it."

"Interesting..."

Jose snapped the book shut and, with a faint blush, glared at Zenos. "You didn't inspire me or anything, all right?! I just figured it was about time to review my basics!"

"Good plan," Zenos remarked with a smile as he leaned back into his seat.

The carriage continued its journey toward the royal capital.

"I must say," came a quiet murmur from inside Zenos's bag. "I feel as though we might be missing someone..."

***

At that exact moment, deep in the mountains, a black-haired woman in a traveler's robe woke up screaming.

The beast tamer Misery glanced around the area in a daze, wearing a confused expression. "Huh? Wh-What happened?"

She recalled joining the expedition to Zagras, sponsored by one of the seven great noble houses. She also recalled sneaking specially treated bloodsucker eggs into the group's food, planning on taking out the talented adventurers all at once.

But, upon sensing danger afoot in the mountains, she'd decided to leave early. And...what had happened after that was a blur.

"Wait...the ominous presence is gone. How? What happened?"

Misery crawled up the mountain path and eventually found her way back to the mountain lodge that had served as the adventurers' camp. Upon arriving at the clearing, she gasped.

"What...the..."

The place clearly existed, confirming she hadn't hallucinated the entire thing. However, the lodge itself lay in near ruins, as though something terrible had ravaged it. Yet...there were no bodies or any other signs of dead adventurers.

Though she couldn’t fully grasp the situation, it was evident that her plan had failed. Frustrated, Misery bit a fingernail.

“Damn it! Why? This was the perfect chance to strike at the core of this country’s forces. Well, next time, I’ll—”

Before she could finish, a sudden numbness spread through her limbs. The eerie face and voice of a strange woman resurfaced in Misery’s mind, leaving her completely immobilized.

“Whenever you try to commit evil again, today’s trauma will resurface, and your entire body will be paralyzed.”

“Aaah! Wh-What is happening?! Nooo!”

Misery’s shrill cries echoed emptily throughout the mountains.

Epilogue II

A few days later, a report from Kaiser about the successful completion of the mission in Zagras reached the drawing room of Lord Baycladd, leader of the seven great noble houses. An air of relief and celebration filled the room among the other nobles present.

"So the rumors of a catastrophe-level magical beast ten years ago were true..."

"And it had returned! Truly a terrifying tale."

"It's a good thing the Sword Saint was there to handle it."

"Let us not forget the contributions of the elite healer and the unparalleled spearman."

As the nobles buzzed with excitement, Lord Giesz crossed his arms and snorted quietly. "Congratulations, future Lord Baycladd. This is, undoubtedly, your success."

"No. This was everyone's success," Albert Baycladd replied with a smile before excusing himself.

As he left the room and stepped out into the hallway, he called after the elderly adventurer who'd just finished his report and was preparing to leave.

"May I have a moment?"

"Of course, my lord," Kaiser replied, stopping and turning to kneel before Albert. "How may I be of service?"

After ensuring they were alone, Albert asked, "Was there a man named Zenos among the participants?"

"Ah...perhaps. Perhaps not."

"The intel I have says there was. But his name was missing from your report. Was he that forgettable?"

"Possibly. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait a moment. Did he truly do nothing of note?"

Kaiser stood, and after a moment of silence, he bowed deeply

before turning on his heel. “I cannot compromise a friend.”

“Ha.” Albert’s lips curled into a smile as he watched the elderly adventurer’s thick frame retreat down the hallway. “Truly interesting, that one...”

Muttering to himself, Albert returned to the drawing room in high spirits.

***

At the same time, in the mansion of another of the seven great nobles—Lady Minerva—a different report was being delivered.

“The saintess has spoken,” announced the messenger, who swallowed hard before relaying the next words. “She said, ‘The most severe rot has yet to be cleansed.’”

Side Story: Her Impression

In a forest somewhere, a dark-skinned girl with hair green as a grassland poked a skewer into a misshapen roasted tuber from a campfire and offered it to the beautiful swordmaiden seated across from her.

"All done, Master."

But the silver-haired Black Class adventurer, Aska Follix, shook her head at the offering. "I'm good."

"You should eat. You don't usually eat much. I know this looks weird, but it's nutritious."

"I prefer to stay hungry during a hunt. It sharpens the senses."

At her master's words, Roa sighed and said, "You know, now that we've been traveling together a while, I'm starting to think that...you're not *actually* preparing for a hunt. You're just a picky eater."

"I-I am not."

"Then why aren't you looking at me?"

"Ah, I'm so sleepy. I think I'll turn in now..."

"Oh, come on!" Roa protested, puffing out her cheeks as she stared at Aska, who was readying a sleeping bag. "You don't eat right. Your sleep schedule is all over the place. That's bad for you, okay? Just yesterday, you randomly decided to lay down by the roadside! You nearly gave a random guy a heart attack!"

"I did?"

"Wait, you don't remember?"

"He must not have left an impression..." Aska muttered, gazing absentmindedly into the sky.

Come to think of it, she's said before that she's not good at remembering people, Roa thought. Maybe Aska's overwhelming talent for swordsmanship came at the cost of cognition and common sense? Roa swallowed nervously. "Um, Master, you *do* know my

name, right?”

“Do I...?”

“Wait. Are you serious?!”

“I’m kidding. You were so stubborn about following me around, even I couldn’t forget you, Roa. Besides, I wouldn’t forget my own apprentice. Your master isn’t *that* much of an airhead.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Besides, you’re my master’s daughter. You look a lot like him, so you’re easy to remember.”

“You mean...you match us in your head?”

“I’m kidding.”

“Hey! Don’t look away!”

The fact Aska hadn’t quite seemed like she’d been joking was unsettling. How exactly *did* the Silver Wolf form impressions of others?

“Really, Master, are you okay? I’m amazed you’ve managed on your own until now.”

“Rude. I remember the people I’m supposed to remember.” Aska’s lips puffed in mild annoyance.

Roa decided to test her a bit. “Okay, then. You know our adventure in Zagras? Do you remember Kaiser?”

“Kaiser,” Aska echoed, then nodded slowly. “Yes. The big older man.”

Correct. Apparently the Platinum Class adventurer had left an impression.

“What about Jose?” Roa continued.

Aska placed a finger on her shapely chin, thought for a moment, then flared her nostrils triumphantly. “Of course I remember. The cute girl who’s great at healing.”

“Pfft!” Roa couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“What?”

“N-Nothing. You’re right,” Roa said with an awkward chuckle. Though she didn’t correct Aska, Jose was not a girl. Then again, Kaiser had made the same mistake, so it was probably fine. “All right, what about Veego from the Skull Dogs?”

Aska didn’t even bother trying to think this time. “Vee...who?”

“Never mind...”

Poor Veego, forever unmemorable despite all his antics. Roa started to feel sorry for him.

Leaning forward slightly, the Kumil girl asked her final question. “How about Doctor Zenos?”

Aska fell silent. Roa was perplexed—she didn’t think anyone could forget that man. But...

“Wait... Master, is your face turning red?”

“N-No, it’s not. It’s just the fire.”

“Reeeally?”

“Wh-What?”

“Nothing. But you know, the doctor always says that eating and sleeping well are important, so...”

“Ngh...” Aska groaned softly. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the misshapen vegetable skewer. “Fine, I’ll eat it,” she mumbled with her pale lips, then shot her apprentice a glare. “Why are you grinning like that?”

“Oh, no reason!”

In the dense forest, the lighthearted exchange between the Sword Saint and her apprentice carried softly on the breeze.

Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you for picking up a copy of the sixth volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

Also, what.

What?

What?!

Brilliant Healer has been officially green-lit for an anime adaptation!

Wahjfgeskjdfhdsgvfjhaj! (Losing it)

Ahem. Sorry about that. But really, when I casually began posting this story online all those years ago, I couldn't have imagined it'd be published, let alone turned into a manga and now even an anime! This is all thanks to your unwavering support. Thank you, sincerely, from the bottom of my heart.

It's so moving to think that we'll soon see Zenos, Lily, Carmilla, and the others fully animated, moving, and speaking on-screen. Everyone involved in the anime's production is working hard to deliver something truly wonderful, so please look forward to more updates!

On top of this, a webtoon adaptation of *Brilliant Healer* has also been announced! Thank you again, truly!

The webtoon will feature a completely original storyline, separate from the novel and manga, with new characters joining the mix. I hope you're as excited about it as I am!

Now then, on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work on the publication of this book.

Thank you to Daburyu-sensei, the illustrator, whose character designs for *Brilliant Healer* are always so perfect that I sometimes

wonder if I accidentally drew them myself. Thank you, as always, for never failing to capture my vision so well! I can't wait to see what else you come up with!

Thank you to Ten Junnoichi-sensei, the artist behind the manga adaptation! I think the manga being wildly popular is a big part of why the anime adaptation was green-lit. Volume 3 of the manga should also be coming out right about now, so please check it out!

Thank you once more to the readers of the web version. Your feedback and opinions are super encouraging. And, as always, my deepest thanks to all the readers who have purchased this book!

I hope you continue to enjoy the ever-expanding world of *Brilliant Healer* through the novel, manga, and now anime and webtoon as well!

Until we meet again!

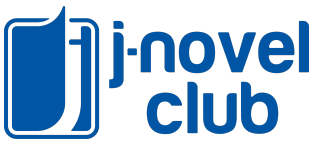

The
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Illustrator
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Standing serenely in the middle of the muddy swamp, a woman parted her pink lips to speak.
“Can you please be quiet? I’m trying to sleep.”
Aska
© Daburyu


© Daburyu
Jose
“A thrilling adventure awaits you!”
Zenos
Roa
Carmilla


© Daburyu
"THIS IS FOR EVERYONE!"
Aska's gaze fell on the girl carrying the spirit of her mentor.



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by Sakaku Hishikawa

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Edited by Stacy Stiles

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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