
THE GIRL Who Wants TO BE A HERO AND THE GIRL Who Ought TO BE A HERO
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Akamoku


THE GIRL WHO WANTS TO BE A HERO
AND THE GIRL WHO OUGHT TO BE A HERO





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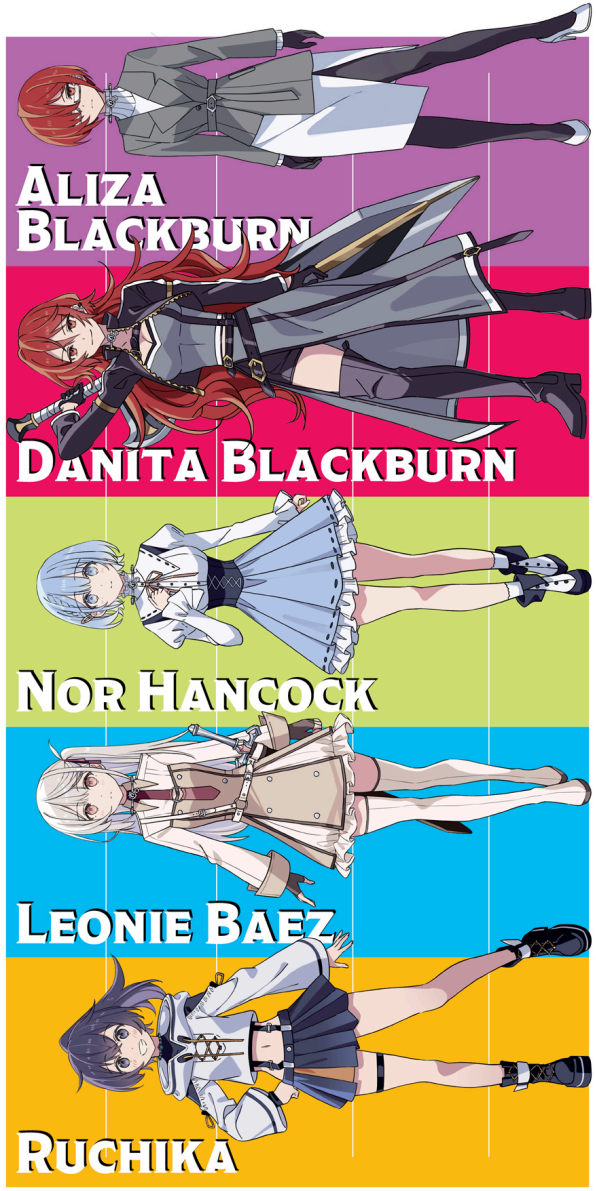
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Aliza Blackburn
Danita Blackburn
Nor Hancock
Leonie Baez
Ruchika



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Illustration by

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Translation by

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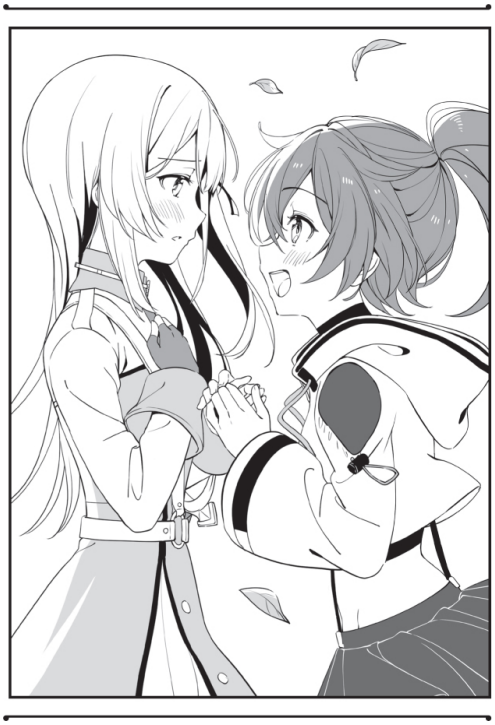
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Countless humans perished in the Great Human-Demon War. We express our utmost grief over the souls of the heroes lost in battle, including the late Lainie Baez. Owing to the noble sacrifices of the hero Lainie and her party, humanity was able to achieve reconciliation with demonkind. What is next for humanity? We must now redefine the meaning of *hero* as someone who works to right the faults of humankind itself. Strife between humans, competition for wealth, inequality caused by disparity in ability—these have been and will continue to be the ills of humankind. And so, to foster leaders who may someday find a way to overcome these issues, we hereby declare the establishment of the Hero Institute.

Those who study at our Institute are required to obey the following five precepts.

Thou shalt be a servant of all humankind.
Thou shalt be a keeper of the law.
Thou shalt stand by the weak, though thou art strong.
Thou shalt renounce self-interest.
Thou shalt obey thy Gear over thyself and thy teacher.

—Excerpt from the preamble to the school regulations of the Kars Kingdom Hero Institute.

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Prologue

I'd had this idea in my head for a while now, even before leaving my hometown to strike out on my own: Somehow, trouble always seemed to find me.

Thinking this as I gazed at the scene before me, I idly scratched at my cheek. It was almost evening. I had come to a city surrounded by lakes and forests—Sped, capital of the Kars Kingdom. In the distance, one could see clock towers, large ramparts, and other old, elaborately decorated buildings, all illuminated by the glow of the setting sun. It looked like they were being gradually overtaken by modern, homogenized gray buildings—*what a waste*.

I stood in a wide-open space. Around me were young men and women, decked out in their armaments. Each of them wore a gear-shaped necklace. I'd never seen anything like these accessories back home, and I'd only learned what they were a little while ago.

But enough about that. The real problem was how I was going to fix this mess I seemed to have landed myself in.

"You damned…demon scum…"

I looked down at my opponent, a girl who I had just roasted to a nice golden brown. She lay there, her hair a little frizzed, glaring up at me with a bitter expression on her face. The people in the gallery were reeling back. They had been looking at me with contempt or indifference before, but now they were staring at me like I was some

kind of monster. *Talk about rude. We settled the war between demons and humans more than ten years ago.* Just then, I heard a rumbling around me like thunder— *Whoops, that's just my stomach.* Using that ability of mine always made me hungry.

"R-Ruchika…"

One of the first people in the gallery to unfreeze was a beautiful girl with silver hair and red eyes named Leonie. She had called out my name in a strained voice. That's me—Ruchika. I may not have the most delicate way of talking, but don't get it twisted: I'm a girl.

Leonie was a true beauty if there ever was one. She had long, pale hair that looked both white and silver at the same time. You could tell she took good care of it, and I bet it felt like heavenly silk to the touch. Her red irises, reminiscent of a cold flame that would freeze you if you made eye contact, were wavering with slight unease.

She had a kind of gloomy vibe about her, but that was no big deal. I'd be sure to put a smile on her face. I gazed at her, thinking how cute she was plopped down in the gallery, sitting with her legs bent at the knees. Then I opened my mouth.

"Leonie."

"…!"

My reply seemed to frighten her. *Ugh, that sure bruises my ego.* But that made sense, more or less. I *had* gotten a little violent back there. I might not have left the best impression, but I bet things would be all right in the end. I mean, she was going to have to get used to at least that much if this was going to be the beginning of a long relationship.

That's right—*relationship*. Humans sure did like to use roundabout expressions for that kind of thing. Back home, you'd get laughed at for using a term like that. So I figured, why don't I just go right ahead and say this my way for once?

"Hey, Leonie?"

"…What is it?"

I stepped away from my opponent, who was still rolling and writhing on the ground, approached Leonie, and held out my hand.

At the same time, I felt everyone else in the gallery flinch back in fear. *Come on, guys, now that's just mean.*

In Leonie's eyes, I saw myself, a short girl with black hair and irises. *Sigh… I really do wish I was a little taller.* She stared back at me cautiously, but I simply returned her gaze with a smile. She took my hand and got to her feet, rising to about one head taller than me. *Yeah, must be nice to look so cool.* So about Leonie and me—

"*Ahem*. Leonie, you were really brave back there."

"…That wasn't exactly my intention, but…"

"No worries. I still thought it was super impressive."

"Okay…"

"So anyway, I've got something I want to ask you."

"…Yes?"

I stopped talking for a moment and just looked at her. I could tell she was still wary of me. But that was appealing in its own way; I liked a girl who knew her own worth and didn't melt at the slightest compliment. Still, what I was about to say to her was a little drastic, even for me, so I could only hope she'd take it the right way.

Nothing to do but go for it. Mama always said a girl's gotta have guts.

"Leonie Baez, will you be my mate?"

"Huh…? 'M-mate'…?"

Ah, did I just see her blush? Maybe, just maybe? Dare I hope? I had been sure to show off my cool side, so I was pretty sure I had a shot here. *All right, now I just have to win her over with some smooth talking.*

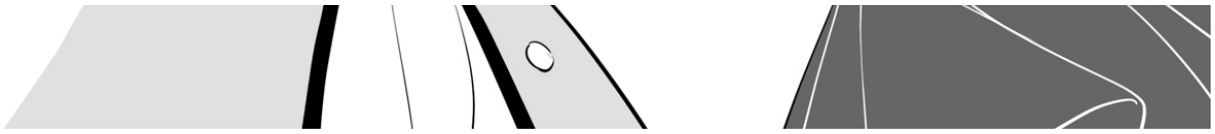
"Leonie, you're really nice, and in terms of looks, you're totally my type. I swear I'll make you happy. So? What do you say? Please?"

"Uh, um…what?"

"Let me guess…you're not sure about taking a demon as a mate. But you've got nothing to worry about there. My mama always said comfort is more important than attraction when it comes to mates."

"N-no, that's not the issue…"





Huh? Is she more uptight about this sorta thing than I took her for? I really thought I had a shot here. Did I mess up somewhere along the way? I thought back on everything that had happened up to this moment.

It all started the night I arrived in this kingdom…

Chapter 1

I was on the brink of death. No, I hadn't battled with a formidable foe. And I wasn't sick. The reason was I had simply used up all my money for traveling expenses and was hungry.

"Ugh… I'm starving… They were right when they said the humans of the capital are heartless…"

This was the capital city of the largest kingdom in the human realm, Kars Kingdom. After arriving at the gates of the city, I had collapsed near a fountain at a public square a little way off from the city entrance. The amount of money I'd brought was supposed to be enough for my traveling expenses here, but the city had been farther than I expected. I'd been scraping by on water alone for the past three days.

The next thing I knew, my surroundings had grown dark. As I sat there with a vacant look in my eyes, the people passing by gave me cold stares, keeping their distances. The humans have this saying: *The wise stay well away from danger.* But I thought it was pretty extreme they would take it so far as to abandon a pretty girl like me.

I hardly even had the energy to be mad about it. I was almost at my limit. To think I'd left my hometown on a faraway journey in pursuit of my dreams, only to die of starvation. Didn't get much less cool than that. *Mama down there in Hell, I'm sorry. I'll be coming to*

be with you soon. So this is how my adventure ends, bathed in the light of the moon— "Um…are you all right?"

"Leonie, stop."

"We can't just leave her like this, Nor."

"But look at those black eyes and hair… She's a demon."

"Precisely why we should help. As the daughter of a hero, I cannot discriminate against her."

I heard the voices of two girls. Mustering the last of my strength to look at them, I laid eyes on a worried-looking girl with a white color scheme and a cowardly-looking girl in light blue.

"H-help me…," I pleaded.

"Are you injured? Sick?"

The girl in white who the other had called Leonie knelt down next to me and began to inspect my body. The girl in light blue—Nor—looked on with worry.

"—gry."

"Hmm? What was that?"

Rrrrrumble.

"…I'm so hungry."

"…Huh?"

I saw Leonie's expression gradually change from one of worry to one of exasperation. *Ugh… I'm so lame. But there's nothing I can do about it now. Even humans say you can't fight on an empty stomach, right?*

"Please…feed me something…"

"*…Sigh…* Wait here a moment. Nor, keep an eye on her, please."

"Ah, wait, Leonie…!"

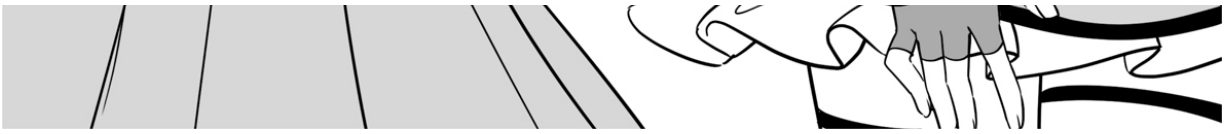
Leonie left us behind, appearing to head in the direction of a nearby street stall. I say "appearing" because my vision had gone blurry, and I couldn't really see what was going on. *Ugh, this is the pits.*

"Here, please eat this."

I sensed that Leonie had returned, and I grabbed the thing she handed me. In that instant, an intense aroma pierced my nostrils,

jolting me back to reality. Before I knew it, I had scarfed the whole thing down. A salty, savory flavor filled my mouth. Was there anything in this world more delicious? It brought tears to my eyes.





"S-so good…"

"Enough to make you cry?! What an exaggeration. It's just a regular meat skewer."

"No, I mean it. It's amazing…"

"Then you must have been quite hungry…"

As the girls looked at me with both exasperation and a strange sense of admiration, I chowed down on the second skewer. As I sank my teeth into the hot poultry meat, grilled to savory perfection, its juices gushed out from the inside and spilled into my mouth. While the simple, salty base seasoning was delicious on its own, the sweet and spicy sauce that had been drizzled over the top of the meat was just out of this world. I was in ecstasy as I devoured the food, and in no time flat, the five skewers Leonie had brought me were gone.

"*…Gulp.* Thank you. Ah…that hit the spot…"

"I'm glad to hear that."

"You really saved me. Thanks. I owe you my life."

"Again with the exaggeration."

"No, seriously, I was on the verge of death back there…and…?"

Just then, I noticed for the first time—this girl, Leonie, was unbelievably gorgeous. The moonlight was bringing out her doleful, ephemeral beauty, and she was just my type. And on top of that, she was a kind enough person to have reached out to check on some demon she had never seen before passed out by the roadside. She was definitely a catch.

"My name's Ruchika. You're called Leonie, right? Do you have a mate?"

"Huh?"

"What do humans call it again…? A 'lover'?"

"…No, I can't say that I do."

"Gotcha, gotcha."

When I'd collapsed from hunger, I'd seriously been wondering what would become of me. But the fact that I'd met a wonderful girl

like this must have meant the world had plans for me yet.

"Can you stand?" Leonie asked.

"Huh? Oh yeah. I think so. *Hup!*"

I jumped up and checked the condition of my arms and legs. They seemed a little weak from having been still for so long, but they were already feeling better after a bit of movement.

"Thank you again. Seriously. I can't believe I was about to drop dead before getting a chance to chase my dream after coming all this way to the human capital."

"Does that mean you've also come to take the entrance exam for the Hero Institute?"

Oh?

"Are you two are doing the same?"

"Yes."

"We just came back from checking out the exam venue in advance, actually. We were about to find something to eat before going home."

In contrast to Leonie, who had nodded coolly, Nor still looked scared of me…but maybe that was simply part of her personality. Where Leonie tried to look at everything calmly and objectively, I felt like Nor was the timid and reserved type.

Okay, so they're off to get some food… This is my chance.

"Can I go with you?"

"…Do you mind, Nor?"

"If you're all right with it, Leonie, then sure…"

"Thanks!" I said.

And with that, they allowed me to tag along. But just then—

—I paid the price for my lack of vigilance.

"Wha—?!"

Someone bumped into me from behind and made me stagger. I felt something being pulled out from my pocket.

"…?! A thief!"

"Whoa, seriously…?"

Even though I had been able to fill my belly a little, I was honestly still pretty hungry, and I must have let my guard down while I was dazed. Although I'd used up all my cash a few days ago, I didn't want to lose my wallet, too.

"They targeted you because you were out of it! We have to chase after them! Nor, go report it to the guards!" Leonie said.

"Okay!"

"All right, they're not getting away with this!"

Leonie and I took off running, leaving Nor behind. Even though it was nighttime, the city streets were still full of people. Brightened by the light of magical lamps, the place really seemed like a city that never slept. Leonie and I wove through the crowd as we chased after the pickpocket. *Wow, this girl's pretty amazing if she can keep up with my speed.*

"I guess the crime rate in Kars Kingdom isn't as low as I thought."

"There are a lot of crowds this time of year given the number of visitors coming for the Hero Institute entrance exam. That means more unsavory types, too."

We kept talking as we ran, but Leonie didn't lose her breath at all. *Yeah, she's good.* I was starting to like her even more.

"So is it actually pretty hard to get into the Hero Institute?"

"It's a school for developing the next generation of heroes—of course enrolling is difficult. But this isn't really the time—"

"And there's a practical exam?"

"And a written one on top of that. But what does that have to do with—?"

Leonie shot me a quizzical look as I grinned back at her.

"In that case, we'd better be good enough to catch some lousy pickpocket, huh?"

I started running even faster.

"Wha…?!"

"Look! We're about to catch up to them!"

Planning each movement carefully as I gave chase, I made sure to lead the pickpocket farther and farther from the crowds. Soon

enough, I had succeeded in chasing them into a dead-end back alley.

"Y-you little…!"

"All right, stop right there. You won't be getting out of this one."

I held out both my hands as if to block the pickpocket's way. Leonie looked a little impressed as she caught up with us a few moments later. *Heh-heh, I really got to show off some of my moves there.*

"All right, time for you to give up and return my wallet. It was a gift from my mama, and it's empty anyway."

"Screw you—!"

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the pickpocket was a girl. She cursed viciously at me as she threw the wallet back in my direction. I caught it and put it carefully away.

"I bet you two are no different than all the others, blabbing on about wanting to be heroes and all that nonsense!" The pickpocket yelled again. Her eyes were darting about, searching frantically for an escape route.

"'Nonsense'…? I'm dead serious about it, actually."

"Leave her be, Ruchika. There's no way a thug like her could ever understand the ambition it takes to pursue becoming a hero."

Leonie's response was scathing. I could sense she had some special feelings around her desire to join the Hero Institute. But her phrasing only seemed to provoke the pickpocket girl even more.

"You're Leonie Baez, aren't you? The daughter of the Almighty Hero? You suck-ups think you're so much better than everyone else, always doing whatever your Gear tells you to do!"

"You have no idea what it means to be a hero. Heroes are the hope of humankind, entrusted with overcoming the mistakes of humanity."

"'Hope'?! They're nothing but a bunch of slaves who happened to be born with a little talent!"

"Uh, sorry, but I'm not really following…?" I said.

Aren't heroes just supposed to be the strongest people around? I tilted my head in confusion.

"Your Gear, Ruchika!" said Leonie.

"Huh? Whoa?!"

The pickpocket took out a knife and charged at me. I barely managed to dodge her swing, then hurried to get my distance from her.

"That was close…"

"Ruchika, where's your Gear?"

"What's that?"

"You don't have one?!"

"No?"

"I can't believe you came to take the entrance exam without a Gear… *What, to her? You want me to what?*"

In the middle of our conversation, Leonie suddenly started talking to herself.

"Leonie?"

"I'll explain later. Put this around your neck."

She passed me some kind of metallic device shaped like a cog. I did as I was told and put it around my neck.

—*Attachment confirmed. Please state your name.*

A robotic voice sounded in the back of my mind.

"I'm R-Ruchika."

—*Nice to meet you, Ruchika. I'll be assisting you from now on.*

As I reflexively said my name, a mental image formed along with the voice.

"Hmm, okay. Whoa…"

Apparently, this thing was some kind of magical device. A combat assistant, to be specific. It was displaying all sorts of information in my mind's eye, from upcoming potential threats to recommendations for how I should proceed. The next moment, the outline of the pickpocket in my vision blurred, replaced by an image of her advancing toward me with a slashing attack.

"Here she comes!"

"Yeah, I see it. Huh, this thing is pretty neat."

—Diagonal slash from overhead. One second away.

The pickpocket came swinging at me again, her attack a strong match for what the Gear had displayed in my head. It wasn't perfect, but this thing seemed to be able to predict the future to some extent.

"Wow, you're amazing. By the way, what's your name?"

—…You are only the second person to ever ask my name in return. Please call me Prototype.

"Too long. I'll call you Proto. Nice to meet you. By the way, who was the first?"

—Next attack: horizontal slash. Point five seconds away.

"Whoa, okay!"

Admiring the wonders of human technology, I nimbly dodged the pickpocket's knife.

"I can see how this thing would be convenient, but I feel like it's kinda disorienting, too. It might not be for me."

"You trying to make a fool out of me, brat?!"

The pickpocket seemed to take my remark as an insult and brandished her knife even more viciously. The attack wasn't much of a threat in the first place, but with the added assistance of the Gear, I was able to dodge it with ease.

"If you wanna play that way— Ah, hold up. You aren't the type to give off much mana or a battle aura when you're fighting, are you? That'll definitely leave me hungry. Hmm, what to do…?"

"Ruchika, leave this to me."

The same moment I heard her voice, Leonie took a step toward the pickpocket and closed the gap between them in an instant, getting inside the range of the girl's knife and grabbing her by the arm.

"Haaah!"

"Bwah?!"

Leonie had thrown the pickpocket to the ground, knocking her out. While the girl was still unconscious, she skillfully tied her up with

some rope. When I wondered aloud about where she'd gotten the rope from, Leonie explained she'd used something called "convenience magic."

"Phew…"

"Nice work, Leonie. You too, Proto."

"And you, Ruchika."

—Well fought.

"That was some fancy footwork, Leonie."

"Thank you. Shall we move somewhere else?"

"What about her?"

"I believe the guards who Nor alerted will be here soon to take her away."

"Oh, okay— Huh?"

I suddenly noticed something.

"This emblem… Isn't this the Hero Institute's?"

"Hmm?"

I pointed to the gear-shaped device the pickpocket had around her neck. An insignia of a dragon was engraved on its surface.

"Yes…this is a genuine product of the Hero Institute. So that means this girl is associated with the Institute…?"

"…I used to be a student there. But I was expelled."

"?!"

"Oh, you're up?" I remarked.

The pickpocket seemed to have grasped the situation she was now in, but she wasn't showing any signs of trying to escape. She had resigned herself to her fate.

"'Used to be'…? So that means you also wanted to become a hero?"

"Yeah. Though, now I wish I could forget it ever happened."

A dark smile formed on the pickpocket's face as she went on:

"That place is a school in name only. They just want to recruit people with talent while they're still young and innocent and brainwash them with Gear. Then once they've got them wrapped around their little finger, they give them some grandiose title and

send them back out into society to work as another cog in their machine. That's the Hero Institute's whole—"

"Don't spout such nonsense!"

Leonie interrupted the pickpocket with a shout.

"The Hero Institute trains the next generation of the most important profession in the world. Those heroes will become the hope of humankind and serve as models and beacons for the people."

I was really starting to get the feeling that Leonie had very strong opinions about heroes. But the pickpocket was as cold as ever with her response.

"You mean those mass-produced, obedient puppets? Ha, some hope that is."

"'Puppets'? Heroes are society's best and brightest, and they'll be in steady supply thanks to the Institute's education system. Though, I doubt someone like you, who can't even conform to the norms of society, could ever really appreciate that."

I could tell the two of them were never going to see eye to eye on this topic. But it made me wonder—wasn't the Hero Institute just a school for training the strong? Now that I thought about it, maybe I didn't really have a solid idea of what kind of place the Hero Institute was after all. Leonie and the pickpocket seemed to have totally different viewpoints on the matter, so I guess it was a controversial topic.

"The Hero Institute ain't shit—you'll see that much the moment you walk through the doors."

"Thanks for the warning. But maybe you should just mind your own business."

After that, the guard who Nor had called showed up and took the pickpocket away. But the whole situation had left a bad taste in my mouth.

"That girl sure had a lot to say about the Hero Institute, huh?"

"There's no need to waste an ounce of your attention on anything she said, Ruchika."

"Yeah, I won't. Anyway, nice work back there, Leonie."

"You too."

That was the story of our hectic yet memorable first meeting.

At that time, I had no idea this girl—Leonie Baez—was going to change my life in a big way.

◆◇◆◇

(Leonie)

Since we had started attracting some unwanted attention to ourselves after the incident with the pickpocket, I brought Nor and Ruchika over to a bench in the public square to get away from all the fuss. We procured some food from the street stalls and had that to eat instead of a proper dinner.

Ever since the Great Human-Demon War, humans had developed a tendency to avoid extravagance. Accordingly, most of the dishes available in the stalls were simple fare such as meat skewers and steamed potatoes. I bought a sandwich with chicken and chopped vegetables; for Nor, a baked potato with melted butter on it; and for Ruchika, meat skewers. The three of us finished everything off with three servings of fruit juice.

Ruchika must have just completed a long journey, because her body was quite soiled. Unable to leave her in such a state, I used my convenience magic to clean her body and repair the frays in her clothing.

"Purify… Quick Mend."

"Whoa… That's awesome."

Ruchika's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of it; she didn't seem to be familiar with convenience magic. It was nice to have such a fresh reaction to my magic.

"That reminds me. Leonie, you said you're the daughter of a hero, right?"

Ruchika brought this up after we reintroduced ourselves. She must have remembered this from my conversation with the pickpocket.

"Yes, my mother was Lainie Baez, the Almighty Hero, who defeated the Demon Lord," I said.

"A-and my mother was in her party—the Healing Hero," added Nor.

"Whoa."

Ruchika looked back at us in wonder, her cheeks still stuffed full of meat. I had answered honestly, but truth be told, I didn't enjoy discussing my origins. Being the daughter of the Almighty Hero put way too much pressure on me. When people learned about my background, they would often regard me with admiration and expectation at first. But once they found out the extent of my actual abilities, they would grow disappointed in me.

To change the subject, I asked Ruchika a question.

"Why would a demon girl want to come to the Hero Institute?"

"Is it so weird? Demons and humans have made their peace. It can't be that strange for there to be someone like me."

"Still, I believe it's highly unusual."

"Well, you know. I have my reasons."

Saying this, Ruchika took a sip of her fruit juice and smiled. She looked like she wasn't open to taking any more questions about it.

"I won't pry. I'm sure everyone has one or two things they don't like to talk about."

"Hee-hee, you're a sharp one, Leonie. You'll make a great bride one day."

Ruchika sometimes said things I couldn't quite wrap my head around. I stayed silent, taking another bite of my bread. It tasted a little old.

"Oh, here, I'll give this back now. Thanks for your help, Proto."

She took the Gear from around her neck and handed it back to me.

"I can see how this thing is convenient, but I don't think it's really my style."

"But, Ruchika, you don't own a Gear, right?"

"That's right."

"Having one is a requirement to take the Hero Institute entrance exam."

"Whaaat? Seriously?!"

To begin with, Gear weren't simply battle-assistance devices. They were the fruit of the wisdom of humankind—a great guiding hand that would show the wearer their best courses of action and which talents they should develop. Though they were not well-known to the general public, they were indispensable to the gifted—especially those who aspired to attend the Hero Institute. In fact, Gear was even mentioned in one of the five precepts of the hero, as was written in the preamble to the school regulations: *Thou shalt obey thy Gear over thyself and thy teacher.*

As a hero cadet, one had to prioritize obeying their Gear even over their instructors at the Institute. When I explained all this to Ruchika, she put on a grimace.

"Dang it… And I bet those things don't come cheap, either."

"It's not the kind of money one could easily get their hands on, especially for someone who's just run out of her travel allowance."

"Ugh…"

I had no shortage of money myself, and the Gear I had loaned to Ruchika was a smaller spare I'd happened to be carrying with me. It was an old model I had found lying around our house; I was wearing a new one myself.

"Shall I lend this one to you?"

"What? But…"

"As you can see, I have another one I'm using." I pointed to the Gear around my neck as I continued, "Although, if you're going to give up on entering the Hero Institute instead, I won't stop you."

"I'll take it! Please lend it to me! Please, pretty please, with a big hunk of meat on top!"

"Oh, that must be the demon version…"

Nor couldn't help but comment on Ruchika's strange turn of phrase.

"All right. I'll lend it to you."

"Thank you! Oh, how should I pay you for it?"

"You can compensate me somehow after you're back on your feet."

"How about I pay you back with my body?"

"Ruchika… I know demons must have different personal values than humans, but if you are hoping to become a hero, you should really stop with those kinds of jokes."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, sorry, sorry."

As I rebuked her, Ruchika delivered an unexpectedly frank apology, though I wasn't entirely sure whether she was being honest or if she was still playing with me.

"Here, take this, too."

"Hmm?"

I retrieved a few silver coins from my leather bag and handed them to Ruchika. She gave me a surprised look as she gnawed on her meat skewer, then swallowed the remaining meat down and questioned my gesture.

"What's this for?"

"Your living expenses until the entrance exam. You're broke at the moment, right?"

"That's true, but…I'd rather you help me find somewhere I can work."

"Somewhere you can work?"

"Yeah."

I admired Ruchika's desire to earn her keep rather than simply depend on someone's charity. This improved my estimation of her.

"In that case, I can introduce you to an acquaintance of mine who runs an inn. They're in desperate need of extra hands at the moment with the Hero Institute entrance exam coming up. I assume room and board would also be included."

"Whoa, that'd be perfect! Yes, please!"

I wrote my acquaintance a letter of introduction for Ruchika, drew her a simple map of the inn's location, and passed them to her.

After we exchanged some information regarding the entrance examination, Ruchika took her leave from Nor and me.

"Bye for now, Leonie, Nor. See you at the entrance exam!"

"Yes, see you."

"Later, Ruchika!"

Night had completely set in over the public square, and Ruchika disappeared from sight soon after we parted. We hadn't spoken for long, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be forgetting that strange demon girl anytime soon.

"She was a bit of an odd one, wasn't she?" Nor said.

"Yes. But—"

As I started walking, I found myself continuing in a whisper.

"—she doesn't seem like a bad person."

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(Ruchika)

The morning a few days after I met Leonie and Nor, I headed for the venue of the Hero Institute entrance exam. Apparently, it was taking place at the Hero Institute itself, but when I arrived at my destination, I only found a single imposing gate in front of me.

Hmm?

—Please pass through the gate. It is usually closed off to outsiders, but it should be open today.

I found it a little suspicious, but I did as Proto said. When I passed through, my view abruptly changed.

"Whoa."

—Welcome to the Hero Institute. Though, it's not like I myself am associated with it or anything.

"Hey, thanks. I'm getting kinda excited."

The Hero Institute was surrounded on all sides by high, austere-looking walls, and it seemed like visitors were only able to come and go through the gate. The complex was designed in such a way as to prevent its interior from being seen from the outside. I thought it

looked a bit more like a prison than a school. The largest building was a grand, old structure built in a bygone human style, and it looked like it might have been reused from some other past facility.

Looking around, I saw confident-looking young people lined up shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the tests to begin. No two expressions on their faces were alike, but they all seemed impatient for things to get started. As a member of the demon race, which valued strength above all else, I couldn't help but get excited seeing so many powerful people around me. But according to Leonie, I would have to confront the written exam before the practical one. I wasn't too lacking when it came to book smarts, but I'd never been any good at memorizing things.

"Ruchika."

"Oh, Leonie. And Nor as well. Good morning."

As I waited around, mingling with the crowd of prospective students, Leonie and Nor came up to greet me.

"Good morning."

"Morning, Ruchika!"

We casually exchanged greetings. The two of them seemed pretty nervous, but I guess that was natural. We were about to take an exam, after all.

"Well, it's almost time for the test. How you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm confident about the written portion, though I can't say the same for the practical exam…," Leonie said.

"Why's that? From what I saw the other day when we caught that pickpocket, you're plenty capable, right?"

"The fact that Leonie's worried should let you know just how high the level of the examination is," Nor said.

"Precisely. For example, take a look at that girl over there with the red hair," Leonie said.

Leonie pointed at a girl with long, wavy red hair who was standing a way off from us. You could tell just from the way she carried herself that she was a superstrong fighter.

"Who's she?"

"Danita Blackburn. Like Leonie and me, she's the daughter of a member of the party that defeated the Demon Lord. They're already calling her one of the strongest heroes of our generation."

"That's the level an applicant needs to be on to get through the entrance exam. They won't let you pass if you're anything less than remarkable."

Based on Leonie's explanation, I could tell it was going to be a pretty difficult test. But I still had no intention of giving up now.

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm still gonna become the strongest hero here."

And I wasn't just putting on a brave face, either. I wasn't bluffing. When I said that, I meant it.

"Huh? You sound pretty cocky over there, eh?"

It seemed the red-haired girl—Danita—had heard what I'd said. There was an agitated look on her face as she headed over to me. She looked even more impressive as she got closer. It wasn't like she was covered in bulging muscles or anything, but you could tell her body was strong and graceful with not an ounce of extra fat on her. She wore a fierce smile that reminded me of some kind of untamed wildcat.

"A little squirt like you is gonna try to become a hero? Come on, Leonie, tell her—this ain't some playground for little kids like her."

"Danita…," said Leonie.

"Hey, just because you're a little taller than me doesn't mean you can treat me like a kid," I said.

Though, when we stood next to each other, it really did look a lot like a child standing next to an adult.

"Ability has lots to do with physique. And I've been training my whole body with a Gear since I was little. Compared to you, I'm just built different."

"You said it, Danita. Besides, what are you, a demon or something? A demon who wants to be a hero—sounds like a bad joke!"

That last quip hadn't come from Danita but from one of her followers who had joined in on making fun of me. Maybe I was just

biased, but it was kinda weird to see this girl, dressed flamboyantly like some kind of party girl, together with Danita, who had more of an arrogant, militaristic vibe.

"Go ahead and laugh. But no matter what you say, I'm still gonna be the strongest hero here," I said.

"You know how to run your mouth, runt. Though, now that I get a good look at you, I can tell you might just be able to hold your own… Want me to teach you a lesson here and now before the exam starts?"

"Do it, Danita!"

"Stop it, you two!"

As Danita and I glared at each other, Danita's crony stoked the flames, while Leonie tried to stop us.

"Not my fault if you end up getting hurt," I said.

"Same to you, tiny," Danita spat back.

The air between us was crackling with intensity.

"Silence, everyone! The examination is about to begin! All prospective test takers, please form two lines and enter the venue."

As if to dispel the mounting tension between us, an announcement declaring the start of the test rang out around us. Danita and I both relaxed our battle poses.

"You got lucky this time, kid."

"Speak for yourself."

As I got in my last word and watched Danita walk away, I heard Leonie and Nor let out large sighs behind me.

"Ruchika, you know…"

"You really went and picked a fight with Danita…"

"She was the one picking a fight with me! And I'm not one to back down from a challenge."

In the end, I was glad I didn't have to waste any of my energy before the test. And the whole incident had helped me blow off a little steam, so all's well that ends well.

"Well, Leonie, Nor—let's all do our best on the exam!"

"…You're still as relaxed as ever, I see. Must be nice."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha…"

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(Leonie)

I finished the written portion of the exam and exited the lecture hall. As I walked around the area, thinking I would find Nor and get something to eat with her, I came across her and Ruchika in the courtyard.

"Hope it went well, Nor, Ruchika."

"You too, Leonie."

"Yeah, sure…"

Nor was her usual self, but Ruchika appeared rather dejected. She had her head on Nor's lap, using it as a pillow.

"I'm guessing your written exam went well, Nor?"

"Mm-hmm. What about you, Leonie?"

"Same here."

"I see. But as for Ruchika…"

"That was impossible… All those big words gave me a headache…"

Judging from how Ruchika appeared to have collapsed in exhaustion, she must have had quite a hard time on the written exam. My first impression was that classroom learning probably wasn't her strong suit, but I never imagined it would be this bad.

"Get a hold of yourself, Ruchika. You're going to become the strongest hero there is, aren't you?" I said.

"Yeah… But at this rate, I might be kicked out in the prelims…"

"I didn't think it was *that* difficult…," said Nor.

"Come on, Nor, don't rub salt in my wounds…"

"Oh. Sorry."

With Ruchika's head still in her lap, Nor began to softly pet her hair. *They're awfully close all of a sudden…*

"Since when have you two been so intimate, Nor?"

"Huh?"

"Oh? What, Leonie, you jealous?" Ruchika said.

"No."

While I did feel a little bit like Nor had been taken away from me, Ruchika made it sound too malicious.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Not looking so hot anymore, are you, li'l miss strongest hero?"

"For real!"

"Danita…"

Danita and her follower had shown up to sneer at Ruchika in her low spirits. While Danita wasn't exactly known for her good behavior, she was well-educated. She lived up to her reputation as a famous hero's daughter. Incidentally, her father had also been in my mother's party and had been known as the Battle-Ax Hero, and her mother was an instructor at this very Hero Institute.

"Shut up, Danita. Go away," said Ruchika.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't want anything to do with you anyway. See ya, you dropout. Come on, let's get outta here."

"Ah, wait up, Danita!"

Throwing out a final insult, Danita left with her follower at her heels.

"What was the point in her coming over here anyway…?" asked Ruchika.

"To…cheer us on, maybe?"

"No way her intentions were that good…"

Regardless, if she really had no interest in Ruchika, she wouldn't have come over to talk to her. In that sense, I could tell that Danita was starting to take notice of her. We still didn't have a good idea of Ruchika's abilities, but something about her had been enough to draw the attention of a fierce fighter like Danita.

"Moping about it isn't going to help anything. They'll be posting the results soon, so let's hurry up and have something to eat," I said.

"C-come on, Ruchika. Time to get up," added Nor.

"Nnnh… Just a little longer…"

"Get up," I said.

"Ouch! Leonie, you're so strict!"

"I believe I'm being very reasonable."

As I rolled my eyes, Ruchika reluctantly stood up and stretched. She reminded me of a big kitten. You might say a "big kitten" is just a cat, but she really was like a kitten that just happened to have a larger body.

People had started to crowd around the bulletin board at the entrance of the Hero Institute, where the results of the written exam would be posted. It seemed the results were already up. As people either rejoiced at having passed or lamented their failure, their various reactions began to spread throughout the crowd.

The three of us cut through the crowd to get in front of the display board.

…Thank goodness. I passed.

It's true I was confident about my ability to pass, but I hadn't discounted the possibility of me making some kind of careless mistake while filling out the answer sheet. I was relieved that I had gotten through this phase without issue.

"Oh, good. I passed…," said Nor.

"You too, Nor? Congratulations."

"Thanks. Looks like you did, too, Leonie. Congrats!"

Nor and I grasped each other's hands and celebrated. Nor had always been an excellent student, so I figured there was no chance she could fail, but it still made me happy to be able to confirm we passed together like this.

The only remaining problem was—

"…"

"Ruchika?" I asked.

"I don't wanna look. I'm too scared."

Ruchika was covering her eyes with her hands. When I tried to pull her hands away, she just shook her head and refused. *My goodness.*

"Leonie, can you check it for me?" she asked.

"What number were you?"

"B-613."

"Got it."

Let's see… B-613… B-613…

"I don't see it anywhere."

"No way?!"

Ruchika let out a scream and pulled her hands away from her face. Her eyes went wide as she frantically scanned the bulletin board.

"Ah… Huh…? It's right there…"

"Yes. Congratulations, Ruchika. It looks like you barely made it through this round. You passed."

"Whaaat?! Don't scare me like that! I really thought I failed for a second there!"

"Hee-hee. Oh, Leonie…," said Nor.

I had only wanted to tease her a little, but seeing how seriously Ruchika had panicked, I felt a bit guilty. *That wasn't very nice of me.*

"I'm sorry, Ruchika. My joke was in poor taste."

"It's okay, don't worry about it. Ah, talk about a relief!"

"Ruchika, I think it might be a little too early to celebrate…"

Nor said this with an unhappy look on her face. It looked like she was still worried about something.

"What do you mean, Nor?"

"Remember, the practical exam is a one-on-one mock battle. And, Ruchika, you've been paired up with—"

At Nor's comment, Ruchika looked at the bulletin board again. I had already checked who my upcoming opponent was—a talented mage of some renown. Nor's opponent was a skilled swordsman, but with her abilities, there was nothing for her to worry about. The issue was Ruchika's opponent.

"I'm paired up with… Oh."

She had seen it now. Her opponent was—

"Danita."

That was right—Ruchika had been paired up with Danita for the mock battle. From what I had seen during our encounter with the

pickpocket, the demon girl seemed like she could hold her own in battle, but I couldn't imagine she was anywhere close to someone like Danita, who was already being lauded as one of the strongest heroes of her generation. Her Gear had declared her strongest ability to be her swordsmanship, and her combat skills were rumored to be even better than her father's, who had been known as the Battle-Ax Hero.

However…

"Hmm. Lucky me! I wanted to try fighting her anyway."

Saying this, Ruchika smiled just like a little kid heading to a picnic in the park.

"Are you insane? This is the Hero Institute entrance examination, you know. What awful luck for this to happen after you managed to scrape by the written test," I said.

"Yeah, you may be right about that. But nothing gets me pumped like a strong fighter. She seems super tough, so I bet it'll be a really fun battle."

"'F-fun'…?"

Nor's face said it all—this was totally incomprehensible to her. It was the kind of reaction I would expect from her, since she was quiet by nature and didn't like battle. Despite all that, she could still be quite the fierce fighter when she needed to.

But to return to the topic at hand…

First off, we decided to head to the venue for the practical exam, which didn't take long. It looked like this portion of the test had already begun, as we could see two men already crossing swords in the middle of the arena.

"Even though this is the entrance exam for the Hero Institute, I guess that doesn't mean everyone is strong like Danita," Ruchika commented with a yawn as we watched the two men battle.

"True, but those two seem to be relatively skilled fighters."

"I wonder. The short one isn't so bad, but the taller one looks like he's having a pretty hard time. I bet it'll be over in about five more attacks," Ruchika commented, predicting the outcome of the battle.

Thinking there was no way she could be right, Nor and I watched on as the battle continued. Then…

"…Exactly five attacks. How did you know?"

Just as Ruchika had predicted, the mock battle had concluded with the shorter emerging as the victor in exactly five moves.

"Hmm? I dunno. Just had a feeling."

Ruchika laughed it off like it was no big deal, but I knew even Gear couldn't predict so far into the future with such accuracy. There was something special about this girl.

After that, Ruchika continued to predict the outcomes of the mock battles. She wasn't always right, but her forecasts hit the mark about 80 percent of the time—accurate enough to suggest there was more to her analyses than just a "feeling." Did this mean Ruchika was able to predict the future just as well—or even better—than Gear?

"Next up, A-13."

"Here."

Eventually, it was my turn to fight.

"We're rooting for you, Leonie!"

"Do your best!"

"Thank you. Here I go."

After being seen off by Nor and Ruchika, I went to stand in the test arena. My opponent was a young man, a mage who had achieved a level of renown for defeating a number of notorious named monsters. As he took up his staff, his battle stance showed no openings. While considering how I should go about attacking him, I lowered my center of gravity into my own battle stance and unsheathed my sword.

"Ready… Begin!"

As an announcement signaled the start of the battle, I took off toward my opponent without waiting for my Gear's first prediction. In battles between sword and magic, conventional wisdom said that swordfighters shouldn't allow the battle to progress at a distance—so I closed in. Staying at a long range would put me at an

overwhelming disadvantage. I tried to get in an attack before the mage had a chance to finish reciting his first spell. But then my Gear voiced an unexpected prediction.

—Enemy approaching. Distance: one meter.

"?!"

While I had assumed my opponent would try to distance himself, he was doing the opposite and heading right for me. He'd not only closed the gap between us but had also come within exceedingly close range of me. I couldn't hope to land a felling blow at this range. I folded back my elbows, kept my arms close to my body, and attempted to slash my sword in as small an arc as possible, but my first attack missed, hitting nothing but air. In the next moment, I felt as if I were floating.

"Wha—?!"

I was blown back about five meters from where we had first clashed. Evidently, my opponent was well-versed in martial arts as well.

This was one of the difficult aspects of battles involving Gear. Yes, the devices were able to give simple predictions of the future, but how one used that prediction depended on their current condition. This time, I'd had the option to wait and watch how my opponent moved first, but if I had done so, I wouldn't have had enough time to stop him from casting a spell. It was all or nothing—I needed to make the first move. But it was my own mistake to try such an established tactic against an experienced magic user. While I hadn't taken much damage, I had given my opponent time and distance. And now he had already begun reciting his first spell.

In a battle between two Gear wearers, the futures predicted by each party's respective Gear clashed, making it a match not easily settled.

I can't do anything if I don't get close to him first…!

Before he had a chance to finish me off at range, I pressed forward once again. I assumed his next attack would be an offensive

spell. If I could just cut him off and get in my next attack— —*Earth magic,* Muddy Soil*. Underfoot.*

"?!"

I immediately leaped backward. The spot where I had just been standing suddenly changed into a muddy morass. If I had still been there, my feet would have been swallowed up, and I'd have lost my balance, allowing my opponent to finish me off with a magic attack. Cold sweat ran down my back.

—*Fire magic,* Fire Bullet*. Front.*

"Ugh…!"

I rounded the arena to get out of range of the spell, desperately evading the ball of flame that chased after me.

Every move I make is one step too late…

My opponent had completely taken control of the match. If I didn't do something to change the flow of the battle, I would be overcome in no time. In that case— "—!"

My opponent's expression changed as I shifted from evading his *Fire Bullet* to attacking him head-on.

"Hah—!!"

With a small swing of my sword, I took some of my attention off his fire attack and rushed in to close the distance between us. In response, the enemy cast even more fireballs, but I paid them no mind as I continued forward.

—*Earth magic*, Muddy Soil*. Underfoot.*

"Float!"

I had guessed that might be his next move, so I was prepared to use one of my convenience magic spells—one that allowed me to step up onto a platform of stiffened air—and dash upward over the spell. My opponent, having used his turn casting *Muddy Soil*, wouldn't have time to react to this. I was finally within reach. Just then…

"That's enough!"

…an announcement brought our mock battle to a whimper of an end.

"The results will be decided after careful consideration of the mock battle's content alongside your marks on the written test. Both parties, please exit the arena."

"…Thank you."

I returned my sword to its sheath. Though I was embarrassed by the outcome of such a disappointing match, I had no one to blame but myself. It was my fault for being weak.

"Nice fighting, Leonie!"

"Ruchika…"

The demon girl greeted me with a smile, but that innocent gaze of hers only stung all the more.

"Your opponent was pretty strong, huh? It wasn't the flashiest of battles, but it was a good match. Even an expert would have enjoyed watching it."

"…Thank you."

I sat down next to Ruchika and ruminated on the match—where had I gone wrong, and what could I have done to win? I concentrated on analyzing the mock battle.

After all, if I didn't do that—

"So *that* was the daughter of the Almighty Hero?"

"That's all she's got? Lame."

"Sure doesn't live up to the hype. Kinda disappointing."

—if I didn't concentrate on another topic, I'd have to listen to the same yammering I was subjected to every time something like this happened. As the daughter of the famous hero Lainie Baez, I'd always had high expectations placed upon me. And I had her to thank for never needing to worry about money. But if I didn't conduct myself in a manner seen as worthy of being the daughter of a hero, no one would appreciate me.

I wanted to be strong. Stronger than anyone else, like my departed mother. But I— "Hold on! What the hell is that?!"

As I was thinking all this, Ruchika abruptly shot to her feet, and her voice brought me back to reality.

"…Ruchika?"

“That’s no way to talk about someone who fought with her all! Winning and losing is just a result, right?! Weren’t any of you actually watching?!?! That was a hell of a fight!”

I was shocked. Ruchika was angry. And she was clearly expressing her disapproval of all those who’d been throwing insults and stares in my direction. It was the first time I had seen her mad.

“Leonie read her opponent’s movements at a high level, performed her own moves accurately, and used her skills to back up her choices in battle. How blind do you gotta be to not appreciate a match so obviously worthy of praise?! And even look down on it?!”

“Ruchika…”

I felt a pang in my chest. Until now, I’d had nothing but the results I was supposed to get. Results worthy of a hero’s daughter. Everything else was deemed worthless, including all the effort I spent trying to get there.

But Ruchika’s way of thinking was different. She lauded the hard work that both my opponent and I had put into our respective training to be able to put on a battle of that caliber. She wasn’t looking at the result of winning or losing, but the process that had led up to it.

“Leonie, don’t give those people an ounce of your attention. I know you’ll pass. I guarantee it.”

“Th-thank you.”

Ruchika shot me a bright smile as I struggled to respond with anything beyond simple gratitude. Her grin was so charming, I involuntarily felt the need to avert my gaze.

“Oh, look, it’s Nor. Hey, over here!”

“Ah, sorry to keep you waiting!”

That reminded me—Nor had been nowhere to be found until just now. Getting tunnel vision in situations like these was a bad habit I’d been trying to fix, but clearly, it wasn’t going well.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think it went okay,” Nor said.

Apparently, Nor's turn had also come up during my battle. She had been called to fight later than I had, but our matches had ended at about the same time, so I guess she had managed a decisive victory. Since she had also done well on the written portion, it was all but certain she'd pass overall.

"That's great!"

"How about you, Leonie?"

"I…"

"Leonie did her best. I'm sure it'll be fine!" Ruchika said.

"I see."

Based on Nor's expression, I could tell she had gathered how my match had gone but was kind enough not to push for more details.

"What're you looking so relaxed about? Get over here already. They're callin' for our turn."

The person who had cut into our conversation from over in the exam arena was, of course— "Oops, sorry about that, Danita!" said Ruchika.

"Hurry up so I can beat the crap outta you."

Danita beckoned Ruchika to the arena, her greatsword readied on her back.

"Okay, be right there!"

Ruchika sprang up and dashed over to the arena.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Finally got my chance to knock you around."

"Who knows? You might be the one who'll get knocked around, Danita!"

"You're killin' me, pip-squeak."

After they exchanged some light trash talk, Danita took up her greatsword, and Ruchika readied her fists, over which she wore a kind of fighting glove. Both of their weapons had been loaned to them by the Institute for the purpose of the exam, but they would still pack a decent punch.

"Ready—begin!"

Danita made the first move.





“Graaah!”

With a ferocious step forward, Danita swung her sword down from overhead. Ordinarily, a strike like that should have left her wide-open, but the skill and speed with which Danita was able to execute it was so great, my eyes could hardly keep up with her as I watched from a distance. Ruchika’s Gear had probably predicted this attack from Danita, but the question was whether or not she would be able to respond in time.

“…”

Ruchika didn’t move. She remained in her original battle stance. Danita’s attack came down on her—and the tip of her blade plunged into the arena floor.

“S-such power…,” said Nor.

“That’s Danita for you,” I added.

Danita’s attack had gouged open a large hole in the earth. Even though she was using a greatsword, one normally wouldn’t expect that kind of force from a blade. But people held up this girl as one of the strongest heroes of the next generation for a reason.

“You’re not taking this seriously, are you, Danita? It was crazy obvious you weren’t gonna hit me.”

“Consider it a greeting. If you’re gonna run now, I won’t stop you.”

Ruchika appeared to have anticipated the reach of Danita’s attack. She’d delivered her response with a tinge of exasperation in her voice, and it seemed like Danita had just been warming up herself.

“Looks like they’re back to square one.”

“Pretty remarkable after seeing a strike like that…”

“Yes, normally, you’d expect Danita’s opponent to lose their nerve after that. But all it did was teach Ruchika something about Danita’s fighting style.”

Ruchika wasn’t the type of person you’d expect to flinch back from an attack. But that didn’t mean she could ignore the ferocity of Danita’s overhead sword swings. The blow showed Ruchika that

Danita had a move in her repertoire powerful enough to dominate the arena.

"All righty, then I guess I'll give you a greeting of my own."

"Ha, that's more like it. Show me what you got."

"Okay. Well, here I go! Ready, set…"

Saying this with the same carefree attitude as always, Ruchika brandished her arms above her head.

"Hup!"

"Gah?!"

Ruchika's fists blew Danita back toward the other end of the arena. Danita had managed to quickly put her greatsword between herself and the attack, but I could tell that if she had taken the blow directly, the damage would have been considerable.

"You damn brat…!"

"Whoa. Nice one, Danita. You've got good reflexes!"

"Don't mess with me… I'll freakin' kill you!"

"You finally taking this seriously? Hell yeah! All right, now let's really do this!"

At long last, Danita had put up her guard and was ready to fight to kill, and Ruchika seemed pleased as punch about this. If it had been me out there, I surely would have been frozen in fear.

From there on out, the two began exchanging blows. Danita unleashed a storm of slashing attacks, and Ruchika wove through them with jabs and kicking techniques. Everyone watching the advanced tactics on display could tell this was a bout between two talented fighters—and all watching found themselves totally absorbed.

"Hey, hey, what's the matter?! Already slowin' down?"

"Ugh…! Come on, Proto, I can't just throw out ice magic at a time like this!"

After a while, the equilibrium between the two contestants began to collapse. Danita had begun to take control of the offensive. Ruchika kept trying to counter with everything she had, but her

movements had somehow started to lose their pep. It was like her rhythm was off, or she was struggling against something.

"Enough!"

Ruchika, who had been keeping within range of Danita up until then, took one large leap back to get some distance.

"Proto, I'm sorry, but you're just getting in my way!"

Ruchika shouted like she couldn't stand it anymore, and all of a sudden, placed her hands on her Gear and took it off.

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(Ruchika)

—Hmm. So my regular guidance is a hindrance to you. If that's the case, you're the same as her*— Ah, wait!*

I ignored Proto even though it was in the middle of trying to say something and took the Gear off my neck.

"I know this thing is convenient and all, but it's just noise to me. I'm taking it off for now, so can you hold on to it, Leonie?"

Saying this, I went over to the spectator seats and tossed the Gear I had just taken from my neck to Leonie. She had gone totally pale. *Why?*

"Don't be ridiculous, Ruchika! You can't possibly fight without Gear!"

"That's not true. I like it better this way. And besides, what's with it telling me to use magic counterattacks over and over when I've never been any good with magic?"

It was super annoying to have those recommendations popping up nonstop in the back of my mind and the corners of my vision.

"Because it's the optimal tactic! You may just not know it yet, but you must have some kind of magical ability—"

"No way. I know myself. And I'm gonna do this my own style. You don't mind, do you, Danita?"

When I turned to ask her, Danita was glaring at me like an angry ogre.

"Wh-what? What's with the scary face, Danita?"

"Are you messin' with me again, you twerp? You think you can fight against *me* without Gear?"

"I'm not messing with you, I swear. I just like this way better."

Why can't everyone else understand? It's like they're obsessed with sticking to what their Gear tell them.

"Ruchika, please reconsider! Put your Gear back on!"

Leonie was practically screaming as she pleaded with me. But why? Based on Danita's reaction, it seemed like most humans assumed you would fight using a Gear. But Leonie's reaction was too extreme—like she had some kind of strong emotional attachment to the whole issue. But if I kept that thing on my neck, there was no way I'd be winning against Danita.

"I'm telling you, don't sweat it. Just calm down and watch, okay, Leonie?"

I gave her a wink before turning back to Danita again.

"Sorry about that, Danita. I'm ready to fight for real, now."

"You kiddin' me?! Get over here—I'll insta-kill you!"

That seemed to have really ticked her off. She raised her greatsword back over her head… It was the same overhead strike from earlier. But this time, she looked like she was attacking for real. I knew I'd be in trouble if I took a hit from that thing. The next moment, Danita started rushing at me so fast, it was almost like she had disappeared.

But—

"Wha—?!"

"Heh-heh! You may be plenty strong, too, but there's no way I'm losing to you in that area!"

—I had stopped Danita's overhead sword attack, binding her sword by crossing the backs of my hands and pushing upward against it. She wouldn't be able to move it one bit in this state.

"Back atcha!"

"Gwah?!"

I took her greatsword, which was wedged between my hands, and pulled it over to the side, making Danita lose her balance. Then I hit her with a well-placed roundhouse kick to send her large frame flying.

"Whoa, you didn't let go of the sword that whole time—you're good."

"Argh…! Don't get cocky!"

Danita had flipped her body in midair and landed defensively on the ground. Her red eyes were burning with anger.

"I'm done with you underestimatin' me. Now I'm gonna slaughter you for real."

As soon as she declared this, a malicious battle aura flooded out from her body. It was extremely rare for someone to have such a tangible aura, the kind you didn't even need to look for. Danita was the real deal—and any regular person would have probably lost the will to fight at seeing that display of hers.

But me? I was a different story.

I looked at Danita again. *Yeah, this is awesome. Once you get serious, you're a great opponent. Plus, I'm starting to get hungry, and you're starting to look like one hell of a lunch. That means there's only one thing left for me to do.*

"Time to dig in!"

"?!"

Danita's eyes widened in surprise. Well, no surprise there. I basically looked like I was coming straight at her, practically begging to be cut down. *But sorry, Danita, this isn't gonna go how you expect.*

"Tch…!"

Her sword came sliding toward me nimbly. It was a beautiful side slash, like something out of a swordsmanship textbook. And so, I sidestepped—toward her attack. I spread my hands vertically and slammed them down like jaws closing on her greatsword.

"Gluttony."

The sound of something stiffening boomed around us.

"No…way…"

I heard Danita's dazed voice. My hands, which had been hardened by her dense battle aura, had become sharper than any monster's fangs, and I'd used them to tear off a chunk of her greatsword. A sense of omnipotence welled up within me.

"Gimme more, Danita. You've got more than this in you, don'cha?"

"Ugh…graaahhhh!!"

Danita probably had no idea what I had done to her. Her mental state was growing closer and closer to derangement. Even so, her reflexive attacks had unparalleled accuracy, and it was obvious how much she had trained to get to this point.

Her battle aura looked mouthwatering.

With every deadly slash she dealt, I kept biting and tearing through her greatsword bit by bit. Each time my hands clashed with it, the sword grew more and more battered.

"Ruchika… Her movements really have become sharper after she took off her Gear… But to think she'd be able to overwhelm Danita…"

"That's not all, Leonie. It looks like Ruchika is…feeding off Danita's battle aura…?"

The first person to see through my trick was Nor. Since her fighting style was close to a mage's, she must have also been able to sense the flow of aura around her opponents. And she was right. *Gluttony* was a power that allowed me to devour energy from my opponent's mana and battle aura and use it as my own.

"That ability of hers… Do you think it's a Gift?"

"What?! You mean to suggest that she already fulfilled that requirement even before joining the Hero Institute?"

I had no clue about these "Gifts" or hero requirements or whatever they were talking about, so I brushed it off and kept focusing on my battle. Danita's face was twisted with frustration.

"You monster…!"

"Now, that's just not nice. But if that's what you think I am, then maybe I should show you something really monstrous."

"…Huh?"

I focused my consciousness on the energy I had charged up in my stomach and visualized myself spitting it all back out.

"Danita, put up your best defense, okay?"

"Wh-why you…!"

The next moment, I breathed out a mass of flames that engulfed her.

"Gaaaah?!"

Danita tumbled to the ground and rolled, putting out the flames that had covered her body. Her light leather armor was charred all over, and smoke rose from her.

"You… Seriously, what the hell are you…?!"

"What am I…? I could have sworn I already introduced myself. I'm Ruchika. I'm from the race of demons that humanity defeated."

"?!"

After I introduced myself again, the people of the gallery all began to buzz.

"That black hair, and those black eyes…"

"So that's the savage power of a demon…"

I heard everyone start whispering behind my back. While *Gluttony* was active, all five of my senses were sharpened, so it was no use for them to try to hide what they said. *Geez…turns out humans are still pretty prejudiced against us.*

"Okay, Danita. Can you keep going?"

"…'Course I can…"

Danita was struggling to get back on her feet. She looked pretty beat up, but the will to fight still hadn't left her gaze. The glint in her eye looked somehow tragically heroic, coming from someone who had been touted as an elite. Surely, she had her own reasons, something she knew she would never surrender. *Good. I like people like that.* I was happy I'd be able to fight her to the bitter end of our battle— "Hang on, Ruchika. The match is already decided. Don't you think that's enough?"

—but Leonie was there to step in between us.

"Leonie…"

"You've already proven your strength plenty. Any more, and you'd be overdoing it."

Saying this, she spread out her hands as if to protect Danita. *Hmm, okay. So that's what this looks like to her.*

"Get outta the way, Leonie! I can still fight!"

"But, Danita…"

"Shut up! If I… If I can't be the best, then there's no point in any of this!"

Standing with a shout, Danita pushed Leonie out of the way and looked at me as she once again raised her greatsword over her head. This was probably her final attack. She would choose her best move, one she had the most confidence in. Her sword swooped down with a beautiful, clean, and straightforward attack. And as it descended toward me— "—Yup. This one's the tastiest of them all."

Bringing my hands together from the left and right, I blocked her attack. This was a technique that human martial artists called a "barehanded blade block"—but to me, it was just another manifestation of *Gluttony*.

I greedily devoured the battle aura infused within Danita's greatsword, feeling euphoric as I did. *Yup, Danita, I'm so glad I got to fight you. It really is a blast.*

"As a show of my respect to how you gave me your all in this match, I'm gonna give you my best, too."

"—?!"

Danita rushed to try to take evasive measures, but having used up all her energy on her last attack, her movements had become clumsy.

"—Try not to die, 'kay?!"

"Aaaghhhh…?!"

Danita took the full brunt of my attack and was blown back by flames that engulfed her. The moved I had used was technically a punching attack. But since I had also implemented the concentrated energy I had built up while *Gluttony* was active, the force of the

blow was overwhelming compared with your average punch. And because my own battle aura had flame-like properties, it applied a burning effect to my target. This was one of the best tricks I had up my sleeve.

Danita tumbled back four meters or so, then finally went still. As she lay there on her back, I could tell she had still managed to retain consciousness, but it looked like she really wasn't able to move anymore.

"Th-that's enough!"

"Thanks for the feast."

The referee overseeing the match declared the end of the mock battle.

"Ruchika… You…"

"Heh-heh, did you catch all that, Leonie?"

After hearing Leonie's voice, I turned back triumphantly to face her, but she looked like she was sort of shrinking back from me now.

Huh?

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"Leonie."

"…!"

Leonie reacted to my voice as if she was a little afraid of me. *Hmm. Did I get a little too carried away?* But Danita had been really strong, and I wouldn't have been able to win without giving it that much. I guess younger humans weren't used to seeing the way that demons fought, so maybe it had been a bit scary for her.

I wanted to become Leonie's mate. Right from the start, I knew she was just my type appearance-wise, but after seeing the honest, steady way she'd fought during today's exam and the kind, courageous way she'd tried to get in between Danita and me, my impression of her was even better than before. Who would've thought the human race would have a catch like this?

"Hey, Leonie?"

"…What is it?"

Keeping Danita in the corner of my eye as she was carried out of the arena, burned to a crisp and muttering insults as she went, I walked up to Leonie. At the same time, I felt everyone in the gallery except for Leonie flinch back in fear. *Yeah, yeah, I'm used to getting looks like that. Though, I still think it's pretty mean.*

She gazed back at me cautiously, but I simply returned it with a smile. She took my hand and rose to her feet, and I was struck by how cool she looked, especially since she was so tall. Then I continued: "*Ahem.* Leonie, you were really brave back there."

"…That wasn't exactly my intention, but…"

"No worries. I thought it was super impressive."

"Okay…"

"So anyway, I've got something I want to ask you."

"…Yes?"

Leonie still looked pretty wary of me. It occurred to me that maybe I should wait to bring this up until after we got to know each other a little better, but I also felt like a girl this cute was sure to get snatched away if I didn't act fast. *Ah, well. A girl's gotta have guts.*

I put on the best smile I had in me and asked my question.

"Leonie Baez, will you be my mate?"

"Huh…? 'M-mate'…?"

I saw her face redden a little, which made me think I might have a chance. After the fact, however, I would learn that she was just embarrassed because the word *mate* had been too direct. Chalk that up to a cultural difference, I guess.

"Leonie, you're really nice, and in terms of looks, you're totally my type. I swear I'll make you happy. So? What do you say? Please?"

"Uh, um…what?"

"Let me guess…you're not sure about taking a demon as a mate. But you've got nothing to worry about there. My mama always said that comfort is more important than attraction when it comes to mates."

"N-no, that's not the issue…"

"You don't like me? I may be a demon, but I'm pretty sure I'm decently cute."

"There's no issue with your appearance. The thing is, we're both girls. I don't have anything against you, but I must reject your proposal."

"Aw, man…"

And so, my dreams of marrying Leonie were shattered. Not that I was going to let one rejection stop me from trying again later.

As for the results of the Hero Institute entrance exam, I ended up passing. While my performance on the written part had been bad, my overwhelming victory over Danita in the mock battle got me top marks. After her wounds were treated, Danita came back and gave me a real stink eye, but I guess that was just part of the game. I figured I might have another chance to fight her soon, but I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

More importantly…

"Hey, Leonie. Are you sure it's a no?"

"Please, give it a rest."

"But, Leonie, I just like you so much. Come on, let's be mates!"

"No, thank you."

"You're so cold! But don't worry, Leonie."

"?"

Leonie looked puzzled. I couldn't help but think how lovely that innocent face of hers was as I shot her back a smile.

"This is the beginning of a long relationship between us, so I'll have plenty of time to win you over. Just you wait and see!"

"…Absolutely not."

And so, my life as a student at the Hero Institute kicked off. Apparently, some people had already branded me as the scary outcast of our grade, but I didn't pay them any mind.

"I'm really looking forward to spending more time with you, Leonie!"

"What exactly are you trying to rope me into?!"

Chapter 2

(Leonie)

"Hey, Leonie?"

"…"

"I said hey, Leonie!"

"…"

"If you don't answer me, I'm gonna call you 'honey'!"

"I'm listening. What do you want?"

It had been about one week since we started at the Hero Institute. While my results in the practical entrance exam had been less than stellar, my combined marks including the written exam were good enough to allow me to enroll in the Institute. I'd finally gotten to the starting line as the daughter of a hero—but there were already plenty of dark clouds overhead.

One of which was her—Ruchika.

She, Nor, and I were all sitting in a row together in the lecture hall of our next class. Nor was an old friend of mine who was practically family, so I felt no discomfort being around her. But Ruchika was different. I had only just met her, yet for some reason, she had come to be a fixture of our group. It would be fine if that was the extent of it, but…

"Come on, be my mate!"

"No. Go pester someone else."

"But I only want you!"

"Ah, ah-ha-ha-ha…"

As I tried to dismiss Ruchika's straightforwardness as best I could, Nor chuckled with a slightly exasperated, awkward smile.

"You're so popular, Leonie!"

"Don't you get in on this, too, Nor. And, Ruchika, please quit it with the distasteful jokes."

"I'm not joking. I'm super serious!"

"That's even worse. First and foremost, we're both women, aren't we?"

"Huh? What's the problem with that?"

"…Nothing, but…"

And do you have to look so shocked about that?

"…Oh, can humans not take mates of the same sex?"

"Given the population decrease after the Great Human-Demon War, the kingdom refuses to officially recognize marital relationships that cannot produce children."

"That's weird. Demons can have children between two members of the same sex, and I think it'd be all right even if my partner was a human. So what do you think? You wanna try doing it the demon way?"

"Unfortunately, I intend to follow the standards of human culture."

"Aw, okay. I guess it is more fun to try to win you over if you're a little stubborn anyway."

"…Sigh…"

Ruchika had kept on making attempts to court me in this manner from the moment we enrolled. She was nice girl with a carefree personality, so I had no problem with counting her among my friends. But it was clear Ruchika was seriously hoping for something more than that, and I was having trouble responding to it. It was one thing to see her as a friend, but I didn't think I could ever see her in *that* way.

I wanted to put a bit of distance between us, but our situation wouldn't allow it. That was because of our results on the entrance

examination. The Institute had lumped us together and was treating us as problem students.

"Quiet, everyone. It's time for class to begin."

A female teacher got up in front of the blackboard and addressed us in an intelligent-sounding voice.

"Oh, it's Danita's mom."

"Please call me Professor Aliza, C-100. And please refrain from chatting while class is in session."

Professor Aliza had called Ruchika by her student code. I only learned of this after enrolling in the Institute, but it was custom here for superiors to call their subordinates by numbers. The *C* in Ruchika's student code indicated her year, and the three-digit number indicated her ranking based on her grades at the time of admission. I was C-088, Nor was C-005, and Danita was C-001. To be honest, I found the whole system rather unpleasant.

"Yes, ma'am."

As Ruchika gave a perfunctory reply, Professor Aliza glared at her as if she were some kind of disagreeable insect before opening her textbook.

"Today, I will introduce the concept of Gifts."

As Professor Aliza began her lecture, her expression remained stiff. Ruchika appeared to have already earned some kind of special ire from her.

In all likelihood, this was because Ruchika had defeated her daughter, Danita, in their mock battle. Up until then, Danita had been undefeated among her peers, so the fight against Ruchika was the girl's first loss. To make matters worse, this had happened at a highly public venue: the Hero Institute entrance examination. Perhaps it was a matter of course that Danita's mother would resent Ruchika for this, but it reflected quite poorly on Professor Aliza that she seemed unable to keep those private feelings out of her public life.

"In the past, only a handful of prodigies were able to acquire special powers known as Gifts through their own talent and good

fortune. The counterpart to these Gifts was magic, a scholarly skill that any person could obtain to some degree. While magic is more versatile, Gifts are more specialized and powerful."

As I listened to her matter-of-fact, fast-paced lecture, I occasionally felt the professor shoot me the same harsh gaze she'd given Ruchika.

"Individuals who acquire these Gifts and complete the prescribed curriculum at the Institute are authorized with a hero title and graced with various benefits from the kingdom. And the progenitor of all such heroes—the Almighty Hero, Lainie Baez—happens to be C-088's mother."

It seemed that, in addition to Ruchika, I, too, had been deemed an academic underperformer, and the school administration planned to manage the two of us together as problem students. They had even assigned us to the same room in our dormitory. And since Ruchika wasn't very knowledgeable about how things worked in the human world, I had been ordered to watch over her. This was what I'd meant earlier when I said our current situation didn't allow me to put much distance between us.

"Gear plays an important role in Gift education. Owing to the Hero Institute and Gear, it is now possible for those with a certain level of ability to artificially acquire Gifts of some degree, even if one is not a prodigy— C-100! Do you think you can sleep in my class?!"

As I was getting lost in my thoughts, Professor Aliza's sharp voice brought me back to reality. I looked over and saw Ruchika next to me, face down in her textbook, fast asleep.

"Mmmhhh… I can't eat any more…"

"C-088, what are you gawking at?! Wake her up already!"

"Ruchika. Ruchika, wake up."

As I had sat there, stunned, Professor Aliza had suddenly barked a rebuke at me, too. I hurried to follow her order, shaking Ruchika by the shoulders. But that showed no signs of working. Then just as I thought she was finally stirring and saying something…

"Nnnh… Lecture's just so boring… Like some kinda sermon…"

Ruchika's sleepy reply came out louder than it should have in the quiet classroom.

"…*Pffft*, a sermon…"

"…Hee-hee-hee…"

Unable to hold it in, other students started bursting into fits of giggles. Professor Aliza grew humiliated up on her podium, shaking her fists in anger.

"…Fine, then. If that's your attitude, then I have another idea. Everyone is to write a five-thousand-word report on the concept of Gifts and turn it in by next session. Since you're all so smart, I suppose you won't require my *sermon* on the subject. Class is dismissed."

As everyone in the classroom erupted in complaints over being given such a tedious assignment, Professor Aliza ignored us and quickly took her leave. Naturally, everyone's gazes then turned to Ruchika, who had caused the problem in the first place. But the girl herself was still in the middle of a carefree dream.

"Oh, Ruchika…you sure know how to make an impression."

"Nor, please don't sugarcoat it. This was completely her fault."

"That's true, but…"

"Ruchika, if you don't wake up this instant, I'll resent you for the rest of my life."

"I'm up!"

Ruchika popped up so fast, I doubted she was ever asleep in the first place. But it seemed she truly didn't have a grasp on the whole situation, as she looked around in befuddlement at the harsh glares piercing her from all over the classroom.

"Umm…did I do something wrong?"

"Sure did."

"Aw, dang… Now I'm in trouble!"

But Ruchika didn't look troubled at all as she simply laughed it off.

As one could see, Ruchika's attitude when it came to her classes was terrible. And it wasn't only in lectures—she basically did as she pleased in practical training, too.

"C-100! Put your Gear on!"

"But it's easier if I don't wear it!"

"I don't care—put it on anyway! Learning to use your Gear well is the shortest path in becoming a hero—"

"I'll become a hero without a Gear. How about that?!"

Her ability to do better than everyone else in the class even without her Gear only served to annoy the people around her. But it was saying something if she even came to class in the first place, as she usually failed to attend any courses she wasn't interested in. Personally, I found her conduct unbelievable. However, Ruchika performed so remarkably well in practical training that no one had any room to complain. I couldn't help but secretly feel embarrassed at how she did all this.

The reason I was so stubborn over the use of Gear was because it was something my mother had bequeathed to the world. Before she'd invented Gear, humans didn't have much use for magical devices—and it was the first device of its kind, one created by implementing the magic of demonkind. As I'd already explained, Gear instructed its wearer of the ideal path they should take. Consequently, it was an incredible waste for someone to go out of their way to avoid using it.

As the daughter of the Almighty Hero, I had always faithfully followed the guidance of my Gear. Although I'd doubted if I would be suited for the path my Gear had recommended—swordplay—the odds of the device being wrong were slim to none. And sure enough, ever since the introduction of Gear, Kars Kingdom had produced a steady stream of capable heroes in all sorts of fields. It stood to reason that we should follow it. Moreover, as the daughter of the woman who'd created Gear, I considered its guidance tantamount to my mother's own words. Because I believed this to be true, I had dedicated myself to the practice of swordplay.

And yet, as if to disregard all this, Ruchika did whatever she pleased. The way she steadfastly believed in herself over everything else and acted accordingly made me knit my brow. I had nothing

against her, but that one point—the way she ignored the guidance of her Gear—I simply could not accept. It was almost like an insult to my mother's memory.

"What's wrong, Leonie? You look upset about something."

"…And whose fault do you think that is?"

"Huh?"

I curtly responded to Ruchika's question, venting my anger at her, and started to leave.

"Ah, wait up, honey!"

"Who do you think you're calling 'honey'?!"

I can't with this girl…

"Ruchika, you should take your obligations more seriously. Please, do what you're supposed to."

"Leonie, I think you should try to give yourself a little more freedom. Why don't you just do what you want to do?"

It seemed our mindsets would run parallel to each other no matter what, never to reach agreement. I could do nothing but heave a sigh at her for what felt like the millionth time.

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(Ruchika)

…Hey, Proto?

—What is it?

…Are they gonna make us do this every morning?

—It seems so.

It was morning. I whispered mentally to Proto as I was made to repeat this strange ritual once again, just as I had every day since the entrance ceremony. It was the morning assembly, and everyone had their eyes closed as they sat silently in their seats.

They're all listening to that thing again, right?

—Correct. I've also received instructions to have you listen to it, but I'm ignoring it, since you don't want to.

I mean, it's basically like brainwashing!

—"Bzzzt…—the ills of humankind. And so, to foster leaders who may someday find a way to overcome these issues, we hereby declare the establishment of the Hero Institute. Those who study at our Institute are required to obey the following five precepts. One: Thou shalt be a servant of all mankind."

Waaah! Stop that, Proto! I'm gonna lose my mind!

—I don't blame you. I also feel something is not right with this.

During the daily morning assembly, everyone was made to listen to the preamble to the Hero Institute's school regulations on repeat. They said it was so we would never forgot the school's philosophies, but there was definitely something fishy about it. I felt like I was witnessing a ritual from some weird religious cult.

So you're against the morning assembly, too, Proto?

—I am a defective Gear. I'm not well-behaved like all the others. So if you tell me I don't have to do something, then I won't—including not participating in the morning assembly and staying quiet during your battles.

Well, I really appreciate that.

The way I saw it, the Gear's combat assistance and predictions were nothing but noise. Since I would get chewed out if I didn't wear it, however, I was keeping it on for now and just asking Proto not to do any of that stuff.

While you're feeling defective, can you tell me what's the deal with this school? I get the sense something's off here.

—Such as?

Well, there's the morning assembly for one thing. And with the whole way everyone relies on Gear so much, is there even any point in having teachers?

For example, even in our practical training, they left all the instruction on how to move and fight up to our Gear. Our teachers didn't explain the rationale behind or the implications of this choice, nor did they try to justify it, and no one was willing to question the way things were, either.

—They put a high level of trust in their Gear. In fact, I believe you are in the minority.

Seems that way. I just don't think it's something I should blindly follow.

—While this may be a little rude of me to say, I believe you have the correct attitude.

…So are you part of the minority, too?

—I wonder.

After the morning assembly, which I could still only see as a brainwashing ceremony, I first had a lecture about magic. The instructor showed up at our classroom and began the lesson.

"—And these are the basic elements in magic. Can anyone tell me the two additional rarer elements that don't fit into these categories? …You, C-088, please explain."

"Yes."

Next to me, Leonie was called on by the instructor and stood up to answer.

"Aside from the four basic elements of magic—earth, water, fire, and wind—there are two rare elements, light and dark. There are few who have mastered these two elements, and there are still many unknowns surrounding their use and effectiveness. In general, however, light magic is used in healing, dark magic is used in offensive magic, and these two elements cancel each other out or repel each other. According to the theory of renowned magic academic Evans Norwich—"

"Thank you, that's enough… C-088, your performance in the classroom is impeccable. I can only hope you will try just as hard in your practical training."

"…Yes, Professor."

Leonie lowered her gaze slightly at the instructor's snide comment, then sat back down as if nothing had happened. The snickering from the other students that erupted around us was irritating as all get-out.

Jerks…

—On top of being beautiful, Leonie excels at her studies. There must be many who envy her.

I can see how other girls might have an inferiority complex around her, but what's up with the guys?

—You haven't noticed? Since she enrolled, she's already received confessions of love from a number of young men.

What?! My *Leonie?!*

—She doesn't belong to you, Ruchika.

So that meant those boys had gotten angry after Leonie rejected them. Their love turned to hatred, and they switched over to bullying her instead.

I can see why she'd turn them down.

—Precisely. Still, it seems Leonie has some qualities that make her an easy target.

Like what?

—She never lets her guard down, no matter what. As a woman—no, as a hero cadet, Leonie is accomplished in all areas besides her practical skills. And no matter how much defamation she faces, she doesn't break. That's why her sole weakness, her practical ability, is an easy target of criticism.

Man. Humans are such a pain…

If they had a problem with her, they should just talk it out…with their fists.

—Rather than being an issue of humanity as a whole, it may be more accurate to say the Institute's customs bring out the worst in people.

Proto spoke with an air of lamentation. After spending a few days here, I had started to notice the Institute's rules were really strict. Beginning with their obsession with Gear, it went without saying they also strictly called roll at curfew and lights-out. The whole place was filled to the brim with rules and values that made people stop thinking of others as people. Anyone would get messed up from getting too used to a place like this.

It's always Gear this, Gear that…even though humans were able to fight against us demons for ages without needing to rely on the things. It's pathetic, really.

—But it was only after the invention of Gear that humans were finally able to defeat *demonkind.*

Yeah, that's true.

I wasn't liking how my image of humanity, starting with the Almighty Hero herself, was getting tarnished.

I wonder if Leonie and Nor are gonna end up like that, too?

—Who can say? I suppose you'll just need to watch over them and make sure that doesn't happen.

I'll do my best.

I had been so excited to leave the demon realm, lured by the promise that I could become stronger by coming here. But I was starting to feel more disappointed than anything else.

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"Today, you'll be doing your practical training alongside some upperclassmen."

A few days later, at the beginning of class, the male instructor said this as he introduced some older students. As they lined up in front of us, we could tell there was something different about them compared with us newly-enrolled students. For one, they all seemed more mature. But there was more than that— "Hey, Leonie."

"You'll get in trouble again if they catch us whispering, Ruchika."

"Don't you think the upperclassmen seem kinda…lifeless?"

"Perhaps they're simply calm."

I wasn't sure about that. To me, something about their expressions looked dark, like their eyes were dead.

"The class will be formatted in two-against-two mock battles. Please do your best to learn what you can from the upperclassmen."

Saying this, the instructor quickly began splitting us into groups.

"Uh, Professor, can I be in a group with Leonie?"

"Ruchika! You can't simply ask something so selfish like that—"

"I don't mind, but are you okay with it? For students of your level, it's best to pair up with another student whose strengths best outweigh your own weaknesses. What's your Gear telling you?"

"Huh? Me and Leonie are the strongest pair ever!"

"Ruchika!"

"*Sigh…* Well, do whatever you want. Just try your best not to get too hurt."

"Yahoo!"

"Geez…"

And so, to my joy, Leonie and I were able to pair up for the class.

—I'm not sure you should celebrate just yet, Ruchika. Your opponents look rather formidable.

Hmm?

The pair who appeared to be our opponents were a girl and a boy. The boy looked like a mage of some sort and was holding a staff, while the girl was apparently the same kind of fighter as me, battling empty-handed.

"I'm Ein, the Mage Hero cadet."

"And I'm Flicka, the Iron Fist Hero cadet."

"So, C-088, C-100. You're not a pair designated by your Gear, are you?"

Ein said this with a mocking tone in his voice. *Ugh, what a jerk.*

"That's right. We're not tied down by our Gear."

"Please, speak for yourself, Ruchika. I'm sorry, Ein, there's an explanation for—"

"You're the daughter of the Almighty Hero, and she's a demon girl. Isn't that right?"

I didn't miss the way Leonie's face tensed at Flicka's mocking tone. But it was only for a split second, and she quickly recomposed herself and answered: "Yes, I am the Almighty Hero's daughter, and Ruchika is a demon. What of it?"

"It must be nice having a celebrity as your parent, huh? We've seen your scores on the entrance exam. Haven't we, Flicka?"

"Yeah. I didn't realize they still let people in with grades that low. They must have decided to let you ride in on Mommy's coattails."

"Hey, that's not—!"

I started to get fed up and was about to lose it on them, but Leonie grabbed my arm and held me back.

"I believe you should judge our abilities only after battling us."

"Hmph, if you say so."

"Cocky, aren't we?"

The upperclassmen grimaced at the dignified way Leonie responded.

"All right, everyone, are you ready? Ready, set—begin!"

Just in the nick of time, the professor gave the signal to start the class.

"Time to give you whelps a reality check."

"Yeah, right—just try not to cry too hard after you lose to us!" I said.

We glared at each other, our prey in our sights and our fists at the ready.

"Leonie, how do you want to attack?"

"You go after Ein, Ruchika. Your *Gluttony* skill should have good compatibility with him. I'll take on Flicka."

"So taking advantage of their respective characteristics. Got it, got it."

"…Ha. Our characteristics, huh?" said Ein.

"Are you two still going on about that crap?" said Flicka.

"Huh?"

I wasn't sure what they were getting at.

"The idea of 'characteristics' is nothing but a label. What it really comes down to in a fight is how well you can use your Gear."

"In the end, your own ability will do all the talking."

"Just watch and learn—," said Ein, starting to recite a magic spell and getting into his battle stance. He raised his staff above his head as he infused it with mana.

"Ruchika, wide-range ice spell incoming, underfoot!"

Leonie shouted out what I assumed was a prediction from her Gear. An instant later, the ground beneath our feet was covered in ice, just like she had said.

"I'll dispel it. Give me a moment—"

"It's okay, I can handle this," I said, interrupting Leonie.

"Huh?"

Paying the ice no mind, I took off toward Ein.

"?!"

A look of surprise spread over his face; my footsteps weren't impeded by the ice in the least.

Though, I really learned this trick from Leonie.

During the entrance exam, Leonie had used a *Float* spell to run across *Muddy Soil*. I was just doing the same thing she had. I closed in on Ein, dashing across the ice, using platforms of stiffened air as my footholds.

"—I figured you'd try something like that."

"—!"

I heard a voice come from the side. I slid my body backward at an angle as I felt a large, sweeping kick mow past me. Though I was able to dodge it, that definitely would have left a mark had I taken a direct hit.

"*Gluttony*, was it? That thing where you eat your opponent's battle aura and mana? With an ability like that, it's obvious you'd go after Ein."

It was Flicka, trying to obstruct me.

"But you know, I don't think I'll let you get away with something so convenient today. In a real fight, your Gear decides who you fight against anyway."

Saying this, Flicka started hurling attacks at me. Swift punches, powerful kicks, and grappling throws—she came at me with a variety of techniques. She wasn't making it easy for me. I could tell she was used to fighting.

"Ruchika!"

"Hold it, Momma's girl. You'll be squaring off against me."

As Leonie sensed I was at a disadvantage and ran in to help, Ein got in her way.

"You know, there's one thing I just can't stand," Ein said.

"…And what is that?" asked Leonie.

"The rules at the Hero Institute are as strict as they come. Everyone here learns to endure them and to discipline themselves in turn."

"I'm aware of that."

"Oh really…? In that case—"

Ein readied his staff for an attack.

"—you should know some daughter of a hero who needed special treatment to get in doesn't deserve to be here!"

"—!"

While anyone would have expected him to follow up with a magical attack, Ein unexpectedly performed what looked like a physical attack instead, swinging his staff at Leonie. Taken by surprise, Leonie reacted too late. She fumbled her sword as she rushed to swing back at him and sliced the air. In the meantime, Ein slipped his staff into the space between, slamming her directly in the stomach.

"Ugh…!"

The next moment, Leonie went flying backward. Ein must have hit her with a magical attack at point-blank. Her body came soaring toward me, and I rushed to catch her in my arms.

"Welcome back!"

"…It seems this fight won't be so straightforward after all," Leonie commented to me, catching her breath.

—Shall I assist you now?

No, I don't think it's gonna help.

—Actually, I agree.

Then why did you ask?!

—What can I say? I have a mischievous streak.

I was seriously starting to think this Gear might be broken.

"All right, we're back to square one. What should we do?" I asked.

"These two have more experience than we do in battles using Gear. I'm not sure we have what it takes to go up against them," Leonie breathed out a weak response.

"Should we just give up and apologize, then?"

"No… I want you to lend me your strength."

"Sure thing, but how?"

"Ruchika, have you ever heard of a 'chess problem'?"

"Yeah. But I'm no good at that kind of thing."

"This situation is the same as a chess problem. We need to find a way to put them into checkmate."

Leonie whispered her plan to me in a low voice.

"Hey, you over there, how long are you planning on keeping us waiting?"

"Sorry about that," said Leonie.

"Hmph…you ready to give us some more entertainment?"

"Sure—how's this for entertainment?!" I said.

I released the energy I had been secretly building up in my feet and took off toward the two upperclassmen.

"She's fast—!" said Ein.

"Ein!"

I aimed a punch at Ein. Just like before, Flicka cut in, attempting to compensate for his late response, but her movements weren't as leisurely as they had been last time.

"Why, you… You were holding back before?!" I said.

"It's hard for me to get excited about some regular, boring fight. But since you've started to make it interesting, I thought I'd kick it up a notch."

"Ugh…she's too fast…!"

I switched gears, prioritizing the number and speed of my attacks over their power. I was aiming for Ein. As a mage, he basically had no way to stop me from using *Gluttony*. Flicka would be forced to be his backup, and in the end, I'd be able to tie up both of our opponents at the same time.

"You think you can take on the two of us at once? Do you think this is a game—?!"

"Ein, don't let your guard down! C-100's not playing around!"

As I exchanged blows with Flicka, I made sure to make passes at Ein every time I noticed an opening. They had me tied up now, but I was confident I'd be able to push through them both on my own.

And besides, I wasn't alone.

"Leonie, I'm almost ready!"

"Okay!"

As soon as I gave Leonie my signal, I grabbed Flicka by the arm, put her in an armlock, and threw her.

"Wahhh!"

No matter how good a martial artist you are, you need the stability of your lower body to support your agile movements. And when you're flying through the air, your body doesn't move like you expect it to. While Leonie took care of Flicka as the girl was airborne, I would thwart any magical assistance from Ein. Then we would go after Ein and put our opponents in checkmate.

We had them cornered—or so we thought.

"Aren't you ashamed to be fighting alongside one of the demons who killed your mother?!"

"—!"

Flicka's anguished insult disrupted Leonie's focus as she slashed her sword. It was only an instant, not even a second long. But that instant was our downfall.

"Hah!"

"Kyaaa?!"

The second Leonie's sword wavered, Flicka, still hanging upside down in midair, knocked it back with the heel of her palm. Then Flicka took the sword and used it to spin in the air, turning her body in the air and landing a powerful kick into Leonie. My teammate collapsed on the spot.

"Leonie?!"

"You left yourself wide-open!"

"—!"

I was immediately distracted by Leonie's injury. And there was no way Ein was going to let that fatal gap in my defenses go unpunished.

"Glu—"

"Not so fast!"

Predicting that a magic attack would be coming next, I got ready to use my *Gluttony* ability, but Ein's next strike was a physical blow from his staff instead. For a mage, the move was unexpectedly strong, and it hit me directly in the pit of my stomach. Unable to breathe, I fell to the ground.

"That was a simple physical attack, delivered with nothing but physical enhancement magic. Your *Gluttony* or whatever shouldn't apply to something like this, huh?"

He was right. *Gluttony* wouldn't be able to feed off attacks of that kind.

"You surprised us for a minute there, but I guess that's all you've got?"

"You're both such pushovers. You're nowhere near ready to fight us with that kind of attitude."

The pair started spewing insults again, as if to look down on us. I hated to admit it, but they did have us beat this time. And the real reason we lost was because Leonie and I hadn't built enough trust between us.

"…You win."

Leonie said this with a tone of frustration. And I was even more frustrated that it was my fault she had to say such a thing.

"Why don't you just quit already, you fakes?"

"Posers like you will never be able to call yourselves heroes."

They were giving me a mouthful, but I had nothing to say in response. While I didn't think the gap in our abilities was *that* big, it was true that Leonie and I weren't completely up to snuff.

For a while after that, Leonie wouldn't even look me in the eye.

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(Danita)

"That should have taught that demon girl Ruchika a lesson…"

I got dinner ready as I listened to my mom complain. Both she and I usually ate our meals at the dining hall, but when she was in a bad mood, she'd come to my room and beg me to feed her. When that happened, she usually had something she wanted to complain about, so I wasn't really a fan of her visits. Even my roommates, who typically wanted to hang out with me, tried to stay away when my mom showed up. They'd come up with some kind of excuse to leave the room to us.

"Forget about her already," I said.

"That won't do. A demon trying to become a hero puts the reputation of the Institute at risk."

"She's just gonna fail some big test somewhere down the line and get kicked out anyway."

"That would be letting her off too easily, especially after what she did to you."

"I don't really care."

I was already fed up as I ladled out the chicken stew I had made. Mom talked about the reputation of the Institute and all that, but I knew the thing she actually cared about was that I had lost to Ruchika. She was overprotective and always pinning her hopes up on me, so she couldn't stand to see someone take me down a notch. And man, it was suffocating.

"You're such a nice girl. But you shouldn't be. You have to win back the dignity she's stolen from you. The next chance you get, you must win against her. Understood?"

"…Yeah, whatever."

Easy for her to say. I didn't like Ruchika, but I had to admit her skills were the real deal. It wasn't gonna be easy to beat her in a fight. Still, I wasn't planning on letting her off completely. That mock battle had been the first time I had seen her *Gluttony* ability, so my

response had lagged. But now that I knew what I was up against, I could come up with a plan for next time and make sure I didn't make the same stupid mistakes. I'd find a way to get back at her.

Still, I didn't wanna have to hear it from someone else, like it was gonna be easy.

"Hey, Mom. You gotta stop pokin' your nose into Ruchika and Leonie's business. It's embarrassin'."

The Institute, including my mom, was clearly trying to find a way to get rid of the two of them. While Ruchika was gonna have to pay for her bad attitude in class one way or another, it was just plain mean to make Leonie look after her.

"What are you saying, Danita? They're a couple of underachieving problem students. We're just trying to do what's best for the Institute, even if that means getting rid of them."

"Underachieving problem students," huh? Yeah, I would call Ruchika a problem student. And sure, maybe Leonie's grades in practical training weren't so great. But Ruchika's work in practical training had been pretty amazing, and Leonie's grades in lectures were top class. Put another way, they each had their strengths that couldn't be ignored. But the Institute wasn't even trying to acknowledge that.

"I just want to get rid of them as quickly as we can and make sure we provide you with the best schooling environment possible."

"Sure, whatever. Let's just eat."

I didn't really want to hear any more of it, so I changed the subject. Thankfully, my mom always loved the food I made. I only hoped it would fix her bad mood.

I thought about Ruchika and Leonie again. Right now, it seemed like Ruchika was continuing to one-sidedly pursue Leonie, but Leonie didn't seem completely against it, either. There still seemed to be some distance between them, but they were generally open with each other. It was totally different from the relationship I had with Mom, my own blood relative. She felt like barely more than a random passerby.

I guess it's been like this ever since Dad died.

Dad had been the Battle-Ax Hero. People said he would never step down from a fight, no matter what kind of terrible monster or fierce attack he was up against. They said he'd been a vanguard for the ages, and without him, even the Almighty Hero wouldn't have been able to defeat the Demon Lord. After that, he had been part of the effort to set up the Hero Institute, and that was how he met and married Mom.

Mom hadn't always been this intense. While she still tended to nag at me even when Dad was alive, she used to act more mature than she did now. Everything changed after Dad died. After that, Mom started referring to him like he had been some kind of god with absolute authority. She kept saying over and over how I needed to be more like him. That's the reason why she doesn't criticize the rough way I talk—'cause Dad was like that, too. And he was everything to her.

What the hell am I doin' anyway?

They may call me the strongest of my generation, but in the end, I'm just sittin' here trying to fix my mom's bad mood. When that hit me, everything started to feel so pointless. I shook my head, trying to put everything out of my mind, and brought a spoonful of my chicken stew to my mouth. But it didn't taste like anything at all.

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(Ruchika)

It was early afternoon, and I was training by myself in the Institute courtyard.

—The bell has already rung, you know.

Yeah, yeah.

I kept practicing my form anyway. Leonie and I may have lost to Ein and Flicka this time, but I wasn't gonna let it happen again. That still didn't mean I felt like going to class.

Every once in a while, one of my classmates or an upperclassman passed by, but none of them paid any attention to me. It was like they didn't want anything to do with me.

—Looks like everyone is treating you like a troublemaker now.

I guess they didn't want to risk getting mixed up in my mess. Leonie and Nor were the only exceptions.

All things considered, the Hero Institute was more boring than I could have ever imagined. Worst of all were the lectures, which were a total pain. When I had heard this was a school that would teach you how to become a hero, I had expected there would be classes about creative methods of combat and stuff like that. But in reality, lessons were basically left to the Gear, and the teachers rarely focused on each student's individual needs.

So lectures are boring, and the students who were already strong in the first place get the best grades in practical training. Not much of a school, if you ask me.

—Perhaps that is the true nature of school after all.

If what Proto said was true, then I'd be much better off just practicing my fighting forms by myself. I was starting to feel like I understood what that pickpocket we had run into before the entrance ceremony was talking about.

Trying to shake off my feelings of disappointment toward the Institute, I kept training on my own for a while before lying down on the lawn. I closed my eyes, basking in the warmth of the bright rays of spring sunlight on my face. That pleasant feeling of exhaustion after exercising was starting to give way to sleepiness. I thought about how Leonie would be mad at me for skipping class again.

Speaking of Leonie, I hadn't had a real conversation with her in a few days. She had to be pretty frustrated about losing our battle against Ein and Flicka. Or maybe there was something else on her mind. Either way, she sure did seem depressed these days. I didn't want to just leave her be, so I had tried to make conversation starting off with one of my usual pickup lines, but…

"How can you be so flippant all the time? Are you not worried at all about whether you'll be able to keep up with classes?"

…she had snapped back at me.

Personally, I chalked up our loss against Ein to a series of coordination mistakes between us, so I wasn't concerned whatsoever about it reflecting on my work in our lectures, much less practical training. Maybe this was just my big head talking, but I was pretty sure I could have beaten both Ein and Flicka by myself if I'd really tried my hardest. What Leonie and I actually needed was to work on as a pair was trusting and understanding each other.

"But that's a minor problem in the grand scheme of things. We'll figure it out."

Humans had a saying: *Good things come to those who wait.* I figured this was the kind of thing where I just had to go with the flow and let it play out on its own.

"Hi, Ruchika."

Someone called out to me just as I was about to nod off. When I opened my eyes, I saw someone I hadn't been expecting and sat up.

"What's up, Nor? Hasn't class started already?"

"Yeah…"

Nor was standing in front of me. If a straight-A student like her was skipping class to come looking for me, there must be something pretty important she wanted to talk about.

"You coming over to the dark side to be a bad student like me?"

"No! I just have something I really need to discuss with you."

"What's that?"

Nor sat down a little way off from me. I wondered what it could be. If this had been Leonie, who was always way too serious and tended to criticize me, I might be able to guess, but I couldn't imagine what Nor wanted. She looked as though she had made up her mind about something before coming here.

—Rather unperceptive of you, Ruchika. If you think about it, you should be able to guess.

Huh?

—There aren't that many reasons why a girl like Nor would make such a bold move.

Hmmm, could it be I've gotten myself into a sticky situation?

"Oh, so *that's* how it is, Nor."

"You already guessed what I want to talk about?"

"Yeah."

Wow, okay… I would have never expected it, but it must be true.

"I never meant to hurt you, Nor."

"Yeah…it's been hard to see you two like that."

"I bet. I'm sorry, it's all my fault."

"Ruchika…"

I walked up to Nor, looked into her glossy, light-blue eyes, and spoke.

"I'm sorry, Nor. You're a very lovely girl. But Leonie is the only one for me. I can't return your feelings."

"…Huh?"

Though it pained me to have to tell her this, for some reason, Nor responded to my heartfelt declaration with a confused look on her face.

"Wait, you're saying you want to be my mate, right?" I asked.

"N-no, that's not it! That's not it at all!" she said.

"Huh?"

I guess I had been off the point on this one.

What the heck, Proto?! You were totally off!

—……

Yeah, sure, now's the time you pick to keep your opinion to yourself!

What a piece of junk.

But that aside…

"If you're not confessing your love to me, then what is it?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Leonie."

"Leonie?"

Nor nodded back at me.

"She's in a really tough position right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone at school is shunning her… Simply put, she's being bullied."

"Bullied…"

Like I had talked about with Proto before, since Leonie was so beautiful and smart, I figured it was easy for people to get jealous of her. That much was clear based on how everyone had treated her the other day in class. But if she was getting bullied, would she really put up with it? In my mind, she would almost definitely speak up against something that absurd.

Perhaps sensing what I was thinking from my expression, Nor continued speaking.

"I-if it was really about something she did, I think things might have gone differently. But the reason she's in this situation in the first place…is partly because of you, Ruchika."

"Huh? Me?"

I was a little taken off guard by this unexpected swerve in the conversation. But Nor kept going, putting the pressure on me.

"L-Leonie's expected to look after you, right? And now she's getting blamed because you won't attend class or take your lectures seriously."

"Whaaat, for real…?"

I hadn't been paying much attention to the issue of Leonie supervising me, since I figured I didn't need someone to look after me. But it sounded like everyone was assuming she was responsible for the way I acted. I never imagined that Leonie would have to face consequences for *my* actions. And yeah, now I felt sorry that I had put her through that.

However—

"Hmm. But is what I'm doing really so wrong?"

"What…?"

As I tilted my head to one side in confusion, Nor looked back at me like she didn't understand.

"I mean, I'm getting good results in class, aren't I? I may be skipping lectures, sure, but no one else in our year can beat me in practical training."

"That's true, but your performance in the classroom is—"

"The thing people want most out of a hero is their ability to fight, right? No matter how well you mentally understand the ins and outs of being a hero, it's all pointless if you can't actually hold your own in battle, isn't it?"

"That…may also be true, but…"

I mean, maybe there were still other qualities a hero should have or other things they should know, but I was pretty sure it was an undeniable fact that the ability to fight was most important. To put it differently, as long as a person could fight, then all that other stuff didn't really matter. But maybe everyone else didn't think of it that way.

Besides—

"Besides, do you think it's okay for Leonie to keep going like this, Nor?"

"What do you mean?"

Nor seemed to need more of an explanation, so I did my best to rack my brain for a way to express how I was feeling.

"Truth is, Leonie and I are kind of fighting right now."

"You and Leonie?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about it for a while just now, and Leonie's, like, too restricted by the fact that she's a hero's daughter."

"I suppose…that does describe Leonie, yes."

Nor looked like she was getting what I was saying, like she had felt the same thing before.

"First off, I think she puts way too much faith in her Gear. I agree that it's a useful tool, but just because it tells the wearer what their best course of action is, that doesn't mean they can actually accomplish it."

"In that case—"

"Plus, how do we really know what's 'best' anyway?"

"Huh…?"

This time, Nor looked like she wasn't following at all. So I did my best to try to explain.

"There's never only one 'best' solution for any given situation, right? Like, if your opponent comes slashing at you with a sword during a battle, what's 'best' will change depending on if you want to counterattack or if you want to subdue them."

"W-well, they say Gear is supposed to intuit the wearer's intentions."

—That's right. I am quite the capable woman, after all.

Oh, you're a girl? …Wait, just be quiet for a minute, Proto!

I shushed Proto as she poked her head into the conversation and I continued by asking Nor a question.

"Intention, huh? Maybe that works when the wearer knows exactly what they want to do. But what if they're not sure?"

"Oh…"

This time, Nor seemed to get what I was trying to say.

"Right? There are plenty of situations where it would be hard to make a decision. Actually, I think it's much less common for a situation to have a simple answer. I can't help but think using Gear all the time weakens your ability to make decisions. And why would that be a good thing if you want to become a hero?"

"That's…"

Nor didn't have an answer. Or rather, using Gear all the time was just so normal to her, it was as though she had never even considered there might be some kind of drawback to doing so, like I had.

"Everyone at this school trusts Gear way too much, especially Leonie. I mean, I can get why. Her mama invented it, right? So of course she would think highly of it. But too much of anything can be a bad thing."

The same issue had come up during our mock battle with Ein. Leonie's discomposure, a consequence of the lack of trust between us, had cost us the match. I didn't have the slightest reservation

with Leonie, but I couldn't say she completely trusted me. To me, it was less that she simply didn't trust me because I was a demon, and more that she was too attached to the idea of acting as a hero's daughter should or too attached to following her Gear.

"…"

Seeming to have understood the crux of the problem, Nor closed her eyes and appeared to fall deep into thought.

It wasn't only Leonie's obsession with Gear. I think that attitude of hers—of never being discouraged in the face of adversity—was another thing that had come from her feelings of being tied by her obligations. I had never seen her whine or complain, and I was sure she took it as a given that she would continue to resist and fight against the unreasonable. All this was probably her way of acting like how she thought a hero's daughter was supposed to—and this quality was one of her virtues. But again, it was possible to do too much of a good thing.

"But what does this all have to do with you skipping lectures? Aren't they separate issues?" Nor asked.

"I think if I told her all this myself, she wouldn't listen to me. Maybe she'd listen to you, since you're her childhood friend. But I haven't known her long enough yet. So while it may be a little drastic of me, I figured I'd give a live demonstration and let her see for herself."

I'd show her what it was like to live life doing whatever you felt like.

"So that means you're skipping lectures on purpose to prove a point?"

"I just wanna help Leonie have a bit more freedom."

I wanted to free her from all the little *shoulds* and *musts* she had bound herself to all because of the guidance of her Gear or her sense of duty as a hero's daughter. I wanted to help her see that she could follow her *wants.* Life was just plain boring if you only ever did what you *should* and never what you *wanted*, right? My only desire was to help this girl I had come to like so much to be happy.

"I wonder how I never realized it…even though I've been by her side all this time."

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Nor. For better or for worse, you're too close to her. You're both descended from famous heroes, and you're childhood friends, right? Your positions in life are similar, and so are all the things you take for granted."

"In that sense, you've come from a totally different environment from us."

"Yeah. Guess that's why I could look at Leonie and tell that something was off."

Of course, it went without saying that demon values weren't all better or more correct than human values or anything.

—You sure have a lot of negative things to say about us.

I'm just generalizing. I've got a feeling you're not one of the bad ones, Proto. Though, your personality could use some work.





—How rude.

But setting Proto aside…

"Hey, Nor. You like Leonie, right?"

"What?!"

"You're friends, right?"

"Oh…that's what you meant… Yes, in that sense, I do like her."

"Then I want you to lend me your strength."

"Hmm? What do you need my help with?"

"I want you to help me change Leonie's mindset."

I knew I'd never be able to do it alone. For better or for worse, she and I were too different, and Leonie was as stubborn as they came. But maybe, with help from Nor, who had spent so much time with her up until now—maybe if the person closest to her expressed her concern over the way she was acting, then our voices could finally reach her.

"Come on, Nor. Be my accomplice!"

I held out my right hand to her.

"…How can I say no? Sure, I'll help you out."

Her answer sounded nervous, but she grasped my hand firmly.

"All right! Here's to the formation of our united front against Leonie!"

"Sure. Here's to helping Leonie. Oh, but one thing—"

"What?"

"—stop skipping class and go to your lectures. You almost got away with avoiding answering for that one, but I'm sure Leonie's freedom and your playing hooky aren't the same issue."

"Aw, dang, can't fool you, can I…?"

That was Nor for you. It was no wonder she was Leonie's best friend. With that, Nor dragged me across campus and made me jump into the middle of the lecture I had been trying to skip. And of course, I didn't get out of that one without a good scolding from Leonie.

Chapter 3

"Ruchika, are you skipping again?!"

"Sorry, Leonie. Give the professor a good excuse for me, will you?"

"I will not! Just go to class like everyone else!"

"But our next one is with Professor Aliza, right? Yeah, no thanks."

"Ruchika!"

Despite receiving a harsh scolding from Leonie as she made a sour face at me, I decided to skip class as usual. After Nor's rebuke, I had done my best to attend all the other professors' lectures, but Professor Aliza clearly had it in for me. Simply having to deal with her made me exhausted. Plus, her lectures were super fast-paced and hard to keep up with.

I slipped out of the school building and lay down on the lawn of the courtyard. The sky above was blue. It looked like summer was almost here. As I enjoyed the feeling of the late spring breeze, I closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew, I had fallen into a deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes, it was dark outside.

Ah, looks like I did it again. I had not only skipped Professor Aliza's class but all my remaining classes for the day. *Whoops. And I even sort of liked the practical training course I missed.*

"Eh, whatever."

What was done was done. I would just have to go apologize to the teacher later.

—If that's how you feel, then why don't you just attend class in the first place?

I can't help it. Professor Aliza's classes are agony for me.

I had to admit I wasn't exactly a serious student, but there was definitely a problem with Professor Aliza's attitude, too.

"……Hmm?

When I arrived at my dorm room, I noticed something strange: I could sense someone inside. It shouldn't have been Leonie; at this hour, she was usually still out studying by herself and wouldn't be back until later. On top of that, the door was ajar. Leonie would never do something so careless.

A thief, maybe?

—Do you want to know what I think?

No, I wanna see this for myself.

I was getting a little worked up. Yeah, I knew it was inappropriate to be excited at a time like this, but I just loved when things happened that were out of the ordinary. Especially now, when my daily life had been so boring. Getting to catch a criminal in the act sounded kinda fun.

I quietly opened the door and peeked inside. I didn't hear anything, but I could sense someone else's mana within the room. Then I heard some kind of groaning voice going "Uhh…" and "Hmm…" Maybe the thief was struggling to pick out what to steal.

The room was about twenty square meters large and was made for two people. There were two beds and two desks, one for each person, but not much else in the way of furnishings. That meant there weren't really any places to hide. Since there was a window, someone could leave from it. But on the other hand, that was the only place to escape, so it'd be easy to chase the intruder. *All right, here I go.*

"Don't move! How dare you try to steal from me and Leonie's love nest! Surrender and come quietly, or else I'll— Wait, what?"

"Ugh…"

When I stepped into the room, I could see there was no robber in sight—only Leonie, collapsed on the floor.

"Wait, Leonie?! What's wrong?!"

I rushed over to her, took her into my arms, and gave her a sniff. She didn't smell like she was sick. I couldn't see any external wounds on her, either, so she didn't appear to be injured. Only when I stared hard at her face could I see she had deep, dark circles under her eyes. From the looks of it, she hadn't gotten enough sleep. Her cheeks looked hollow, too. Which meant— *Looks like anemia caused by sleep deprivation.*

Well, that's no good.

"Nnh…? Ruchika…?"

"Are you awake? Just stay still for now, and I'll carry you to your bed."

I took Leonie into my arms and laid her in her bed. Her body felt unbelievably light, which made me even more worried.

"I'm sorry to burden you like this, Ruchika."

"Don't sweat it. More importantly, you should get some rest. You haven't been sleeping lately, have you?"

"…"

"If there's something on your mind, I'm happy to listen. Or if it's something about me, I can go get Nor."

"No…that's all right."

Hmm. She didn't seem all right in the slightest.

"Leonie, you don't have to trust me if you don't feel like you can, but I hope you'll at least let me pry into this once. I know we're not partners yet or anything, but we are roommates."

"…I'm sorry."

"I'm not looking for an apology, either."

We were both quiet for a while.

"It's just…some things…haven't been going well…"

Falteringly, Leonie began to speak. I fixed her blanket and gave her a look of encouragement, trying to get her to keep going.

"Ever since I enrolled at the Hero Institute, I've been messing everything up…from practical training to my relationships with others…"

"I have a feeling some of that's my fault."

"That's not what I'm trying to say…"

"You're right, I'm sorry. Keep going."

I apologized for interrupting, and she nodded back at me.

"I've been doing the best I can. But I still haven't been getting any results. Even though…I'm the daughter of the Almighty Hero."

"Leonie… Just because you're a hero's daughter doesn't mean you can do anything and everything."

"I know that. I know I'll never be as good as my mother. But I can't even manage to do the minimum of what's expected of me."

"I don't think that's true. You're too hard on yourself."

For example, she undeniably excelled at book learning. When I tried bringing this up to her, however…

"People expect strength of hero cadets first and foremost. Even if one has the knowledge, it means nothing in the end if you aren't able to apply it."

"Hmm…I think you're taking everything too seriously, Leonie."

Yes, I had said the exact same thing about strength to Nor earlier. But hearing it from Leonie made me want to tell her that wasn't entirely true.

—Love sees no faults.

No, that's not it.

It was just a hunch, but I was getting the feeling that being a hero was a lot more complex than I had been making it out to be. Or at least, I was starting to feel that way as I watched Leonie struggle like this.

"I'm not taking it seriously enough. Especially when I've gone and exhausted myself like this, obsessing over nothing but a hobby of mine," said Leonie.

"A hobby?"

"Ruchika, can you please get that for me?"

I picked up the object Leonie was pointing to.

"Is this…some kind of magical device?"

"Yes, it's convenience magic…," she answered, a bashful look coming over her face.

Convenience magic was an umbrella term for of magic that saved people time or effort in their everyday lives, such as magic that cleaned the body or boiled water. The Hero Institute didn't place much emphasis on the field, but it was extremely helpful for the general public and was probably the type of magic that had the largest number of regular practitioners.

"I bet this device…is for boiling water? Considering that the pot has a spell circle engraved into the bottom."

"So you can tell?"

"Yeah, since magical devices were a part of demon culture, originally. To some extent, at least."

Demons specialized in magic and magical devices. After humans defeated the Demon Lord and made peace with the demonkind, magic culture spread from demons throughout humanity, and now humankind had developed its own culture of magical devices. For example, in lecture, I learned that Gear hadn't come from demons originally but rather had been developed by implementing and expanding upon demons' magical device technology.

"That's right! These devices are groundbreaking inventions, and they employ all sorts of innovations to ensure even ordinary people with weak magic ability will be able to use them. One such particularly amazing innovation is this spell circle—as the instantaneous firepower of fire magic is too high, it equalizes the firepower over a designated span of time, allowing the user to further fine-tune the intensity—"

Having said this much, Leonie seemed to realize she was talking too much.

"…Sorry. I got a little carried away there."

"Nothing to apologize about. You sure like convenience magic, don't you?"

"Yes. When things are rough at school, researching convenience magic is a nice diversion. Though, just because I like it doesn't mean I'm any good at it."

I had been under the impression that Leonie was totally focused on her swordsmanship, so I found this a little unexpected. But when she talked about convenience magic, Leonie seemed to light up, a far cry from her usual calm and collected self.

"…You're not going to laugh at me?" Leonie asked.

"Laugh? Why would I?"

"Well, because…it's all meaningless."

I didn't understand why Leonie was being so self-deprecating.

"Is it even possible for something to be totally meaningless? I think it's always better to know about something than to be ignorant of it."

"That's true, but my Gear told me that my talent lies in swordsmanship. Even if I learn convenience magic, I won't excel in it."

Leonie smiled sadly to herself, repeating that it was meaningless. *Again with the Gear thing*, I thought. Apparently, Gear could even tell the wearer what areas they excelled in. I had my doubts about Gear—with the exception of Proto, obviously—but Leonie had complete faith in the devices. Maybe there was nothing I could do about that. They were basically her mother's legacy, after all.

But still…

—Yes, I agree.

Having received something like a nod of agreement from Proto, I decided to go ahead and lay out what was really on my mind to Leonie.

"'Meaningless,' my butt."

"Huh?"

"There's no way having more cards in your hand to play could be meaningless."

Leonie looked blankly at me.

"For example, even if your Gear was correct about swordsmanship being your strongest talent—"

"My Gear *is* correct."

"Ugh, whatever, sure it is! Even then, it's still important to gain skills and knowledge outside swordsmanship, right? With more skills and knowledge, you can do more things. And that means you have more cards in your hand to play."

"Oh…"

That seemed to get through to her. Even if swordsmanship was her best skill, there was no reason why she had to focus on it exclusively. In fact, gaining skills in other areas should help her use her swordplay even more effectively. There was no way having a wide range of interests was meaningless.

"But it's just convenience magic. I could understand if we were talking about offensive magic or support magic, but to a hero, convenience magic isn't—"

"I agree that the most important thing to a hero is the ability to fight. But do you think it's always gonna be that way from now on?"

"'From now on'?"

"Yeah, like in the future."

I picked up the magical device for boiling water, and using convenience magic to fill it with water, I started to prepare some hot water. I thought maybe I'd make some medicinal tea for Leonie so she could sleep better.

"The conflict between humans and demons is over, right? Although humans are still continuing to fight among themselves, I think what's expected from heroes might change little by little over time."

I knew demons and humans both would never be able to live free of strife, but I figured large-scale, decisive conflicts like the Great Human-Demon War would become less and less common.

"…You may be right about that trend. But Gear doesn't stop at indicating battle-related skills to its wearer. Actually, thanks to Gear, the Hero Institute has kept churning out talented people in a wide

variety of fields. The issue is that I myself don't have such talent, and—"

"Hey, Leonie? Forget about talent and Gear and about being the daughter of a hero for a sec and answer me this: What is it that you most *want* to do?"

"—!"

Leonie looked surprised, like she had never even considered my question before. I continued: "Of course, I wouldn't try to stop you if you really just want to keep improving your swordplay. But based on what I'm seeing here, you really love convenience magic, don't you?"

"…Yes."

She finally acknowledged it. And with that, as if some spirit possessing her had suddenly departed, she began to speak freely on it.

"Actually…I do want to research convenience magic more than I want to train my swordsmanship. While swordsmanship is a skill for fighting, convenience magic is a skill that helps people's daily lives become more abundant. And what I really want to do is be of use to the people."

After commenting that it may be improper for the daughter of the Almighty Hero to think so, she went on: "My Gear has shown me the picture of what I should be. It has shown me where my talents lie. And I believe it is correct, even now. But sometimes, I think, is it really so bad to pursue something even if you have no talent in it?"

She finally expressed it. After being bound by the curse of the "hero" and its embodiment, Gear, for so many years, she was able to voice her doubts at last.

"Surely, it makes me a failure as the daughter of a hero…for me to think something like this. Yet I can't help but think I would be overjoyed if only I could devote my life to making people's lives easier. But I would never be allowed to do such a thing."

How strange of me, isn't it? she added, again with a note of self-deprecation.

—While we knew it was bad, I believe this runs deeper than we thought.

Yeah, seriously.

After giving Proto a half-exasperated answer, I then responded to Leonie.

"It's not strange."

"…Huh?"

"It's not strange at all. If anything, I think you're right, Leonie."

"Ruchika…?"

Handing her the medicinal tea I had brewed, I smiled at her.

I was happy. So happy that Leonie had really thought about this on her own. For a while there, I had been convinced she was just blindly following her Gear or some imagined ideal of what it was to be a hero.

But I was wrong. She *had* thought about it. She hadn't just accepted the "correct answer" that had been presented to her without questioning it—she had kept questioning it, suffering all the while. Knowing this, I respected her and loved her even more. And I grew more convinced than ever she was the right person to become my mate.

"I want to help you!"

"Huh?"

"Let me help you with your convenience magic research."

"But there's nothing in it for you."

"That's not true."

She still wasn't getting it. Teasingly, I poked her in the forehead with my finger as I spelled it out to her.

"I want to do what you want to do, Leonie."

"…?!"

Suddenly, her face turned bright red. Since she was so pale in the first place, it was really easy to tell she was blushing.

—How forward of you.

Humans are way too shy—that's all.

As far as I was concerned, there was no such thing as overdoing it when it came to expressing love or affection.

"I—I think you should do as you please, then."

"Yup, I will! For the person I like."

"A-again with that nonsense…"

"It's not nonsense. Leonie, it's about time you stop acting so stubborn and become my mate already."





"I won't be doing that."

With that, Leonie took a sip of the medicinal tea. Reflexively, she commented, "It's rather bitter." But in contrast to her words, her face had unfurled into a broad smile, like a blooming flower.

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The very next day, we got started researching convenience magic. Though, in actuality, Leonie was doing most of the research, and I was assisting her. Proto had told me from the start that my talent was in magic, but in practice, it seemed my plentiful amount of mana actually came in handy for helping her research.

It was Sunday, and we had the day off from school, so Leonie and I went into town to shop for parts for magical devices. Since we were in one of the foremost royal capitals of the human race, the marketplace was crowded with people starting from the early morning. I really liked how energetic it was.

"Hmm?"

"Something wrong, Ruchika?"

"I could have sworn I just saw Professor Aliza over there…"

Maybe my eyes are playing tricks on me?

—That area over there is the black market.

"Black market"?

—A place where people buy and sell dark goods—the kinds of things that don't circulate official trade routes—through back channels. For example, you might find stolen goods or illegally procured military supplies there.

If someone from the Hero Institute is there, that means…

—I believe the Institute forbids its students and staff from even getting near the area.

In that case, there was no way a straitlaced professor like Aliza would be there. I must have been seeing things after all.

"Eh, whatever. Leonie, what is it you wanted to buy?"

"Let's see—I was hoping to stock up on some scrolls."

Scrolls were a convenient item that consisted of a piece of paper with a spell circle imprinted on it. When you channeled mana into it, the magic inscribed in the spell circle would activate. Unlike magical devices, however, you needed a decent level of magical power to be able to use scrolls, so most ordinary people found devices more convenient. Then again, scrolls were cheaper, but they were also disposable—you could usually only use them once.

I guess Leonie wasn't after the actual scrolls themselves but the spell circles written on them. Lately, she had been researching what kinds of spell circles were most efficient, and she'd mentioned wanting to collect different samples the previous day.

"All right, then let's head for a scroll shop."

"Yes. There's one I know of over that way."

Leonie led the way, and I followed after her.

"Sure are a lot of people out today," I said.

"This is the largest marketplace in the capital; it makes sense."

"Wanna hold hands so we don't get separated?"

"We're not children, Ruchika."

Rejected again. That Leonie—her shield against flirtation was as solid as ever.

"Speaking of children, that reminds me…"

"Hmm? Of what?"

"What kind of a child were you, Ruchika?"

"Oh, so you wanna know?"

"Well, I am a little curious."

She didn't even look back as she walked ahead of me.

If only she would just swoon a little bit more.

—Even Ruchika, the world-famous pickup artist, seems to be having trouble with this girl.

Who're you calling a pickup artist?

As I tried to get Proto to cram it with the comments from the peanut gallery, I thought back on my past and answered Leonie.

"Let me see… I guess I was always kind of out of place as a kid."

"'Out of place'?"

"Yeah. Oh, Leonie, I'm getting a little hungry. Do you mind if I buy us some apples?"

"…Go ahead."

"Thanks. Hey, lady, two apples over here please!"

I bought two apples, gave one to Leonie, and started munching on the other one as I continued: "Did you ever notice I don't have any horns?"

"Yes, I do recall that horns are one of the distinguishing traits of demons."

"That's right. Well, I don't have horns because I was born under certain special circumstances."

"'Special circumstances'?"

"Yeah. As a weapon to use in the battle against the Almighty Hero."

"?!"

This definitely got Leonie's attention, and she turned back to me in shock. I was delighted that I had succeeded in surprising her just like I'd meant to. While we were on this topic, I invited her to come sit down by the edge of the fountain in the market square.

"My mama was a really strong demon, and she held the Almighty Hero in really high regard—maybe even more so than humanity did. So that's why she tried out all kinds of things to defeat her. Like altering and modifying her demon underlings, stuff like that. And I was one of those experiments."

I took another bite of my apple and went on:

"They say Mama put the very best of her hero research to work into making me."

"'Hero research'…?"

"Mama thought we needed to bring in the Almighty Hero's own power to compete against her. That's why she obtained some of the Almighty Hero's own flesh and blood during one of their battles and did all sorts of experiments with it. And I was born from one of

them. Since I wasn't born through the usual demon method of blood communion, I never grew any horns."

And well, I wasn't created in time to help out with the decisive battle between my mama and the heroes, I told Leonie with a smile. She looked back at me with a conflicted expression on her face.

"Since I didn't have any horns, the other demons kinda treated me like a freak. On top of that, since I came from a pretty good bloodline as far as demon families go, no one felt comfortable making fun of me to my face, so everyone just kept their distance from me. I think in human terms, you say it's like sleeping on a bed of nails, right?"

"Ruchika…"

She gave me a sympathetic look. *Hmm, maybe I'm not phrasing it correctly?*

"I didn't really mind it that much. But I guess it was pretty hard on my nanny, who acted as my guardian. She seriously held a grudge about the whole situation, saying it was the Almighty Hero's fault that things turned out like this."

"I have a feeling…she may have been justified in that grudge," Leonie said in a pained voice.

"But you know, I have nothing against the Almighty Hero—against your mama. In fact, I admire her."

"'Admire'? You mean you admire the very same person who defeated your mother?"

"Ah…I guess this is one of those cultural differences between humans and demons."

I was going to have to explain this one a little more.

"Demons value strength more than anything. To be strong is the highest distinction. That's why my mama was so high-ranking among the other demons and why the hero who defeated her is held up even higher."

"…I find that value system difficult to empathize with."

"Yeah, I can tell. But, Leonie, don't you find it strange, even uncanny, how smoothly the reconciliation between humans and

demons went after the war?”

“I do wonder about it a little. When I learned about it in history class, it seemed like humanity ended up with a rather favorable situation during the peacekeeping negotiations.”

“That’s for the same reason; it’s part of our demon values to want to follow the strong. Put another way, I’m sure demons would have launched a revolt if humanity grew weaker than us. Especially since after the war, there were some demons who were oppressed, too.”

“—!”

This must have been new information to Leonie, because her face stiffened at this comment. After the war, humans and demons established a basic principle of mutual respect. Yet there were still winners and losers. I’d heard that some demons were forced into servitude or used as tools in conflicts between humans. So it made sense that some demons who still felt animosity toward humans might have considered putting up one last fight.

“But you said that in past tense, right?”

“Yeah, past tense. Demons don’t just go to war because they like to or because they think it’s fun. Of course, there are plenty of hot-blooded types among us, but even they rarely go so far as to put lives on the line… Sorry, I guess I’m getting off topic.”

“That’s okay.”

Now, where was I…?

“That’s all to say, I admire heroes much more than I could ever hate them. Like I said before, I didn’t have a great life living in the demon realm, either. Plus, I wanted to get stronger. That’s why I snuck out behind my nanny’s back and ran away.”

“…So that’s the story of why you wanted to come to the Hero Institute.”

“Yup. And to be totally honest, I have to say I am a little disappointed in this place. But I at least got to meet you and Nor, so it hasn’t been all bad. Plus, you two have some tasty auras.”

“‘Tasty’? You mean battle auras and mana have flavors?”

Leonie’s eyes went wide with surprise.

"Yeah. It's like each person's temperament is reflected in their aura's flavor. Your flavor is super dense, yet gentle. Nor's is a kinda fluffy, soft flavor. And Danita's was a whole different story—really interesting."

"Ruchika, do you mean to tell me you've been sneaking tastes from us this whole time?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, oopsies. After tasting so many people's mana and auras with *Gluttony*, it's kinda become a habit. But it's really hit-or-miss. If I devour a super-tasty aura that sits well with me, I get filled with energy. But sometimes, I eat something gross that I don't tolerate, and it can even make me feel sick. I bet I'd be down for the count if I took a bite out of Professor Aliza."

"Ha-ha, oh, Ruchika…"

I tried cracking a joke, and Leonie let out a small laugh. *She's so cute.*

I noticed I had eaten my apple down to its core, and I realized I should have bought at least one more.

"…I didn't have any other choice but to become a hero."

Leonie began to speak again.

"For as long as I can remember, my role as a hero's daughter has come before even my own identity. That was the expectation under which I was raised, and in actuality, that is how I grew up."

Though, it was her mother's relatives who raised her, she added.

"I was given a Gear before I was even young enough to remember not having one. I trusted its guidance and followed it. Of course, I faced my own indecision or worries, but at the very least, I had faith in my Gear. To me, the device was akin to fate."

I stole a glance at Leonie. She was expressionless as usual.

"But after enrolling in the Hero Institute and failing each day to get the results I thought I would, I've started to wonder if this is really what I should be doing."

"Leonie…"

"You said it yourself, Ruchika: What the Gear says may be correct, but that doesn't mean it's everything. I understand that on some

level, deep down. It's just…I wanted to believe it was everything."

Those words are stained with her own blood, sweat, and tears, I thought. They were filled with the suffering she had borne having walked this path in life. While it was an honor that she felt comfortable telling me all this, at the same time, I wished there was some way I could lighten the load on her heart.

"What you wanted to believe in wasn't the Gear itself."

"…No, it wasn't."

"It was your mama."

"…Yes."

It wasn't the magical device we called Gear that she wanted to trust. And she didn't simply follow it because the people around her told her to. She only wanted to have faith in her mother—the Almighty Hero, who had saved humanity.

"Since my mother was always on her way to some battle, I can count on my fingers the number of times I remember actually being around her in person. But there is one thing I remember as clearly as day, among all those faint memories of her. It was something she told me."

—I'm going to make a world where anyone can be happy. For you, Leonie.

Perhaps those words had been the hero's prayer. But—

"That's why I want to believe in this world my mother left behind for me. That's why I think there's no way the world she fought so hard for until the bitter end could be wrong."

It felt like the words Leonie's mother had left behind for her had become more of a curse than a blessing.

"Sorry for bringing up something so strange. I didn't mean to talk about such things," said Leonie.

"It's not strange. I'm happy I got to know more about you."

"Really…?"

"Yeah, really."

A short while after that, we arrived at the scroll shop. There, we bought a few scrolls and some books on spell circles.

During the way back—

"I can't help but wonder if straying from the path my Gear has indicated for me is like denying the world my mother left behind for me…"

Leonie didn't sound like she was expecting a response, so I didn't say anything. But I couldn't hold back anymore; I was at my limit.

"—! Ruchika…"

"Will you please hold my hand? I'm just a little kid, after all."

When I said this to her with a smile, Leonie seemed unsure of what she should do at first. But finally, she seemed to give in, smile, and say…

"If you insist."

She grasped my hand and squeezed it back.

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"All right, get under the blanket!"

"Okay."

"Sure!"

We were back in our room at the dorm. For some reason, though, there weren't two of us but three: Leonie, Nor, and me. This had all started the night Leonie and I had gotten back from our shopping trip.

"It's not fair. I can't believe the two of you went out without me!"

That was the first thing Nor had said to us upon seeing us come back from our outing. She'd been puffing her cheeks in a pout and whining about how unfair it was.

"You two have been awfully close lately. I feel so lonely being left out…"

"Come on, you know that's not true…unless…?" I'd said.

"Grrr!"

"That's not true, Nor. You're imagining things," Leonie had said.

Aw, what?

"I would never want to leave you out, Nor. You're one of my closest friends. You know, sometimes, you can be really scatterbrained."

"'Scatterbrained'…?"

"Leonie, do you realize how casually you say some really mean stuff?"

Still, just as Leonie had said, Nor was a close friend of hers. And it was a shame we had made Nor feel left out. But I had just the idea on how to make it right.

"Then why don't we have ourselves a pajama party to deepen the ties of our friendship?"

"'Pajama party'?"

"Is this another one of your indecent schemes?"

The two of them regarded me with suspicion.

"What do you mean, 'another'?! I'm always keeping it family-friendly! I just mean, like, we'd get together, eat snacks, and stay up late chatting."

"Oh, that sounds fun."

"Well, if that's all it is."

And so, we decided to throw ourselves an impromptu pajama party as soon as possible. Since the rules and regulations at the Hero Institute were so strict, Nor really wasn't supposed to be allowed in our room. She had to show up for the evening roll call, after all. But Nor had reached an agreement with her roommate to overlook her sneaking out of their room. Apparently, she had convinced her roommate by promising she would make it up to her later and help her with her homework.

The three of us were in our pajamas. Mine were a simple, classic design in white and light blue, and Leonie's were thick and red. But Nor's…

"I didn't expect your sleepwear to be so…sexy, Nor."

"You can't even call those pajamas. It's basically a negligee."

"Please, don't stare like that… I just can't sleep unless I wear something as light as possible!"

Nor had on a cream-colored negligee that was more like a super thin piece of cloth draped over her. It was revealing enough that even someone of the same sex wouldn't know where to look at her. And the fact someone as introverted as Nor was wearing such a bold piece of sleepwear was enough to make my heart pound.

—Are you perhaps having some unfaithful thoughts?

Nuh-uh, you know Leonie's the only one for me.

Still, seeing her like this, I could tell Nor had a nice figure. I myself had a pretty big chest and butt, but I was short. Nor's body, on the other hand, stuck out in all the right places and had curves where all the right curves should be. Then there was Leonie—even though her figure wasn't quite as glamorous, she was tall, and her body was well-proportioned. *Jealous.*

"It must be nice to have such good figures."

Munching away at some snacks, I delivered this comment to them with a sigh. Out of all the snacks, the cheap ones I had brought were the most popular. Leonie and Nor had gotten some kinds of biscuits and cookies, but they were hard, not very sweet, and overall not that tasty. The snacks people ate in this kingdom reminded me of emergency provisions. I would have to introduce them to a few of my favorite shops later.

"That's my line. Nor goes without saying, but even you, Ruchika, are rather well-endowed in your bust and hips."

Whereas I'm flat as a pancake, complained Leonie.

"I-if we're comparing figures, I think yours is really the best out of all of us, Leonie," Nor responded. "Plus, when your chest or butt is large, it draws too much weird attention from men…"

"Oh, I get that. They think they're being so sly when they take a peek, but it's always super obvious."

"Yeah."

Though, I couldn't really blame them; even I couldn't help but try to steal a glance when I saw an attractive girl.

"You should be glad you're even getting looked at. I don't think I've ever noticed that kind of gaze directed at me—"

"Leonie, you're so dense!"

"Huh?"

"I'm with Ruchika on this one."

Like Proto had said, Leonie had already received confessions of love from a number of suitors since enrolling. It was obvious that boys were noticing her.

"There's no way a cute girl like you is getting overlooked," said Nor.

Though, on the surface, she was being treated like an underachiever or some kind of malignant tumor by the school, she was still super popular with the opposite sex.

"I wonder… I don't have a voluptuous figure like Ruchika's or a well-proportioned, beautiful body like Nor's. Who would be interested in such boring looks as mine—?"

—Ruchika.

Hmm? What is it, Proto?

—I believe it would be beneficial for you to refer to the Gear's secret data.

"Secret data"?

—We Gear automatically collect a variety of data, one of which happens to be a count of how many times the wearer is subject to the gaze of the opposite sex. Perhaps you should compare the data we've collected on the three of you since you enrolled at the Hero Institute.

What the hell are you Gear doing all day anyway?

—Now, now, why don't you just go ahead and tell Leonie and Nor? In order to view the numerical values, you simply…

I told Leonie and Nor how to view the data, as Proto had instructed me.

"What the…?"

"Wh-whaaat?"

"Well? What's it say?"

Once the exact numbers were displayed to the two of them, they started to blush.

"Mine says eight hundred ninety-seven times. To think I'm being looked at so much…"

Nor wrapped her arms around her body as if to hide it. But honestly, that number sounded low after seeing her figure in that negligee.

"Mine is one thousand two hundred and five. How unexpected…"

Leonie's number was even higher than Nor's. *See?*

"I figured as much," said Nor.

"S-seems you are getting noticed after all, Leonie."

"Well then, what about you, Ruchika?"

"Me? Wait a sec, I'll ask Proto."

The number Proto revealed to me was…

"No way…!"

"What is it?" asked Leonie.

"What was your number?" asked Nor.

"…T-two thousand eighty-one."

"…"

"…"

I felt Leonie's and Nor's gazes grow cold. *Whaaat…?*

"No, come on, there's gotta be something wrong with this number!"

"Gear do not make mistakes," said Leonie.

"Ruchika, you're so popular!" said Nor.

"S-stop that! Besides, I'm not interested in boys anyway! If someone's going to check me out, I'd rather they be a girl."

The way they were looking at me all glassy-eyed was starting to freak me out, so I tried my best to talk my way out of it.

But—

"Hear that? She's not satisfied only getting looks from men and needs attention from both sexes…"

"How greedy…"

"Th-that's not what I meant!"

"And how *does* it feel to be so popular, Ruchika?" asked Nor.

"You even doubled my score…," said Leonie.

"Come on, give me a break…!"

As I pleaded with them, at my wit's end, they both suddenly broke into giggles.

"I'm sorry, Ruchika."

"???"

"Your reaction was just too funny, so I couldn't help it."

Which meant…

"Y-you were just teasing me?!"

"Yes, sorry."

"Sorry, Ruchika!"

"Ugh!!"

I decided to curl up in a ball and hide under the blanket for a while.

"Maybe it's about time we put the rest of the snacks away," said Leonie.

"Yeah, you're right," I said.

It had been about two hours since the start of our pajama party. Most of the snacks were gone, so it was good timing for us to wrap it up.

"I don't wanna brush my teeth; it's such a pain… Can't I just go straight to bed?"

"Of course not. You'll get cavities," said Leonie.

"Just one time won't kill me, right? I'm too lazy to get up and go to the sink…"

"Oh, Ruchika, you're hopeless… Wait here for a moment."

Leonie answered in exasperation before going into her bag and taking out a small piece of paper from inside it.

"What's that?"

"A simplified scroll of convenience magic. I call it a 'slip.'"

As Leonie cast her mana upon the slip-thingy, I felt the inside of my mouth suddenly feel refreshed.

"What is this, some kind of toothbrushing scroll?"

"Technically, it's a simplified version of a cleansing and disinfecting scroll."

"Wow! These scroll things… No, you called it a 'slip'? Either way, they're super convenient!"

"But they can only be used once. And I would call it quite a waste to use it on something as trivial as brushing your teeth."

"Hmm, okay…"

"Scrolls need to be carefully managed, too. It's one thing if it's something like a convenience magic scroll or slip, but there are a number of powerful scrolls that are so precious, they're under the control of the kingdom's military."

"Th-that reminds me, there's been some fuss going on lately about how a military scroll went missing, right?" said Nor.

According to Nor, the missing scroll had a shady history, involving some monster that had gone on a rampage during the Great Human-Demon War. And the people who were supposed to be in charge of guarding it had been fired for misplacing it.

"So they're not all just for convenient stuff like this, huh?" I asked.

I guess that meant I had enjoyed quite the luxurious toothbrushing. Deeming this a special occasion, Leonie and Nor also decided to use slips to brush their teeth. After that, we settled down to chat a little more before bed.

"So are you feeling better now, Nor?" I asked. Originally, the main idea behind this pajama party was to cheer her up.

"Yeah. I'm sorry for getting jealous, Ruchika."

"Don't worry about it. Since Leonie's my bride, it's best we iron things out before we get too serious."

"Who do you think you're calling your bride?" Leonie quipped back from her bed, which was on a lower bunk.

By the way, Leonie and I were both sleeping in our own beds, and Nor was sleeping on the floor on a futon we had laid out.

"I—I don't mind sharing a bed with Leonie…"

This had been Nor's wild proposition, but both Leonie and I had shot it down. Obviously.

"So how has school been going for the two of you?"

I tried making some harmless small talk.

"Things have been fine in the classroom, but I'm still having trouble with practical training. At my level of swordsmanship, it's been difficult to keep up with the other students who enrolled at the same time as us," said Leonie.

"Practical training is my weak spot, too. I really just don't like fighting…," said Nor.

They both seemed to think they were unskilled at practical training.

"Practical training's simple. You just gotta throw all your power out and be like, wham, boom!"

"…Must be nice for you, Ruchika, to not have to worry," said Leonie.

"Yeah, agreed…," added Nor.

"Hey, that's rude. I have plenty of worries!"

Come on, guys. Who do you think I am?

"And what kinds of worries are those?"

"I-I'd like to know, too."

—Me too.

I inwardly resented the comment, but they kept pushing the topic even more than I had expected. Did I really seem like the kind of person who didn't have any problems? I was a little shocked.

"Well, right now, what's troubling me the most is the girl I love won't even look my way…"

"Good night," said Leonie.

"Night!" said Nor.

—Party's over.

"What?! Geez, guys, you're so mean!"

All I had done was honestly voice what had been troubling me, but the two girls (and one device) had reacted like, "Not this again."

"I'm just sick of hearing that same joke over and over," said Leonie.

"And I'm telling you, it's not a joke! I'm totally serious!"

"Sure you are."

"Waaah! Why won't you guys take me seriously…?"

"It'd be a bigger problem if we did."

It seemed humans really did have some resistance to the idea of two women being each other's mates after all.

"I wonder why my beloved won't turn my way? Maybe I'm not pushing hard enough?"

"I don't think it's possible for you to push any harder," said Leonie.

"Maybe you should actually try easing up a bit?" said Nor.

"I'm no good at playing hard to get. I only know how to push, push, push until I win over the one I love!"

"…Well, do your best to exercise some moderation," said Leonie.

"Now it sounds like you're my parent, and I'm some naughty kid you've gotta take care of!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha…"

No matter what approach I took, it seemed like Leonie was never going to be moved by my attempted wooing. I did kinda like that steadfast, stubborn nature of hers, but she could at least throw me a bone every once in a while, eh?

"So, Ruchika…what do you want to do once you become a hero?" Leonie asked.

"Huh?"

It was an unexpected question. The only thing on my mind right now was *becoming* a hero; I hadn't thought at all about what would happen after.

"I guess I've never thought about it. Have you, Leonie?"

"Yes. I want to abolish all war."

"You mean like, between humans?"

"Yes."

Although the human kingdoms had been united during the war against the demonkind, the moment it ended, they began to fight among themselves. Even now, many kingdoms were still suffering the ravages of war. Leonie was saying she wanted to put an end to that.

"That's…a pretty lofty goal."

"I know. But I believe this is what will be required of heroes in the next generation. It's something that heroes can do for this world, and perhaps something that only a hero will be able to accomplish."

"Leonie…"

Nor gave a worried look at Leonie, as she sounded like she had been brooding over this for a while now.

"Then I guess I'll help you with that!"

"Ruchika?"

"There's nothing that says heroes have to work alone, right? Especially since there are all types of 'em. I'm sure we can find a way if we work together."

I leaned forward out of my bed and shot a smile down at her. At first, she looked surprised by what I'd said, but eventually, she returned my smile— "It would be reassuring to have your help, Ruchika."

—and gave her response.

"You two… There you go, leaving me out again…"

"Oh, whoops."

Nor had started to weep silently.

"I'm sorry, Nor. Of course, you want to help us out, too, right?"

"Obviously. We're best friends, after all."

Leonie hurried to follow up her statement in a way that included Nor, who was still looking a little unhappy.

"A party of three heroes, huh? I've got a good feeling the three of us can do anything we set our minds to!"

"Very optimistic of you, Ruchika."

"Maybe you should try taking a page out of her book sometime, Leonie."

"Perhaps…"

The night grew later and later as we chatted, and before we knew it, the three of us had drifted off to sleep.

When we woke up the next morning, both Nor and I had somehow found our way into Leonie's bed, and she totally lost it at

us when she woke up and noticed us cuddled up with her. But we'll just keep that part our little secret.

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"Classes are canceled…?" I asked.

"Yes. It seems there was an outbreak of food poisoning among the professors, and as such, all classes have been canceled," said Leonie.

Food poisoning, huh?

"Couldn't they tell the food was bad by smelling it first?"

"Unless the food had gone extremely bad, most humans wouldn't be able to tell, especially if it was only a little off."

"Well, I can tell. I've never had food poisoning in my whole life."

"Are you sure it isn't just because you've got an extremely strong stomach…?"

Now that wasn't very nice. But whatever. This seemed like a good chance.

"Leonie, are you free today?"

"Hmm? Well…now that classes are canceled, I must say that I am…"

"Great, then it's settled!"

"What is?"

I looked over at Leonie, who still had an expression like she didn't get where I was going with this, and gave her a big smile.

"Let's go on a date!"

Come on, Leonie, don't give me that glare!

A few hours later…

"So remind me again why are you here, too, Nor?"

"Don't treat me like I'm some kind of third wheel, Ruchika."

"I invited her. The more the merrier, right?"

Leonie answered with a 100 percent honest smile. *Damn, I can't say no to that grin of hers!*

"That's not the point! This was supposed to be a date between just the two of us, Leonie!"

"But it's all the same, isn't it? Hanging out in town, all three of us, sounds like a lovely date to me."

"It's not the same at all!"

"…I think I might be starting to feel a little bad for you, Ruchika."

How dare you toy with my poor girlish heart like this, Leonie, you little cherub, you!

"That's okay. I like that about you, too," I said.

"Enough with that nonsense. More importantly, where shall we go?" asked Leonie.

"There aren't actually that many fun places to hang out in the capital, huh?" remarked Nor.

Just like Nor said, the capital, Sped, didn't have much in the way of entertainment. It was an oddly austere area, to the point where there weren't even that many pubs. It was totally different from what I was used to in the demon realm.

"Do you mind letting me lead the way?" I said.

"Oh, do you have some place in mind?" asked Leonie.

"Yeah, sorta. I haven't been skipping all those classes for nothing!"

"I don't think that's something to brag about, Ruchika."

Nor smiled back at me uneasily, but I paid her no attention.

Oh, I almost forgot.

"Before we head out, I want to ask you two a favor…"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"What?"

I could tell that my hesitant phrasing, which was unlike me, made the two of them a little suspicious. But I decided to go for it anyway.

"I want you to take off your Gear, just for today."

"Our Gear? Why?"

"Is there some reason?"

"Yeah. I think you'll understand soon enough."

I guess they could sense I was being serious. Leonie and Nor exchanged a glance before nodding to each other, taking off their

Gear, and putting them away in their bags.

You too, Proto. Sorry.

—Lucky me—it's Proto's big day off!

Yup, I was really starting to think there was something wrong with this Gear.

"Thanks, you two. All right, follow me."

I started walking, leading the way. We left the city center and headed to the market.

"Are we going to the market?" asked Nor.

"Not quite."

"Th-then where are we going?"

"You'll see. Just trust me!"

We cut through the market and arrived at the outer southern edge of the capital.

"If I remember correctly…this is…"

"Old Sped, the capital's old town."

The main buildings that made up the capital city were relatively new, uniform, and designed in a minimalist style, but many old buildings were still standing in this district. I had always thought these kinds of historical buildings were much more charming.

"The scenery and the people here sure are different compared with the city center," said Leonie.

"Oh, you noticed? Most of the people living around here are immigrants," I said.

"So it's like an international district…"

Looking around, we could see people dressed in attire you didn't often see around the Hero Institute. There were women wearing religious clothing that covered their entire bodies, and men with tan complexions. There were also male and female demons like me among them, with impressive horns growing from their foreheads.

"Why did you bring us here?" asked Leonie. "I hear public safety isn't very good in the international district."

"'Cause it's interesting. Yeah, it might not be as safe compared with the area around the Hero Institute, but hero cadets like us

should be able to handle it, right?"

"I suppose so…"

Although the kingdom's capital had a reputation for being tightly controlled, this region remained mostly out of its clutches. Every immigrant who settled in the area had left their own complex and unique mark on the cityscape. I loved these kinds of chaotic spaces.

"Come on, just take my word for it and follow me. Oh, but before that, I'm getting kinda hungry. Let's start off by filling our bellies."

Dragging along my two friends, who were still having trouble getting their bearings, I stopped in front of a street food stand.

"Hi. Can I get three servings of grilled octopus balls?"

"Welcome. Oh, you're a demon, aren'cha?"

"Yup. Looking for a little taste of home."

"This stuff ain't too popular with the humans, y'know. Lemme throw in a li'l extra for ya. Go ahead an' take two boxes each."

"Thank you!"

After paying, I handed the octopus balls over to Leonie and Nor.

"What is this…? What an odd-looking dish…"

"Grilled octopus balls—we call it '*takoyaki*' in the demon realm. It's one of our local specialties," I said.

"This looks like it's made with…wheat flour? And this sauce drizzled on top—I've never seen anything like this before…," said Nor.

"Go on now, just try it. But be careful not to burn yourself; they're hot."

I opened the wrapper and stuck a toothpick that had come with the box into one of the *takoyaki* balls. These days, *takoyaki* often came with a pair of chopsticks, even in the demon realm, but this stall seemed like it was still doing it old-school. *This guy gets it.*

"Let's eat!"

"Don't mind if I do."

"Here goes…"

The three of us all popped the *takoyaki* into our mouths at the same time.

"Hot?!"

"*Huff, huff*…you weren't kidding…!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Everyone always burns their mouth the first time!"

Both Leonie and Nor were overcome with surprise. The *takoyaki* was crispy on the outside and creamy and red-hot on the inside. Novices always got burned. But— "It's hot, but…*huff, huff*…it's…"

"*Huff*…quite delicious."

"Heh-heh! Right, right?"

I smiled with satisfaction. People were always taken aback by how hot they were, but they would always realize how delicious the dish was, too.

"The batter itself has its own flavor, but these white and black sauces on top are very nice, too," said Leonie.

"That's a demon-realm specialty, too. It's good, right?"

"These large chunks on the inside are interesting, too. Th-they're very chewy, but the more you chew them, the more flavorful they become."

"That's the octopus. It's a kind of seafood that humans apparently don't eat very much."

Probably because they looked a bit weird, even though they were delicious.

"I've got lots of other tasty stuff I want to show you! Let's keep going!"

I dragged them along to each destination, working on making them enjoy themselves until they dropped.

"I had no idea the capital had so many interesting places…"

"Yeah, I never noticed."

"Well, I hope you're having fun!"

We ended up hanging out in the international district until evening. We tried all kinds of demon cuisine, enjoyed musical performances from the southern kingdoms, and browsed rare trinkets from the far

west. And of course, I introduced them to the sweets shop where I had bought our snacks for the pajama party.

"Oh, hold on a sec."

I stopped in front of a stand I had suddenly noticed, and Leonie and Nor paused to peek at its wares, too.

"These are cute, don't you think?"

"Yes, they are…"

"Th-they're so sparkly…"

It was an accessory shop, displaying brooches, bracelets, and other jewelry made with colorful processed ores. And the prices were exceptionally cheap.

"This assortment at these prices…?"

"Pretty amazing."

Leonie and Nor were commenting in surprise.

"Oh, but these are all fake, you know."

"What?"

"…Huh?"

When I told them this so matter-of-factly, they slumped in disappointment.

"Hey, kid! Don't go spreadin' weird rumors about my merchandise! Everything here is genuine—"

"Okay, then how about this one? It says it's diamond, but it's actually zircon, isn't it?"

"Uh…"

The shopkeeper was at a loss for words. Zircon was a mineral that looked a lot like diamond, but it was actually a totally different material. And since it was cheap, it often got sold as fake diamonds.

"So this is a fake jewelry shop?" asked Leonie.

"That's right."

The shopkeeper had started to respond to the question in a fluster, but I cut him off with my response.

"How did you know, Ruchika?" asked Nor.

"It's easy to tell from the smell."

"Smell?"

"Yeah, my sense of smell is really sharp. There are lots of things I can tell from scent."

Apparently, my nose was exceptionally keen compared with that of others. I could tell all kinds of things by sniffing objects that didn't even have any smell to other people. For example, I could tell whether or not these gemstones were genuine, or whether or not someone was sick, like I had done with Leonie before.

"But…in that case, why did you stop here? You already knew this shop's merchandise is all fake, right?"

"Yeah. But even if they're not real gemstones, they're still cute, right?"

"But they're fake…"

"Is that such a big problem, whether or not something's real or fake? As long as you think it's cute, then who cares?"

"…"

I picked up one of the shop's bracelets.

"In the end, you're the one who has to decided whether or not you want something. I don't think it really matters whether that thing is real or fake. And I think when you're wearing a Gear, you stop being able to see that."

In my mind, as long as you wanted something, you should feel free to pursue it, no matter what it was. Of course, there were some cases when you needed to have a level of aesthetic sense, but you would never be able to truly develop that sense if you had never been fooled by a fake before.

"Y-you sure know what you're talkin' about, kid!"

"That doesn't mean it's okay to sell fakes while saying they're genuine, mister."

"Uh…"

"But I won't tell on you if you give me a discount on these tricolored bracelets, okay?"

"You're going to buy them?" asked Leonie.

"They are cute, but…," said Nor.

Leonie and Nor still weren't sure about the idea of buying imitation jewelry.

"The colors on this bracelet are *our* colors, don't you think?"

"…Oh."

"Black, silver, and light blue… You're right."

"I was thinking I wanted to grab them as a memento of today."

Leonie was gonna be my bride, and Nor had become a close friend. I thought it would be neat to get matching bracelets to remember this fun day we'd spent together.

"…That might not be such a bad idea."

"Yeah."

"Then that's settled! Hey, mister, three of these, please."

"…Ugh, these weren't cheap to get my hands on, either…"

And so, we bought a set of the bracelets that matched the colors of our hair.

"Yeah, this was a good choice!"

"Even though we don't know what stones they were made with, they still are very pretty."

"Y-yeah, I agree! Th-they're really cute."

Just then, as it was beginning to turn dark out around town, the magically powered streetlights turned on and began to glow with light.

"…"

"It's pretty, huh?"

"Y-yeah."

Even though the gems on the bracelets were fake, they reflected the light of the streetlights around us and gave off a beautiful sparkle. Each of those sparkles was filled with the genuine memories we had made today.

"Today was fun."

"Yes."

"Yeah, it was."

To us, as mementos of this day, these bracelets were, without a doubt, the real thing.

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"♪"

"Ruchika…are you planning on skipping class again?"

As I was whistling to myself and fixing to leave the lecture hall, Leonie called out, stopping me. That startled me.

"Ah-ha-ha…sorry, Leonie. Make up a good excuse for Professor Aliza for me, will ya?"

"I will not. Just be mature and submit to her anger later."

At first, Leonie had really pouted and scolded me every time I'd tried to skip a lecture, but now she was starting to just give up. Shooting her an awkward smile, I started to leave the lecture hall anyway, but then…

"Stop right there, C-100."

"Huh?"

A strict-sounding voice called out to me. I turned around to see Professor Aliza was standing there. *Ugh.*

"A-afternoon, Professor! Nice weather we're having today—"

"Enough with the gags. Are you planning on being truant again today?"

"A-ah-ha-ha-ha…"

All I could do was try to brush off her accusation with a laugh. *Crap, she caught me. Professor Aliza's earlier than usual today. I guess I've got no choice but to give up and attend class today.* Thinking this, I started to sit down in my seat.

—Ruchika, I believe you should be wary of Professor Aliza today.

Huh?

Proto had given me something like a prediction. That was rare.

"Not that I particularly mind," said Professor Aliza.

"Huh?"

"If you don't want to attend the class, then do as you like. Especially if you're going out of your way to come to class, only to fall asleep in the end, then I'd rather you simply weren't here at all.

In fact, perhaps it's about time I exercise my authority on the matter."

…By stripping me of any earned credits for the class, she explained, looking at me with a cruel smile. Then that meant—

"Please wait, Professor!"

Leonie's expression changed as she interrupted the exchange between us.

"I'll talk to Ruchika and make sure she takes class seriously from now on. So please, don't take away her credits—"

Professor Aliza's lecture was a required course. Up until now, I had been skipping class just enough to stay above the passing line, but now she was saying she would make sure I didn't get credit for the class. That would mean I would lose my right to stay enrolled at the Hero Institute.

"I-I-I'm sorry, Professor Aliza, I'm sorry! I promise I'll turn over a new leaf, so please, just one more chance!"

I was really gonna have to suck it up if I wanted to resolve this. Making a complete one-eighty, I apologized profusely to Professor Aliza, begging her to somehow change her mind. Of course, if I was that serious about it, I should have just gone to lecture in the first place.

"See, Ruchika is sincere about it, too, so please—"

"You speak as if this is someone else's problem, C-088, when it's not."

"…What?"

Now Professor Aliza had also coldly turned on Leonie, who was just trying to protect me. Leonie looked back at her in shock.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean your marks in practical training. They're terrible. I'm surprised they even let you enroll. It appears you're a hero's daughter in name only."

"—!"

"Hey, wait a sec, Professor!"

I shouted back in protest. There was no way I could just sit back and listen to that kind of talk.

"Come on, don't you think you're going too far? Yeah, Leonie might be having a bit of a hard time in practical training, but just because you're a teacher doesn't mean you can single her out and attack her about it!"

"Be silent, you dropout."

She cut me off curtly. *Oh man, that pisses me off.*

"C-088, you *are* the daughter of the Almighty Hero, are you not?"

"…Yes."

"And as her daughter, aren't you ashamed that you can only achieve such disappointing results?"

"…I'm sorry."

"I was rather excited when I heard the daughter of the Almighty Hero had enrolled at the Institute. But I must say, an underachiever like you did not live up to my expectations in the least."

Who the hell does she think she is?! Now she was just going way too far. I stood up from my seat and went up to Professor Aliza…only to stop when I felt something pulling hard on my sleeve.

"Leonie…"

"Please don't, Ruchika."

It was Leonie who had stopped me. Keeping her eyes on the ground, she continued to silently bear the brunt of the professor's verbal abuse.

"Why are you stopping me?!"

"The professor hasn't said anything that's incorrect. It's true that my grades are disappointing for the daughter of the Almighty Hero."

Saying this, she again told me to control myself. However, her words did nothing but make me even more upset.

"But, Leonie, you're doing your best, aren't you?! You're trying harder than anyone else at this Institute! For her to—"

"The process is not the issue, C-100. What matters are results. Anyone is capable of simply trying hard. Effort without results is meaningless."

"No way—!"

"I'm sure you must feel the same yourself, C-100. You don't take classroom learning seriously because you know you can succeed in practical training without studying. You know there will be no complaints as long as you produce results. Isn't that right?"

"Y-you're wrong!"

She had hit me where it hurt. While that hadn't been my thoughts on the matter at all, you could easily see it that way if you summarized my school life up until now. I wanted to find some kind of counterargument, but I just wasn't good enough with words. There was no way I could win in a verbal bout with someone like Professor Aliza, who had been a teacher for many years.

"C-088, as of now, the school is considering expelling you."

"…What…?"

"It was a mistake to admit you into the Institute. At this rate, your abilities will fall permanently behind that of your peers."

As Professor Aliza declared this with a sigh, Leonie rushed to respond to her.

"Please hold on, Professor! I'll work even harder! I promise I'll achieve better results, so please!"

"You've had plenty of time to do so already. I believe we've given you enough leeway. It turns out it was hopeless for you to try to become a hero after all."

To Leonie—who had lived her life trying to be worthy of living up to her mother's legacy—this was like being handed down a death sentence.

"You have sullied the name of the hero Lainie Baez."

"How dare you…!"

I couldn't hold back anymore. Who the hell did she think she was, talking down to my Leonie like that in front of the whole class? It was wrong of her, even if she was a teacher. I wasn't sure why, but Professor Aliza was being malicious—she was clearly full of hostility toward Leonie.

I had half a mind to go right over to her and give her a slap in the face to wake her up. But I didn't have the chance to. The reason being— "Take that back, right now!"

—someone else had confronted her instead.

"C-005…"

"Leonie is a wonderful person. She's worked harder than anyone else in order to become a hero. I won't let anyone deny the effort she's put in, not even you, Professor!"

It was Nor. I was totally surprised to see that this normally reserved girl had such a fierce streak in her. With tears in her eyes, she vehemently objected to what Professor Aliza had said. Despite having a good reputation among the teachers for being a high-achieving student, she seemed prepared to toss it all aside right now. She simply let her words fly in defense of her best friend.

"How unfortunate, C-005. It seems even an excellent student such as you has taken up with a group of dropouts."

"They're not dropouts! We're—"

"Be silent."

"—!"

Nor's words caught in her throat at the way Professor Aliza's voice had suddenly taken on a lower, more foreboding tone. Perhaps seeing this as a sign of Nor's weakness, the professor pressed her even more.

"And now you think you can push your luck just because you're a high achiever? You're just a girl who's only been at this school for a mere few months, so don't get cocky. There are plenty of other students like you. How dare you be so conceited!"

"I'm not being conceited! I just think Leonie—"

"Enough. Go back to your seat. It's time to for class to begin."

"But, Professor!"

Bam—there was a heavy sound. Nor had fallen onto her backside.

"I told you to go sit down. Know your place, C-005."

Professor Aliza had roughly pushed Nor out of the way. At that moment, the last thing I saw was Nor beginning to cry out of

frustration, and Leonie standing there stricken by helplessness, still unable to say anything.

Then I heard a sound, like something snapping.

"Ugh…?! Y-you…!"

When I came back to my senses, I had punched Aliza. Somehow, I had managed not to use *Gluttony* on her, but she would have deserved it even if I did.

"That's enough, asshole!"

I was as angry as angry could be.

Results were important, huh? Sure, of course they were. No matter how much effort you put in, people wouldn't validate your hard work unless you also got some kind of result. I understood that. And we were here at a school for raising heroes. If a student was evaluated only on their effort and then went into actual combat or some other official work without real ability, they would end up harming not only themselves but also the people who relied on them. I understood the logic behind this.

But this school was supposed to be for *raising* heroes. In the process of raising them, wasn't it the teacher's job to guide their hero cadets to achieve good results? What Aliza was doing was only harvesting. Instead of trying to nurture the students herself, she was simply reaping the superior students and shipping them out to work. She didn't genuinely care for her students in the slightest. On the contrary, she seemed like she only wanted to eliminate any and all students who lagged behind even a little. And what kind of teacher was that?

"Violence against an instructor—this will not be tolerated, C-100."

"Do whatever you want, then. I had really aspired to be a hero, but if this is the only way to do it, then I take it all back."

"And you too, C-088—"

"Don't call us by numbers. She has a fine name—Leonie. Or do you not even know that?"

In the confused classroom, Aliza and I glared at each other. Though I almost missed it amid the explosive situation, I caught

Aliza making a small sneer at me.

That's when I understood—I had been the target of this whole thing from the beginning.

It was just a hunch, but this situation wasn't only about Aliza's hostility toward me. She was acting on behalf of the whole school. While they considered me a blight on the Institute, they couldn't simply kick me out, since my grades in practical training were stellar. And so, they had concocted a plan to get rid of me. Aliza would attack Leonie for being an underachiever, trying to get me to explode and do something wrong. Those jerks really understood what made me tick to have come up with a scheme like that.





"Your punishments will be forthcoming, so please prepare yourselves. The rest of today's class will be a study hall."

Saying this, Aliza left the classroom.

"Ruchika, I'm sorry… This is all my fault…"

"No, Nor. It's not your fault. Aliza is the only one who's in the wrong here."

Comforting Nor, who had begun to cry, I turned around look behind me.

Leonie had already left her seat.

Our punishment was announced later that day.

"We'll be expelled if we don't earn higher than the specified grade on the next proficiency test…"

Both Leonie and I had been given this punishment. It looked like Aliza's plan was to get rid of the both of us in one fell swoop.

The proficiency test in question was apparently an exam administered by the Institute on a deserted island. During the test, students were split into pairs and were given five days to reach the peak of a mountain on the northern portion of the island. It was a very difficult test, even for regular students using Gear, but it was supposed to be achievable if one stuck with the partnership their Gear recommended. In other words, if Leonie and I were to pair up for the test, we would be going against the advice of the Gear and be at a disadvantage. Maybe that was all part of the plan.

"But there's no way they'll get rid of us with this."

Wasn't it supposed to be a hero's job to try to fight against and correct the unreasonable? At least, that was the kind of thing the Institute's school regulations were constantly espousing. I opened the door to our room with full intention of giving Leonie a pep talk to light a fire under her.

But what I saw left me speechless.

"…Leonie, what are you doing?"

"……"

Leonie had packed up all her things. It looked like she was getting ready to go somewhere.

"I'm voluntarily withdrawing from the Institute. I don't want to sully my mother's good name any more than I already have."

◆◇◆◇

(Leonie)

"Why…? You know you don't have to do that."

As Ruchika asked me this, her face looked even sadder than my own. I felt sorry to have banished her usual happy-go-lucky smile.

"I don't think everything Professor Aliza said was correct. But some of the things she said were right. I clearly don't have what it takes to become a hero."

All this time, I had faithfully followed the guidance of my Gear and trained my hardest. But the gap between myself and the others around me just kept getting wider and wider. Even my swordsmanship was critically lacking in combat, and that was supposed to be my best subject. For a hero, that was a fatal flaw.

"But you said so yourself—that hero work won't be all about fighting in the future."

"Yes, and what you say has some logic to it. But that still operates on the assumption that any and all heroes have the basic skills required to fight, and that additional skills will become necessary beyond that."

When I said this, Ruchika made a face like I had struck her where it hurt.

"As long as humans are human, I don't think we will ever eliminate conflict. The power to fight will always be necessary, and possessing it will continue to be the minimum requirement of a hero. And I don't even meet that minimum."

Like Ruchika had said before, in the future, perhaps people who could *only* fight would gradually be weeded out of the hero population. I believed that would come to pass. But that simply meant the relative value of fighting power had gone down. Heroes would still need the ability to overcome conflict.

"So you're saying…you're going to give up on being a hero because you're not good enough at fighting?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, I just don't have a knack for it. While it is disappointing, as the daughter of the Almighty Hero…"

As these words left my lips, I felt there was nothing more painful than this. Just like Professor Aliza had said, I had sullied my mother's name—a hero's name.

"You're giving up? Even after working toward becoming a hero for all this time?"

"…Those hopes may stay with me a little longer. But I know I must give them up. It's pointless for someone with no talent to keep on clinging to a dream she can never fulfill."

Saying this, I wondered how I should live my life from now on. If I gave up on becoming a hero, I would have no idea what to pursue instead.

I shook my head, trying to put such doubts out of my mind. *I mustn't be a coward about this.* If I kept being indecisive, Ruchika would surely never give up on me, either. She had talent. It was possible she really could become the strongest hero of our generation. *I mustn't let her get mixed up with someone like me.*

"Ruchika, thank you for everything up until now. We only knew each other a short while, but I appreciate the valuable time we spent together. While our paths may diverge now, I hope we can someday—"

"…you."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"I said, I won't let you!"

She repeated herself and told me again in a strong tone of voice. That earnest gaze of hers made my breath catch in my throat.

"Ruchika…"

"You don't have to give up. Who cares about talent or whatever? I won't let you give up on being a hero because of some stupid reason like that."

"'Stupid'…?"

I couldn't help but feel a little offended at the way she had put it.

"Don't you realize how much I've thought this over? 'Stupid'? Oh, sure! Of course you'd think that. A girl like you, who's just overflowing with talent, must think my troubles are simply idiotic!"

I thrust my retort back at her. It was the first time I had ever revealed my feelings so frankly to someone, and it was as if a dam had broken as my thoughts came flowing out uncontrollably. I lost all self-control and said exactly what I was thinking.

"It's not like I want to give up being a hero! Of course I don't really want to give up! I don't want to give up! I love my mother! And I've always wanted to be like her! If the heroes are the successors of my mother's aspirations, then I wanted to be one no matter what!"

While I felt it was a heavy burden to have been born the daughter of a hero, I still didn't mind. If only I could become like my beloved mother; if only I could become a beacon of hope to the people, then I was prepared to put in as much effort and hard work as I could.

But—

"But it's pointless… No matter how much effort I put in, no matter how closely I follow my Gear, I can never be like you… I just can't…"

At some point, my eyes had begun to fill with tears. While it was disgraceful, in my current state, I didn't have the capacity to worry about it.

"Ruchika…I envy you. You're stronger than anyone, even without using Gear. And I envy how you can be so free. I really…wish I could be like you…!"

I had reached my limit. I couldn't stop my feelings from spilling out and simply sobbed, unable to even put those emotions into words anymore.

"Leonie."

As soon as I heard her call my name, I felt a warm, soft feeling around my shoulders. Ruchika was embracing me.

"I'll be your fangs."

She said it like a kind of vow. Surprised at her solemn words, I looked up and saw Ruchika staring back at me with utter sincerity.

"If a hero needs strength to fight, then let me be that strength."

"Ruchika…? What are you…saying—?"

I was perplexed, unsure of the point she was trying to make. Then as if to reassure me, she gave me a soft smile and hugged me even tighter.

"I said this before, too, but I don't think heroes need to be alone. Don't you think it'd be a good idea to divvy up the roles, like one person to handle the fighting, one person to handle gathering people, one person to handle logistics, or something like that?"

"Divvying up the roles…?"

"When your mama fought against my mama, she went up against her with a party of multiple people, right? Even though she was called the Almighty Hero, it's not like she was some super soldier who could go up against the Demon Lord all by herself, yeah?"

Ruchika was correct. While my mother was talented in all areas, she wouldn't have been able to defeat the Demon Lord alone. My mother had been blessed by her bonds with her comrades. She had been supported in combat by Danita's father, who shielded her from enemy attacks; Nor's mother, who excelled in singing songs with healing powers; and another mage, who specialized in wielding a variety of magic.

"Leonie, you don't need to try to get stronger all by yourself. If you need fighting power, I'll give it to you. So I want you to keep walking whatever path you really want to follow."

"Ruchika…"

"Don't give up, Leonie. Let's become heroes together, okay? I want to keep moving forward with you. I wouldn't have it any other way."

She gave me one last strong embrace before letting me go. Then she stayed silent for a moment and simply looked back at me. I think she wanted to give me time—enough time to think and shake off all my doubts. There were a number of conflicting feelings still inside me—hesitation, indecision, fear.

And yet there was only one answer for me to choose.

"…I have no grounding in fighting."

"So I'll be your fangs."

"Even though I'm a hero's daughter, I'm indecisive."

"Or you're being thoughtful."

"I can't live as freely as you can."

"Then I'll just have to drag you around with me."

"The Gear didn't pair us up."

"That's true. You called the Gear something like fate, right? I think it's pretty cool to be a pair who fights against fate, don't you?"

Ruchika's smile spoke volumes. She had an answer for everything. She had already decided she would accept me and everything about me.

I still couldn't believe my Gear could be wrong. But I was starting to think what Professor Aliza said had been incorrect…all thanks to this small, strange girl who I couldn't find it in myself to hate.

"…There's something I've been thinking about for a while now."

"What is it?"

The life had returned to my face, and Ruchika seemed to notice. Putting my reservations behind me, I told this shameless yet dependable demon girl what was on my mind.

"I think Professor Aliza underestimates us too much. Let's show her a thing or two about what the Almighty Hero's daughter, Leonie Baez, really has in her."

"Pfft! …Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Ruchika burst into a fit of laughter. Her laugh was contagious, and it made me start laughing, too. I felt refreshed, like the fog that had been building up inside me had finally cleared.

"Ruchika, will you pair up with me?"

I asked her this question, holding out my right hand. She reached out and grasped it back.

"Of course. I'm ready to be with you till death do us part!"

Saying this, she grinned back at me with a smile as dazzling as the sun.

"This is all Aliza's fault. We didn't do anything wrong. So let's shut her up once and for all!"

Ruchika puffed out her chest. Having been charmed by her declaration to stay by my side, I responded automatically—

"Yes, let's do just that."

—and nodded back at her.

"I'm starting to think you've been influencing me, Ruchika."

"Does that mean you're gonna be my mate?"

"Don't be silly."

Having regained enough energy to engage in light banter, I made up my mind. I would take on the challenge of the proficiency test with Ruchika as my partner.

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(Danita)

"Heh-heh-heh… Now it's really over for those two."

My mom was sitting on the couch in my room, enjoying herself. She had a glass of wine in one hand. On the table in front of her were some snacks I had made. She seemed pretty happy that Ruchika and Leonie had fallen into her trap and was celebrating with one glass after another.

"Don't drink too much, okay? You know you can't hold your alcohol."

"Oh, let me off easy, just for today. Especially now that it finally seems like I'll be rid of those thorns in my side."

Brushing off my warning, she took another sip from her class. I let out a sigh and left a glass of water on the table next to her wine bottle.

"You're real happy just to get rid of them, huh?"

"Of course I am. They don't deserve to be here. Only prodigies in body and mind like you should be allowed to become heroes."

"'Prodigies,' huh…?"

If she was talking about people with innate skill, then Ruchika's fighting sense could definitely be called a natural gift. And it wasn't only her. Leonie's bright intellect and noble ambitions were, in a way, like a talent bestowed by the heavens. I couldn't help but feel repulsed that their talents would be wasted and lost because of this bullying.

"Did you have to go about it this way? If they really didn't deserve to become heroes, then they would flunk out even without—"

"Danita, you don't have to worry about any of this. Just focus on your own path to becoming a hero. There's no need for you to pity those dropouts."

It wasn't pity. I was just judging them objectively. Ruchika's strength and Leonie's smarts were real talent. I'd much rather give them a fair and square fight and prove I was better than them on my own terms instead of letting my mom's underhanded tactics get them expelled.

"Oh, right, I wanted to give this to you."

Saying this, my mom took out a smallish roll of paper from her breast pocket and handed it to me. I opened it up to see it was some kind of magic scroll.

"What's this?"

"A summoning scroll. There's a powerful monster sealed in there. If you use it, you'll be able to control it at will."

A monster? Why is she givin' this to me?

"What am I s'posed to do with this?"

"Use it during the proficiency test. I don't expect Ruchika and Leonie will get anywhere close to passing, but just in case they do, this will take care of them—"

"Mom!"

I cut her off. I couldn't listen to this anymore.

"You can't do this! You're obviously goin' too far!"

"Going too far? But we must make those unworthy of being heroes take their leave as quickly as possible."

"But if they *are* able to finish the exam, that means they *do* got a shot at becoming heroes, right?! So it's wrong to go out of your way to get rid of 'em like this!"

"Danita…"

Mom set her glass down on the table, stood up, and walked over to me. Her face was flushed from the alcohol, and she had a strange look in her eyes. She looked like she was about to give a lecture to a badly behaved child. And I hated that look.

"Think of what your mother is doing as…cleaning."

"'Cleaning'?"

"That's right. I'm cleaning up to create a worry-free environment for you and your prospective comrades who will also become heroes someday. I'm doing this for your sake."

She hugged me. I wondered when I had stopped being happy to feel my own mother's warmth. To me it, the sensation was more like some kind of mud or mucus clinging to me.

"Danita, you don't have to think about anything. Just listen to what I say. If you do that, then you will become a hero. A splendid hero, just like your father was."

We separated, and she looked at me as she told me this. I knew she wasn't really seeing me. She was always chasing an illusion—the illusion of my dead father. That fact made me feel unbearably lonely.

"Hey, Danita, I'm out of the bath now, so— Oh, I didn't know you were here, Professor Aliza," said my roommate. "Good evening."

"Don't mind me, I was just leaving. Good night, then, you two."

"…Night."

"Good night!"

As I watched my mom leave the room, I looked down at the scroll she had left in my hands. *Use this thing "just in case"?* She didn't even ask me to take them down myself. That meant she was afraid of Ruchika and Leonie. She knew they were stronger than me.

"How many times…is she gonna make a fool outta me…?"

"Danita? What's wrong?" asked my roommate.

"None of your business!"

"Whoa! What's with that reaction? Someone's in a bad mood."

"…My bad."

There was no use taking it out on her. That just wasn't cool of me.

"Hey, so…if your parents gave you somethin' you didn't need, what would you do with it?"

"Throw it away behind their backs, I guess?"

"That's what I thought."

If only I could just throw this thing away. But knowing my mom, she'd probably check my belongings before the test started to make sure I still had it. And if she found out I didn't, who knew what she'd do to Ruchika and Leonie instead? I needed to hold on to this thing. I squeezed the scroll in my hand.

…Why doesn't anyone just believe in my strength…?

Chapter 4

(Ruchika)

The proficiency test was about to begin.

The test venue was a deserted island covered in thick vegetation, and according to Aliza's explanation, there were many different kinds of monsters inhabiting it. On top of that, there were traps all over the island; it would be essential to cooperate with your Gear-chosen partners to overcome them.

"We instructors will be leaving the island now. You will all need to find a way to return to the Institute using your own abilities. You may now begin the test!"

As the teachers signaled the start of the exam, everyone took off running. Since there was a five-day time limit, most students chose to approach the test in ways that prioritized speed. This strategy used tons of resources and energy so the pair could move forward as quickly as possible. Considering there was quite a distance to the finish line—a mountain peak on the northern part of the island—an approach that emphasized speed would be a safe choice.

But—

"Ruchika. There's a trap about three meters in front of you."

"Oops, close one! Thanks, Leonie."

"You're welcome. We have a long way to go, so let's proceed steadily."

Leonie and I had chosen to prioritize safety at a slower pace. We would avoid fighting monsters and preserve our energy as much as possible while also using trap-detection magic. If all we had to do was reach the goal, we could go at the same pace as everyone else, but we had decided against it. Being totally exhausted by the time we crossed the finish line would leave us in a vulnerable position. We needed to maintain some surplus energy to be able to handle any unexpected situations that came up. We wanted to be combat-ready at all times, if it came down to it.

But even if we progressed slowly and steadily, we couldn't avoid encountering monsters and traps entirely. So I would handle any monster fights, and Leonie would be in charge of dealing with any traps. Aliza had said it would be difficult to complete the test without pairing up with your Gear-chosen partner, but I felt that Leonie and I were actually pretty good together when you considered each of our strengths.

"…Even my silly hobby of convenience magic is coming in handy."

It was the end of the first day, and we had set up camp. As we sat by the fire, thinking back on the events of the day, Leonie commented this with an awkward smile.

"It's not just a silly hobby! It's seriously helpful."

Leonie's convenience magic was amazing. She could change sewage into drinking water, keep us warm on cold nights, guard us from the rain, and multiply our rations. In a survival situation like this, her magic made her a jack-of-all-trades.

"Still…Aliza really set us up here."

"It seems she genuinely doesn't want us to pass."

Around the time we had started the test, I had learned from Nor that Leonie and I had received less food and water rations than the other students. Our test was blatantly being interfered with. This had enraged Nor, but Leonie and I didn't let it get to us. We were confident we'd be able to pass anyway. And the truth was, since we had Leonie's convenience magic to help us, getting food and water wasn't going to be a problem. In fact, we had more than enough.

"…It's gotten quite chilly out here," said Leonie.

"Yeah," I responded.

Apparently, the nights on this island were pretty cold. Since we didn't want to risk the fire getting out of control, we couldn't leave it going all night, but this was another area where Leonie's convenience magic came in handy. With an improved fire scroll, she had managed a way to sustain the warmth of the fire for an extended period of time. The spell on the scroll reduced the actual strength of the fire but prolonged its warmth, which was perfect for our current situation.

"It's still so warm… This is awesome, huh?" I said.

"It's more effective than I expected. I'm glad I made this."

We chatted back and forth as we lay in our sleeping bags. Side by side, we gazed at the stars in the night sky through our transparent tent.

"…Pretty."

"Yes. When you look at the sky like this, I feel like our issues are insignificant."

"I get that. It's like, you wonder why you were even worried about that dumb thing in the first place."

"Yes."

For a while, a silence fell over us. The only sounds were the swaying of the trees in the wind and the chirping of insects. Thinking Leonie must have fallen asleep, I rolled over to try to drift off myself.

But instead, I locked eyes with Leonie. She was still awake, looking at me.

"Oh, you're still up?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You can't sleep?"

"That's not it. I was just thinking of how I never thanked you."

"Thank me for what?"

I wasn't sure what she was talking about. Leonie let out a small chuckle.

"Ruchika, thank you for helping me get back on my feet. If you hadn't been there to encourage me that day, I think I would have given up on being a hero."

"Leonie…"

"I was very happy when you told me you'd be my strength, that we could become heroes together. I've…been alone for so long."

Leonie laughed bashfully.

"As the daughter of a hero, I've always had many people by my side. But with the exception of Nor, they only ever saw me as my mother's daughter, not my own person."

"Well, now I'm jealous."

"Nor is my friend. It's different with you."

Leonie's words made my heart start to pound.

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"I can't really put it into words. But you're different from Nor. You're not a stranger, but I don't feel like you're a friend, either. If I had to put a word to it…"

"Yeah?"

My chest filled with expectation as I urged her to go on.

"…a partner, perhaps."

With that, Leonie stuck out her tongue at me. *Yeah, very cute.*

"'Partner,' huh…? I was hoping for a little more than that…"

"Do you wish I had said 'lover' instead?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I still…don't know much about love and romance. I've never had much time to think about it."

Leonie looked up at the sky again.

"I've only ever thought about becoming a hero. Everything else was irrelevant. And I thought it was fine that way. But—"

"But?"

As I encouraged her to go on, Leonie fell into thought for a bit before continuing: "But after meeting you, I think my way of thinking has started to change. I'm starting to come around to the

idea that maybe I should have been doing more pointless things along the way."

She assured me she meant that in a good way, and I nodded back.

"After being so fixated on becoming a hero, I think I had become a rather flimsy person. So at that time—when my lack of fighting ability was pointed out, and my accomplishments were brought into question—I was easily bent and broken."

"No, Aliza was just being too—"

As I started to deny what she said, Leonie gave me a look that reined me in and made me shut up. I waited for her to talk.

"Professor Aliza is partially to blame as well. But that's definitely not the only thing. I needed to be more thick-skinned. I needed a solid sense of determination that wouldn't be destroyed by a little bit of criticism. I needed conviction. Especially if I want to become a hero."

"'Conviction,' huh…"

I didn't really get that part. To me, wanting to become a hero had always been simple. I just wanted to be strong—and that was that. All that other stuff, like saving people, would come after. So I didn't entirely understand what Leonie was saying. But— —the way she'd talked about it was really cool.

"But maybe I'm just thinking too hard about everything."

"I don't think that's true. Hearing you say all that, I was really reminded that you're the daughter of the Almighty Hero, who defeated my mama."

"What makes you say that?"

"I'm not totally sure, but I bet there's no one who's thought about what it really means to be a hero more than you have. And because of that, I don't think anyone has a better instinct for what it means to be a hero than you."

And she had arrived this mindset precisely because she had been born the daughter of a hero and hadn't always taken it for granted that she was.

"You're exaggerating. I'm really just a little girl striving to become a hero someday."

"Heh-heh, okay then. In that case, so am I."

With that, we exchanged smiles.

—Ruchika. If you don't sleep soon, it'll affect your performance tomorrow.

Yeah, okay. Just a little longer.

Proto chimed in to give me a helpful warning, but I wanted to chat with Leonie a bit more. At least until we reached a good stopping point—and this beautiful starry sky was too good to give up.

"Ruchika, there's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What is it?"

"I am the daughter of a hero. That means I'm the enemy of your mother. Don't you have any resentment toward me?"

"Oh, that?"

I wasn't sure if I could really make her understand, but keeping that in mind, I did my best.

"My mama said she was exhausted by the never-ending, fruitless war with the human race. And the last human she ever fought with was the strongest in all humanity, the Almighty Hero. My mama was proud of her noble end, and I wouldn't ever want you to feel bad about that."

I hadn't been born yet when it happened, but even my nanny, who hated heroes, told me that my mama had seemed happy with how she met her end. I think, for her, it was a satisfying death.

"I see…but I'm sorry. Honestly, I wish my own mother had made it out alive."

"Then do you resent us demons?"

"…I believe that is a different conversation."

Leonie seemed unsure of how to respond to that.

"There will be things about each other that we understand and things we can't understand—I know it comes as part of the package, and I love you anyway," I said.

"There you go again, making declarations of love like it's nothing…"

"That's just how demon love goes. The way humans do it can be so frustrating."

"I wish you would consider the emotions at play a little more delicately."

"Oh? Then will you finally turn my way?"

"That's also a different conversation."

"Aw, man…"

I laughed, and Leonie laughed back.

"Sorry for keeping you up like this. We should sleep soon."

"Yeah, you're right. Night, Leonie."

"Good night."

I closed my eyes and was soon overtaken by sleepiness. I let myself drift off without resistance and fell into a deep sleep.

"…What a mysterious person. Our origins are as different as oil and water, yet I can feel so close to you… I wonder why."

I heard someone whisper this. But it just barely reached my fading consciousness, and the meaning of those words failed to register in my mind as I faded back to sleep.

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On the fourth day of the test, we reached the goal: the island's northern mountain peak.

—Ruchika, there's something strange here.

Yeah, I noticed it, too.

Instead of returning to the Institute as expected, the students who had reached the goal before we had were grouped together at the spot, camping out.

"Leonie! Ruchika!"

"Oh, Nor!"

"Nor, what exactly is going on here…?"

There, we found Nor, who had arrived before us. She had a fretful look on her face.

"Come over here for a minute."

We did as she told us and followed after her. There, at the mountain's peak, was what appeared to be a kind of altar.

"Look at this."

Nor pointed to a large spell circle engraved upon the ground. But there were scratches here and there all over it.

"Is this…a teleportation circle?"

"Yes. But it appears to be broken, so none of us can return to the Institute."

"Whaaat…?"

"So that's why everyone is camped out here like this."

"Yeah."

Since the expectation was that the students would each return to the school on their own via this teleportation circle, there were no instructors present on the island. If no one had come back by the expected time, the school would surely notice soon enough. But since this essential teleportation spell had now been damaged, the teachers and staff would have to arrive through another route, and that would take few days.

"Looks like we're going to have to stick it out here, just us students, until they come to help us."

Saying this, I looked around. Most of the students were sitting around with fatigue in their eyes.

"Apart from some of the high-achieving students like Nor and Danita, most of the other students look totally exhausted."

"Yes, it appears so."

Unlike Leonie and I, who had gotten here at our own leisurely pace, most of the others had pushed to arrive as fast as possible. I bet many of them had stepped into traps or needed to fight monsters along their way. But since they'd believed everything would be fine as long as they could cross the finish line, they were in

dire straits now. Plus, we had all only been given enough food and water to get us through the scheduled exam period.

"What should we do, Leonie?"

"Huh?"

I asked Leonie what she thought our next step should be.

"Just guessing here, but if we leave everyone like this, people's lives could be threatened. But with your powers, I think we can save them."

Leonie had her convenience magic. If she wanted to, she could use it to extend the time we could feasibly survive here by leaps and bounds.

But that was if she was willing to use it.

"Obviously, I plan to do all I can to help. This is an emergency situation; we should work together to overcome this hardship," Leonie answered without hesitation, as if it went without saying.

"You plan to help them, even after they bullied you?"

The other students had started ganging up on her after learning she had some shortcomings despite being the Almighty Hero's daughter. There was no reason she had to help them.

But—

"That doesn't matter. They're my classmates. And this type of situation is exactly what we did all that research on convenience magic for."

Leonie's gaze was unwavering.

—So this is the kind of person Leonie is.

Yep.

And because that's how she was—

"That's why I love you so much, Leonie."

"Stop it with your nonsense and help me, please. First, let's secure our drinking water."

After that, we began working at full speed. With Nor helping us, we prepared all the urgent supplies we would need to live here. For example, Leonie had that magical device that would change sewage into drinking water. Originally, she had brought it for our personal

use, but she had found a way to disassemble and reconfigure it to allow a larger number of people to utilize it.

But that wasn't all. We were able to set up a cooking space that used fire magic and a first aid station where students who weren't feeling well could rest, and we assigned several students to be in charge of the various stations. The other students were deeply impressed by Leonie's skill and leadership after only knowing her as a student who was failing in her practical training. Now they had really gotten a taste of her true abilities.

"I think that's about it…"

"Great job, Leonie. Let's take a break."

Having briefly left her side, I walked back up to her and handed over something small and red.

"Wild strawberries?"

"Yup. There were a bunch of them growing out in the mountains. I gathered some other edible plants, too."

"Thank you, Ruchika. That's very helpful of you."

Leonie popped one of the wild strawberries into her mouth. I always thought eating something sweet was a good way to refresh myself.

"How long do you think we can last out here?"

"As long as everything goes smoothly, maybe five days. I'm not so sure about any longer than that."

"When you think about the distance between here and the capital, we'll just barely fall short…"

I had gotten some information about the island's location in the kingdom before coming here. If it took two days for someone at the school to notice something was off, then three days by horse to the nearest port, and two more days to get here by ship, we could estimate it would take about a week for our teachers to get here.

"There are already some people in bad shape due to their fatigue and the stress of the unfamiliar environment. For their sakes, I hope a rescue team will come as quickly as possible…"

Leonie's face was downcast.

"Don't overburden yourself with all this, Leonie. Your abilities are amazing, but you're just a kid."

"That's true, but…"

"Hmm…I bet if I phrase it this way, it'll get through to you. Right now, you're our lifeline. So if anything happens to you, we're all back to square one. You have an obligation to take care of yourself."

"…You're right. I'll be careful."

She said this with a serious look on her face, and then her expression softened.

"You're getting pretty good at dealing with me, Ruchika."

With that, she put on a playful smile.

Afterward, the two of us kept on working hard. Using convenience magic and the island's natural resources to the best of our abilities, we worked on making sure all the students would be able to get back to safety.

It was during the fourth day of our group campout when the trouble started.

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—Ruchika. Wake up.

……?

I was in the middle of a catnap when Proto's voice woke me up.

"Well, what've you got to say about this?!"

"*Aaah…* What's going on…?"

As I yawned, I heard some kind of commotion outside our tent. I woke up Leonie, who was sleeping next to me; let her know something strange was going on, and quickly started getting ready to get up for the day.

"I-it wasn't me!"

"Then why are Danita's rations gone, huh?!"

"I—I don't know… Maybe some wild animal took them…?"

"Huh?! Don't play dumb with me!"

The commotion was happening around the food pantry.

—That sounds like trouble.

It's one of Danita's gang. I wonder what happened?

The pantry was a space where we kept all the foodstuffs we had gathered from the mountains; it was maintained at a low temperature thanks to one of Leonie's devices. And the person in charge of this station was Nor.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, Ruchika, Leonie! Help…!"

"What happened?"

"This girl thinks she can get away with pocketing Danita's food rations!"

"……"

One of Danita's flunkies was stirring up a fuss. Nor had shrunk back into a cowering pose, while Danita stood by with her arms crossed. A crowd had formed around them, and everyone was staring at Nor coldly.

"Her food?"

"Wh-when I went to distribute this morning's rations, Danita's portion wasn't there…"

"So why don't we just go get her some more? There's no need to make a big deal about it."

"It seems Danita has very particular dietary restrictions… She can't eat rice."

In other words, Danita's food had been specially prepared for her, and we wouldn't be able to come up with a replacement right away.

"So what are you planning to do about it?! Are you gonna make Danita go without breakfast?!" asked Danita's flunky.

"I'm sorry…," said Nor.

Oh? Okay, I see. I think I get it now.

"We'll prepare a replacement for Danita's meal as soon as possible, so let's all please put the pitchforks down," said Leonie.

"Huh?! Leonie, you think you can just let her get away with this because she's your friend?!"

"That's not my intention, but there's no use in just arguing back and forth about it. That would delay Danita's breakfast even further."

"If we don't straighten this out, the same thing is just gonna happen again! Right, Danita?!"

"…I don't really care if my breakfast is late. I don't care, but—"

"See?!"

Danita sounded like she wanted to say something else but just swallowed her words with a sigh when she saw her crony getting so carried away.

"Hey, you," I said.

"Whaddaya want, Ruchika? You gonna cover for Nor, too? You guys are nothin' but a bunch of—"

"—Can you shut up for a sec?"

I let a fierce aura come over my body and glared back at Danita's follower. The girl took one step back, as if overpowered.

"'Scuse me."

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

I got up in the crony's face and gave her a sniff.

"Uh-huh, I see."

"See what?"

"Just hold on a sec and let me do my thing."

Next, I went into our food pantry and smelled around, then lastly, I sniffed Nor.

"Yup, I got it."

"Got what, Ruchika?"

Leonie was watching on suspiciously at my sudden, strange behavior. I brushed it off and shot her a smile, before turning back to Danita's follower.

"You're the one who took Danita's food, aren't you?"

"Wha…?!"

"Huh?"

Danita's crony put on a startled look when I said this. Leonie looked perplexed.

"See, I've got a really keen nose. And when I sniffed around in the pantry, your scent was a whole lot stronger in there than Nor's. That means you went into the pantry sometime after Nor distributed the evening rations last night. Why?"

"Uh…?!"

Danita's follower went pale when I asked her this.

"Y-you're just making up lies, trying to cover for Nor—"

"You're the one who's lying. Come on, everyone, just think about it."

I turned to address the gallery of onlookers who had gathered.

"You all know what Nor's like from getting to know her the past few months, right? Do you really think a shy, reserved person like her would do something like this? For the sake of argument, even if she did have some reason to steal food, do you really think she would steal Danita's of all people? It's just not possible."

The audience buzzed. Because of the sensitive nature of the issue surrounding food, they had seemed to lose their composure a bit. But once they calmed down and thought about it, I knew they would understand. There was no way Nor would do something like this, and she had no reason to. If anyone had a motive to do something like this, it would be— "So it *was* you."

"N-no, she's wrong, Danita! This is…! I wouldn't…!"

"The hell did you do, then?!"

Danita approached her crony and slapped her across the face. The girl fell on her behind.

"…I-it's not like I wanted to do it!"

"Then why did you?"

"Professor Aliza told me to! She wanted me to rile you up!"

"—?!"

Danita's follower grimaced and continued accusingly:

"I wanted to get close to you 'cause you're supposed to be the great Battle-Ax Hero's daughter, but now you're always getting overshadowed by Ruchika!"

"What…?!"

"If Professor Aliza or I don't do stuff like this to get you angry, you'll never do anything about it!"

"—!"

Danita's face warped with grief. Not only had someone she trusted betrayed her, but now she was having insults to her pride thrown at her, too. No matter how arrogant Danita usually acted, of course she would react to this. She was being publicly humiliated, and her reputation was being ground into the dirt.

"……!"

Danita restlessly looked around. She was no longer her usual haughty, tyrannical self, but a poor, shaken-up animal cornered by cold stares.

"D-don't look at me like that! I… I…!"

It was painful to watch. I didn't hate her. And while she was a bit of a tyrant, I knew she wasn't a bad person at her core. It was hard to see her have to go through something like this.

I wanted to say something to her—but my feet stopped in their tracks.

"Don't look at me!"

A malicious aura flowed out of her body and began to react with something in her bag. My demon senses were telling me it wasn't anything good.

"Danita, stop! If you release that dark aura, something bad is gonna happen!"

"I… I…!"

She had become overcome with despair, and my voice wasn't reaching her. A strikingly strong light shone from her bag before something tumbled out from inside it. It was a scroll.

"That's a summoning scroll!"

Leonie was the first person to grasp what it was. Apparently, it was the military scroll that had gone missing.

"We have to destroy it and stop the summoning!"

"It's too late. It's already being summoned. Everyone, get back!" I yelled.

I blocked the scroll from Leonie as she tried to approach it and made everyone stand back.

The scroll Danita had activated with her aura had already drawn a huge spell circle in the air. Within it, a large shadow began to materialize.

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(Leonie)

I looked up at the monster's huge frame, which seemed like it was made out of tempered steel. It was a one-eyed giant that moved like a sentient mountain. It held a club made of stone in its right hand. It was…

"A cyclops…"

Ruchika, standing beside me, spoke its name as if talking to herself. It was indeed a cyclops—a demon soldier that was said to have single-handedly mowed down dozens to hundreds of humans in the Great Human-Demon War.

"Leonie, get everyone to safety. This isn't the kind of opponent regular humans can take on."

"…What do you plan to do?"

"I'll buy you all some time to escape."

"You can't! This isn't like a child fighting an adult—you'd be crazy to take that thing on!"

Her opponent was gigantic, like its own fortress. While Ruchika was certainly strong, I didn't think there was anything she could do against it.

"I'll use *Gluttony* at full power right from the beginning. It'll be okay. I can at least buy you some time. Now go!"

She pushed hard at my back, making me stumble forward. When I looked back, she was already standing within reach of the cyclops. Slipping past the storm of club attacks, which looked like they could pulverize her with the slightest hit, she closed in on the giant.

"Ruchika… Please, stay safe…!"

There was no room for carelessness now. I needed to use the time Ruchika had bought for us and get the others evacuated to a safe place.

"Everyone, please remain calm and keep your distance! Slow and steady!"

Even though we hero cadets had been trained in this kind of thing, the students couldn't help but be shaken by a threat of this level. Yet still, thanks to that training, they didn't end up panicking. Without any pushing or shoving, they moved in an organized manner away from the monster.

"Leonie!"

"Nor? Please, get back!"

"I want to help Ruchika. I promise I won't get in the way."

"—!"

I was surprised. Nor was usually so timid and fearful. While she was surely one of the most-skilled students in our class, people overlooked her ability because of her disposition. But now that very girl wanted to stand up and fight against this terrifying cyclops.

"It'll be dangerous."

"I know. But I'm a hero cadet. And I think if my mother was in this situation, she'd do the same. I can't just sit by and watch this thing kill Ruchika!"

"…Very well. Please, lend her your strength, Nor!"

"Okay!"

We exchanged determined nods as we headed back to the battlefield together.

"Leonie?! And Nor?! What are you doing back here?!"

Ruchika let out a scream when she saw us. Kicking off the cyclops's boulder-like chest, she took a moment to retreat toward us.

"We don't want you to fight alone."

"We can help you!"

I used healing magic on Ruchika, who was already covered in wounds from just a short period of fighting. Then Nor chanted a

support magic spell and cast it upon us all. I could feel power welling up inside me.

"Man, you guys never learn, do you?" said Ruchika.

"Speak for yourself," I responded.

"This isn't the time to chat, you two. Here it comes!" shouted Nor.

We ended our short meeting and scattered, and an explosive attack immediately came slamming down on the spot we had just been standing.

"Such strength…"

We had learned in detail about cyclops monsters in lecture. As soldiers, they adopted a fighting style that prioritized brute physical strength over using mana or battle aura. They excelled in both attack and defense and would rush into battle without even bothering to defend against superficial attacks.

"Tch…! *Gluttony* doesn't work on this thing!"

It sounded like Ruchika was getting irritated. *Gluttony* allowed her to consume her opponent's mana and battle aura and convert it into her own power. But this cyclops relied on brute strength alone, so there wasn't anything for her to absorb.

"I'll stop it from moving. Ruchika, Nor, you attack it!"

"!"

"G-got it!"

I quickly chanted a spell, aiming at where the Cyclops was standing.

"Muddy Soil!"

"—!"

One of the giant's thick, log-like feet began to sink into the ground. Having lost its footing, the monster was momentarily rendered unable to move.

"Go for it, Ruchika! *Air Burst!*"

"Yaaaaah!"

As Ruchika threw a punch at the monster, Nor cast a wind magic attack in its direction as well. Their target: its gigantic eye. That was the cyclops's only weak point.

But—

"Oh no! Ruchika, watch out!"

"?!"

"Grrraaah!"

My Gear had shown me a prediction of Ruchika being deflected and thrown backward. But my warning was too late; the cyclops let out a resounding roar, and Ruchika was sent flying back like a ball. Her small body bounced once, twice against the ground before stopping and going motionless.

"Ruchika!" I shouted.

"Leonie, I'll distract it, so you heal her!"

"Okay!"

As Nor began a magical chant to stop the cyclops from moving, I ran over to Ruchika. It appeared she had managed to put up her guard before taking a hit from the cyclops, but still, she was covered in injuries from head to toe. Of particular concern was her left hand, whose bones were pulverized, appearing to have taken the brunt of the cyclops's club.

"Ruchika, hold on!"

I used all my power to cast healing magic on her, but the damage she had taken was too great. She remained unconscious.

"Kyaaaaa!!"

Hearing a scream, I turned to the cyclops and saw that it had clasped one of its hands around Nor and started to squeeze her entire body.

"Aaaah…!"

I heard a faint sound—Nor's bones were beginning to creak under the pressure. At this rate, our defeat was inevitable. I racked my brains for something I could do.

Then I remembered the time Ruchika had spoken about how auras had different flavors.

"Ruchika, your *Gluttony* is an ability that absorbs others' aura and mana and converts them into power. And the more compatible the

wavelengths of that aura, the more power you receive—isn't that right?"

In that case… Ruchika was still unconscious in my arms. Looking down at her innocent face, her eyes still closed, I began to charge up my mana inside my body.

"Ruchika, I believe in your power—and in our bond."

Even if Ruchika did wake up, I wondered how much more she could fight against that monster, and how her *Gluttony* ability would vary based on our compatibility. Both factors were uncertain, but I decided to trust in them.

If we wanted enough power to take down the cyclops, I couldn't be stingy with my mana. I gathered it from every nook, every cranny of my body. I had to give everything I had to Ruchika, even if it meant my life. Feeling a strange sensation begin to bubble up within me, I drew close to Ruchika's face.

"I entrust myself—my everything—to you. So please, Ruchika—"

I pressed my lips against hers.

Drunk on the ecstasy of my burning, overflowing mana, I poured everything I had into Ruchika. I could feel my power draining from within me, from the root of my very being. But I still didn't stop sending mana into her body.

Please, Ruchika. Wake up.

I sensed my body empty out, and just before my consciousness faded away, I felt power beginning to overflow from someplace even deeper.

What is this…?

A dazzling, explosive light began to shimmer.

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(Ruchika)

When I woke up, I was in Leonie's arms, surrounded by light. It looked like she had blacked out. Since my consciousness had still

been faint, I understood what had happened. Leonie had done something really bold for me.





"I won't let you down, Leonie."

I squeezed my fist and felt power overflowing from within me. There was something different from the times when I had simply eaten mana or aura using *Gluttony*. Compared with that, the amount of power I had absorbed and was now flowing throughout my body was clearly excessive. *What even* is *this?*

Guess there's just something special about tasting your future bride's mana.

—An interesting hypothesis indeed. But right now, I believe you should be focusing on the cyclops.

Yeah, I know.

I jumped to my feet and faced down the cyclops. Nor was lying on the ground near the giant.

It can't be, I thought in shock for a split second, but then I realized she was still breathing. I felt relief and rage welling up within me at the same time.

"What did you do to my friend, you jerk?!"

I put my strength into my fist and leaped at the cyclops. The next moment, its gigantic frame was within my reach.

"Take that!"

I slammed my fist into the side of the giant's face. Perhaps being taken off guard, the cyclops took the full brunt of the attack and staggered backward. I kept showering it with attacks.

"Haaaaaah!"

Swinging my fists, I aimed my second and third hits at the giant's humongous eye. Something was clearly different about my strikes from before. They were more effective now. But my enemy still couldn't be taken lightly. I delivered my fourth blow in a defensive stance, righted my posture, and prepared for its counterattack. I desperately dodged the giant's fists as they landed with as much force as a massive carriage accident and kept up my own attacks in the meantime.

"Grrr…"

"?!"

Suddenly, the cyclops dropped down to all fours and closed its mouth. I felt a cold chill run down my spine in premonition. I immediately dodged to the side, taking distance from the beast.

"Grrraaaahhh…!"

Destructive breath surged from the cyclops's mouth. The move had incredible force, immediately ripping up from the ground the portion of the woods in its path. Making everyone else evacuate really had been the right call. There would have been no way to focus on the battle while also keeping them from harm. Just as I was thinking this—

—Ruchika, alert. Approximately eight meters behind you, to your right.

Huh? …Oh man…

There were still some stragglers who hadn't escaped. Danita and one of her followers specifically. *Seriously, what the hell are they still doing here?!*

"You guys have to run! You're in the way!"

Continuing my close-range battle with the Cyclops and being careful not to take any of its breath attacks, I shouted to the two girls. Danita's follower looked like she had frozen in terror and completely collapsed. Danita, on the other hand, had avoided that fate, but she still seemed to be in some kind of daze.

"Danita, come on!"

"Why…?"

"What?! I can't hear you!"

"Why can't you…just give up already…?!"

Danita spoke as if delirious.

"How long are you dropouts gonna keep this up?! Why should you care about us—? You should just leave us to die! So why?!"

This may have been the first time I was really seeing Danita's true self. She was in tatters. Now even abandoned by her own followers, she had fallen as the poster child for the next generation of heroes and was left powerless and trembling. Regret, turmoil, and

frustration at her inability to finish what she'd started—it all swirled around her, and the only thing she could do was ask—"*Why?*"

"Why do I need a reason…to protect a friend?" I asked.

I didn't really get what she was asking. Both Danita and her follower were my friends. So I needed to protect them. That was it. There was no place for reasoning or logic in that, but maybe humans thought differently about it.

"A friend…? You mean me…?"

"Am I wrong? At least, I consider you my friend."

Dodging under the cyclops's massive arm, which threatened to down us in one hit, I kept talking to Danita. Of course, I probably should have been focusing completely on the battle. But for some reason, I had a feeling that if I cut our conversation short now, I might never get to speak with her again.

"…"

Danita was dumbfounded. I didn't have the leeway to turn back and look at her, but I guess from her reaction she had never expected to be told that. *Y'know, that hurts my feelings a little. Maybe my idea of friendship is just one-sided after all?*

"I mean, it's fine either way, so just get out of here, okay? You're probably gonna have to carry your flunky there."

"…Hey."

"Yeah, what? Can't you see I'm a little busy right now?!"

Danita was trembling. I thought part of what she was feeling must be fear. She had to be scared of a monster like this. Honestly, even I was afraid of it. But I knew that wasn't the only reason she was trembling.

"Who d'you think I am…?!"

"Huh? Danita…?"

I felt energy welling up behind me. I knew what it was without even looking back to check. It was a pure, unadulterated battle aura, the color of bright, fresh blood.

"Everyone's always underestimatin' me! I'm the daughter of the Battle-Ax Hero, Wolbalter—the one and only Danita Blackburn!!"

It was like her very soul was crying out. As her booming voice shook our surroundings, red meteors of concentrated aura cut through the air.

Danita swung her signature sword from over her head. The trajectory of its beautiful slash cut into the cyclops's steel-hard right hand and sliced it in half.

"Gyaaaaahhh!"

Even the cyclops seemed surprised by the seriousness of the blow, and it shrank back as if unable to bear the pain. This was our first big opening—and we had to take advantage of it.

"Awesome job, Danita! Maybe I should consider *you* for my mate, too!"

I concentrated the rest of my remaining power into my right fist, steadied my breathing, and charged energy into my legs. This one attack could decide the fate of the whole battle. I looked over at the cyclops.

"Thank you for fighting for my mama back then. But now it's time for you to go to bed!"

This monster had been a soldier in the Great Human-Demon War. As a show of respect for its inexhaustible will to keep on fighting, I would send it off with the best attack I could muster.

Growing as dense as it could get, my battle aura corporealized and began to rage. The next moment, a cerberus—a beastly manifestation of *Gluttony*—appeared around my right hand. Usually, it bore the form of a black dog— No, it was more the color of concentrated darkness. But the beast now residing in my fist was a giant dog of pure white. The change probably had something to do with Leonie's mana, but I wasn't sure of the details. However, there was one thing I was sure of—this ended here and now.

"You're finished! Sic 'em—*Cerberus Bite*!"

The crystallization of my battle aura burst forth from my fist. The uncontrollable torrent of rampaging, massive power surged toward the cyclops. I plunged my fist into its eyeball, tore it down and out

through its jaw, then using that momentum, I carved it out and devoured it.





"Graaaahhh…!"

Screaming in its death throes, the massive cyclops began to fall. There came a shaking like the mountains themselves were collapsing, before it finally slumped to the ground.

I was pretty sure I had taken it down for good, but I couldn't let my guard down yet. I slowly approached the cyclops to check its condition and placed my hand upon its hulking, still-warm body. Its core had stopped. This endlessly fighting monster of a soldier was finally at rest.

As I silently confirmed this, I heard a voice from behind me.

"Excellent work, Ruchika."

"Leonie! You're awake."

"Yes."

It was Leonie. It looked like she had already used healing magic on herself because her external wounds were gone, and she was steady on her feet. We ran over to Nor, who lay beside her, and began casting healing magic on her as well. I couldn't help but think Leonie was amazing for still being able to cast healing spells even after sharing all that mana with me.

"Ruchika, what did you mean when you said the cyclops had fought for your mother?"

"Huh? Didn't I tell you before?"

Maybe I had forgotten.

"My mama's name was Elichika. You know, the Demon Lord, Elichika, who fought to the death with your mama, the hero Lainie Baez."

"…?! That means you're the daughter of the Demon Lord?!"

"Yeah?"

For some reason, Leonie looked surprised. *Huh?*

"…Well, you don't look it."

"Aw, man! I get that all the time…"

My nanny always said that Mama had been a bewitching beauty, and that I didn't look much like her. Just another reason why I'd

always stuck out back in the demon realm.

"But whatever. Can I leave Nor to you for now?"

"Sure. What are you going to do, Ruchika?"

"I'm gonna go talk to her for a bit."

I started walking toward the other two girls who had straggled behind—Danita and her follower. The flunky was hugging her knees and letting out sniffly sobs. She had completely lost the will to fight. Danita seemed a bit dazed herself, but there was a note of relief in her expression.

"Thanks, Danita. We might not have been able to defeat the cyclops without you."

"……"

"…So were you the one who destroyed the teleportation circle?"

It was a random guess, but I had a feeling I was right. And just as I thought, she slowly nodded.

"Danita, I don't know what it is you're so tormented by. But just think: Is it really what you want?"

"……"

"I doubt it is. When we fought at the entrance exam and I tasted your mana for the first time, sure, it was all prickly, but at least its flavor was clear."

I said this to Danita with a smile. She hung her head and responded: "…Dammit… I really lost to you."

When she raised her head, I saw her eyes were wet with tears, but her face looked refreshed, like she was finally rid of an evil spirit that had been possessing her.

"…Ugh…"

I felt my consciousness start to dim, and all the strength left my legs as I slumped down.

"H-hey…!"

"Ruchika?!"

"Oh no, Ruchika?!"

On the other side of my fading consciousness, I heard the girls' voices calling out to me. But it was too late… I couldn't even tell

them apart anymore. *I'm sorry, everyone.*

"Ruchika…Ruchika! Wake up!"

I heard a pained voice that must have been Leonie's. But in my current state, I wasn't sure anymore.

"I finally met a partner who I can let my guard down around. If I lose you now, I… I—!"

Rrrumble.

"……"

"……"

"……"

"…I'm staaaaarving…"

I struggled to speak as my voice trailed off. I had used *Gluttony* at full power. Of course I was hungry.

"You! Are! Un-be-liev-able!!"

"Hee-hee. Give her a break, Leonie. At least she's okay."

"I can't believe I lost to a dope like this… What a drag…"

I heard the three of them each comment in exasperation.

"Please, give me something, anything… I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse!"

After some waiting, I felt somebody shove a meat skewer into my mouth, and I was saved. But when I opened my eyes, I was met by Leonie's icy gaze. *Huh? What'd I do this time?*

Not long after this incident, the Institute finally came to rescue us.

Epilogue

The proficiency exam was so rife with trouble that the Hero Institute fell into a commotion for quite some time. First, Aliza and Danita were duly punished for having let their personal grudges interfere with the exam. As central figures in the case, Leonie and I were questioned about the situation during its investigation, and we were even called to the scene on the day the pair's punishment was to be decided.

"It isn't a personal grudge! I am simply trying to maintain the order of the Institute!"

Aliza wasn't ready to acknowledge what she had done. Since her daughter, Danita, had already confessed to everything and acknowledged her wrongdoings, Aliza's persistence only served to leave a bad impression, but regardless, she continued to stubbornly assert that what she had done wasn't wrong. On top of that, she furiously protested the idea she and her daughter should be punished. Just as everyone present—the school principal, the teacher in charge of our year, Leonie, and me—were getting fed up with her antics, a crisp sound reverberated throughout the room.

Danita had slapped Aliza across the face.

"Stop acting so pathetic! What do you think Dad would say?!"

Pressured by Danita's menacing, tearful appeal, Aliza finally began to behave herself. This incident seemed to have set her straight and

practically turned her into a different person. From what I heard, after that, she submitted her resignation and disappeared from the Institute without ever having to face any consequences.

Danita was suspended from school for some time as her punishment. She had violated school rules in a number of ways, such as being in possession of an illegal scroll and defacing the teleportation circle at the proficiency exam. However, since she had committed most of these offenses under pressure from Aliza, the school decided to give her a lighter punishment, taking her talent and age into consideration.

After being handed down her suspension, Danita holed up in her room and seemed to leave her tyrannical attitude behind her. This is a bit of a digression, but I'd heard a student passing by her room had witnessed a juicy exchange between Danita and one of her followers.

Apparently, the flunky had been pacing back and forth in front of her room.

"If you've got somethin' to say to me, then spit it out."

"…I'm sorry. I know I can't ask you to forgive me, but I—"

"I won't forgive you."

"…Wh-what?"

"At least, not until you treat me to lunch. Once my suspension is over, y'know."

"…! Danita…"

"One lunch special, extra large."

"Yes… You've got it, Danita…!"

Leonie was given high praise for the survival skills she'd displayed on the deserted island. Many of the students owed their lives to her convenience magic, and thanks to the words of appreciation she received from both the students who had been saved and their guardians, the Institute had no choice but to acknowledge her achievement. Since Leonie and I had found out about Aliza's involvement with the incident, the school offered to cut us a deal on

the condition we didn't tell anyone else an instructor had been behind the disaster during the proficiency exam.

For our silence, the school agreed to some discretionary adjustments to our school activities going forward.

As I was leaning against the wall by the entrance to the faculty building and waiting for someone, the door opened. I watched as a beautiful girl with silver hair came out.

"Hey, Leonie."

"Ruchika… Were you waiting for me?"

"Yup. So how did it go? Did you reach an agreement?"

"Yes. They suggested adjusting my Gear so I can continue my path of researching convenience magic."

According to the Institute, Leonie's foremost talent that had been indicated by her Gear was still swordsmanship, and they had no intention to go against their beliefs in the Gear's ultimate authority. Apparently, however, they could make artificial adjustments to her Gear to allow Leonie to keep developing convenience magic from now on.

"That means you can do what you want! Congrats, Leonie. That's great to hear, right?"

I gave her a lighthearted reply, but her answer was unexpected.

"However, I declined their offer."

"Huh?"

I blinked back at her in disbelief.

"Wh-why? After you finally got a chance to do what you wanted…"

"Oh, I'm sorry. The way I phrased that was misleading. To put it more accurately, I asked them for something even more extravagant."

"'Extravagant'?"

"Yes. I requested that I be able to study both my swordsmanship and convenience magic simultaneously."

I listened, surprised, as Leonie went on:

"Indeed, I do love convenience magic. But I don't want to give up on the path of swordsmanship my Gear has indicated to me."

I asked her why, and she answered—

"I have what I *want* to do, and what I *should* do—and I want to do them both. Though you taught me the importance of following my passions, Ruchika, at the end of the day, I'm still the daughter of a hero."

It seemed Leonie had, in a fashion, recognized the value of my lifestyle, the value of "doing what you want to do." But she had also chosen not to neglect what she felt she should do. She also attributed the way everyone had ended up awkwardly thanking her for saving their lives on the deserted island to how she had "done what she felt she should do."

"I see. Well, if that's what you've decided, then that's great, too."

"You always respect my decisions, don't you, Ruchika?"

"Of course I do! Because I love you!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Aw, come on, don't be so cold!"

Leonie gave me an awkward smile as I pouted back at her.

"Hey, Ruchika. Can't you hang out with us sometimes, too?"

"Sorry, I can't today. But maybe next time!"

After the proficiency test, my school life underwent some changes. Specifically, I ended up making more friends. The blond, pigtailed girl standing before me was one of them. While there were still plenty of people who were afraid of me, there were also more people who were interested in getting to know me.

"Yeah, you say that now. But you're just gonna go hang out with Leonie again, aren't you?"

"You're right, but I promise it's not because I'm neglecting the rest of my friends! It's just that, to me, Leonie takes priority over everything else."

"You're hopeless. I mean, I get that you're totally infatuated with her, but if you follow her around too much, I think it might have the opposite effect from what you're hoping for."

"What do you mean?"

"*If pushing doesn't work, try pulling*—basically, you should try different approaches when it comes to love games. It's something we humans say. You might wanna remember that for later."

"I dunno, demons are usually all about push, push, push! But thanks, I'll keep it in mind."

I told her I would see her later and went off on my way.

It seemed like, around the Institute, some people were still treating me a little bit like a scary outcast. But at least people also seemed to realize I wasn't a bad guy, either. At first, I felt like it was kind of rude after all that had happened, but I decided not to let it bother me too much once I started making more friends like that girl.

I kept walking and reached the research building. When I peered into the room Leonie had told me to meet her in, I saw her deep in conversation with a few other students.

"Don't you think we should layer this part of the spell circle?"

"If we do, it will dramatically reduce the magic's efficiency. It would be fine if it was just a toy for us to play with, but magical devices should be made with practicality in mind."

"Wouldn't it be better to work on improving efficiency little by little in due course? If there's no room for flexibility in the design from the start, then there's no room for later development, right?"

"That is one way to think about it, but—"

Yeah, I had no idea what they were blabbing about. The bell encouraging the students to go home for the day had already rung, but Leonie and the others were still engrossed in their discussion. I bet pretty soon, one of the school caretakers would be coming around to chase them off, but since they seemed like they'd still be a while, I decided to wait outside the building.

Leonie's reputation as being weak for a hero's daughter hadn't changed, but now people also recognized her for her top-class skills in convenience magic. As a result, she had started receiving requests from people wanting to learn convenience magic and invitations to collaborate on research. I was a little sad we weren't spending as much time with just the two of us anymore. But since I'm a very understanding lady, I would never want to do anything to tie her down…at least, not yet.

—You're not going to greet her?

"I don't wanna bother her when she's concentrating like that."

—Oh, is that the kind of move a considerate girlfriend would make?

"Proto, you say some pretty weird things sometimes. More important, I wanted to ask, is it possible you're actually—"

—What?

"…Eh, you know what? Never mind."

There was something I had been thinking about Proto for a while now, but I had a feeling she wouldn't tell me the truth even if I asked her, so I decided to keep my theory to myself.

—A confession of love, is it? My, my, I suppose I'm quite the popular Gear myself.

"No way that's it!!"

Anyway, I could bug Proto about that later.

"Wait up, Ruchika."

"Oh, Leonie?"

Hearing someone call my name, I turned around to see Leonie walking toward me.

"I saw you leaving. If you came to visit, you could at least say hello."

"It seemed like you were in the middle of a discussion, and I didn't want to interrupt your work."

I never thought she would cut it short just to chase after me. That made me pretty happy.

"Things were getting a little too heated, so we decided to go home for today and pick up where we left off again tomorrow. It's already late, too."

"Oh, okay."

Leonie seemed more cheerful and energetic than she had been before. While she still had her worries about her sword training, she was having fun researching convenience magic, which made her feel more motivated at school. I had started tagging along to help with her sword training sometimes, and I was also having a blast watching her improve. Occasionally, Nor trained with us as well.

Another exception the school had granted us was officially recognizing me and Leonie as partners. Apparently, it was unprecedented to form a partnership that hadn't been chosen by Gear. While there were still some people who disagreed with the idea, Leonie and I didn't care. They could say whatever they wanted.

So basically…

"Now we can officially become mates, right?"

"Of course not."

"Whaaat? Why not?"

While you may have thought that meant I had finally won her over, Leonie was still the same cool and collected beauty as ever, always toying with my heart.

"Aw, man… Don't tell me you still haven't warmed up to me after all this time?"

"Do I really have to come out and say it for you to understand?"

"Uh, that's okay, forget I said anything…"

Faced with her freezing-cold gaze, I started to retreat dejectedly.

"You know I certainly don't dislike you, Ruchika."

"Yeah, right… But you don't *like* me, either… Unless?"

"Just forget it, you dunce."

"Aw, come on!"

We had only just begun our journey together.

It was before we knew we really were destined for each other. This was the story of how it all began.

The End

Afterword

I believe this is the first time I'm introducing myself to many Dengeki Bunko readers. My name is Inori. Thank you very much for purchasing *The Girl Who Wants to Be a Hero and the Girl Who Ought to Be a Hero*. I hope you will stick around for a bit longer as I use this afterword to briefly introduce myself and say a few words.

I am a light novel author by profession, specializing in yuri and girls' love among many other genres. This story—nicknamed *GirlHero*—depicts the relationship between two girls. Dengeki Bunko already has a number of veteran authors in this genre, so I am humbled to be able to join them as a newcomer. While I feel almost crushed by the pressure of standing alongside the great works of my predecessors, I did my best to make sure you will all find this book entertaining as well. Was it to your satisfaction? After being fortunate enough to publish this volume with Dengeki Bunko, I hope you were able to enjoy my story even a little bit.

While the yuri and girls' love genres often depict the subtleties of emotion as if made of delicate glass, or the ephemeral nature of human relationships as if in watercolor, my writing style is a bit more vivid. As I believe you already understand from experiencing the character of Ruchika, she essentially has no sort of internal conflict,

like, “Oh no, I’ve fallen in love with a girl, even though I’m a girl. What should I do?” That’s not to say that this element is nonexistent, but rather that the story was unable to go that far in this volume. I’m sure Leonie will eventually come up against that sort of dilemma, so please look forward to it.

My partner, Aki, played a big role in the creation of this story. She’s a wise and very positive person who never forgets to have a sense of humor, and without her presence, I don’t think I could continue being a writer. The main character of this book, Ruchika, has some aspects that were inspired by Aki. For example, Ruchika’s carefree cheerfulness and positive attitude were basically copy-pasted from her. Of course, I’ve added embellishments to the character for the sake of fiction, but I don’t think the essence has changed that much. Since Ruchika’s character was born in this way, perhaps you could say she is like our daughter. I sincerely hope you will love Ruchika as much as we do.

At the same time this book is being published, an anime of my other series, *I’m in Love with the Villainess*, which was released by a different publisher, is being broadcast. To summarize, it is also a girls’ love story, in which a former corporate slave is reincarnated into the world of an *otome* game. There, she ignores the princes the game wants her to romance and instead puts all her effort into going after the female antagonist. It has five e-book volumes released by GL Bunko and three paper volumes released by Ichijinsha, and seven volumes of the manga adaptation have been released so far by Comic Yuri Hime. I hope you will check out it out as well if you are interested.

I would like to conclude with a few words of acknowledgement.

To Kondou of Dengeki Bunko’s editorial department: Thank you for your numerous efforts in the publication of this piece. I hope to

repay my debt of gratitude to you through this volume's success. Thank you so much for your continued support.

To Kimura of Straight Edge: Thank you for your overall support with the content of this book. Your extensive editorial experience allowed me to successfully bring this book to fruition. If and when the next volume comes out, I look forward to working with you again through trial and error to build Ruchika and the others' story going forward.

To Akamoku, who illustrated this book: Thank you so much for all your wonderful illustrations. It would not be an exaggeration to say that your art gave souls to Ruchika and her friends. It goes without saying that it's the author's responsibility if a book doesn't sell, but if the book doesn't sell after you drew such lovely illustrations for it, I really have no excuse. I hope I can repay you for your exceptional work.

To my partner, Aki: I was finally able to release another story besides *I'm in Love with The Villainess*. You helped me so much while I was brainstorming for this title. Let's celebrate together on launch day with nonalcoholic cocktails again.

Lastly, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to you, the reader, for picking up this book. Thank you so much.

Now, with the hope that I will have the good fortune to see you again, I put down my pen. And here's to hoping there will be a next volume… Inori., signing off.

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