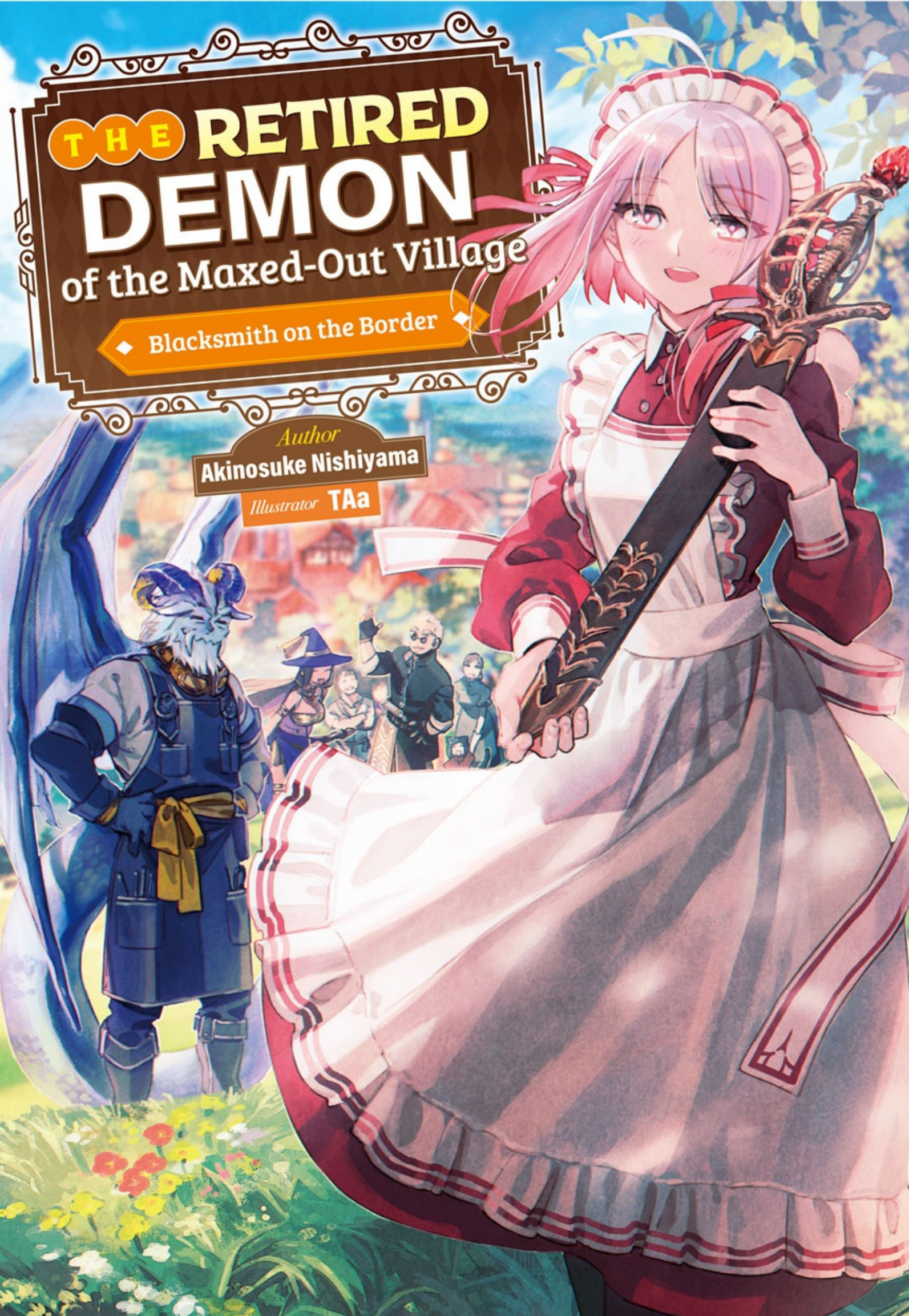
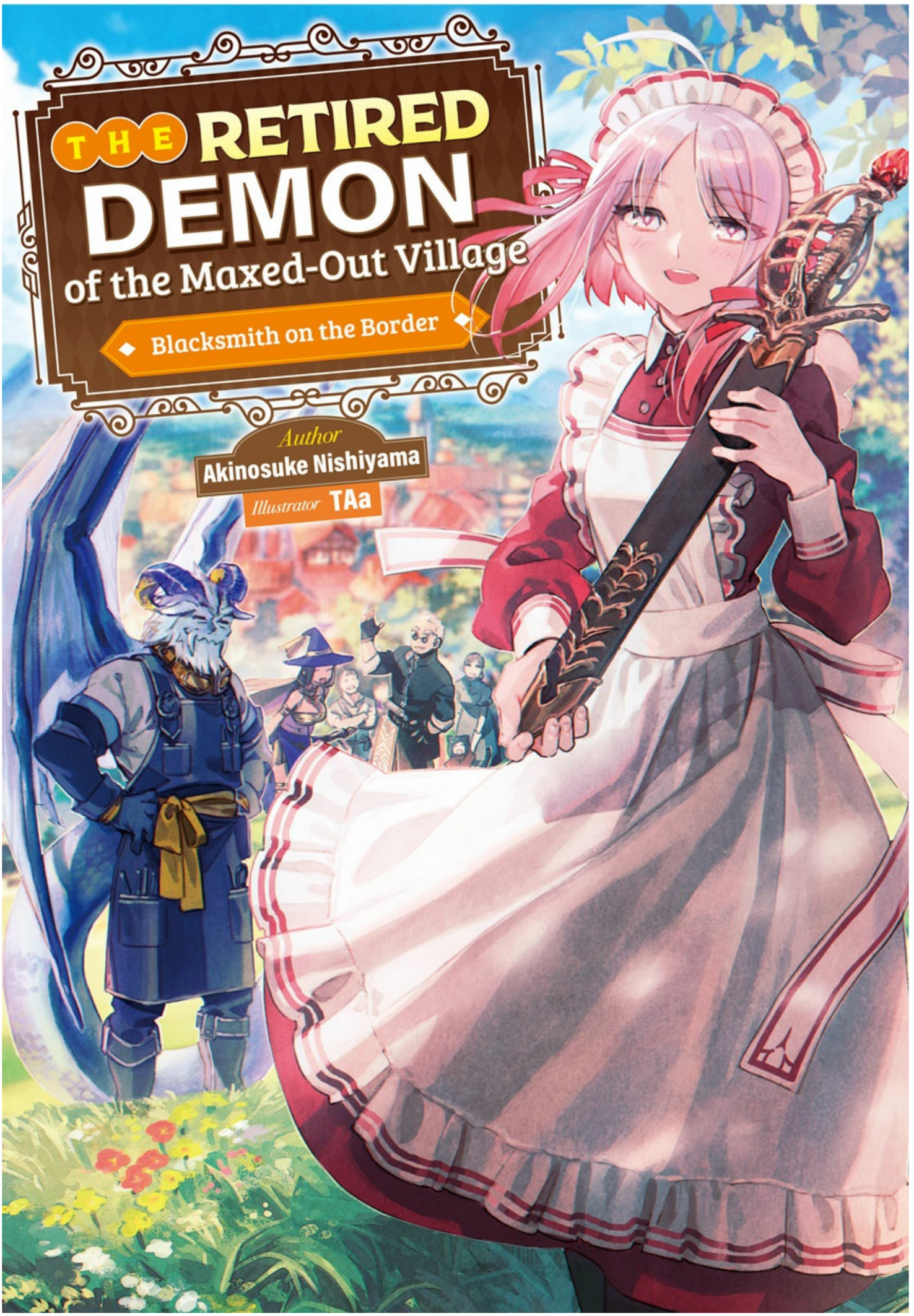
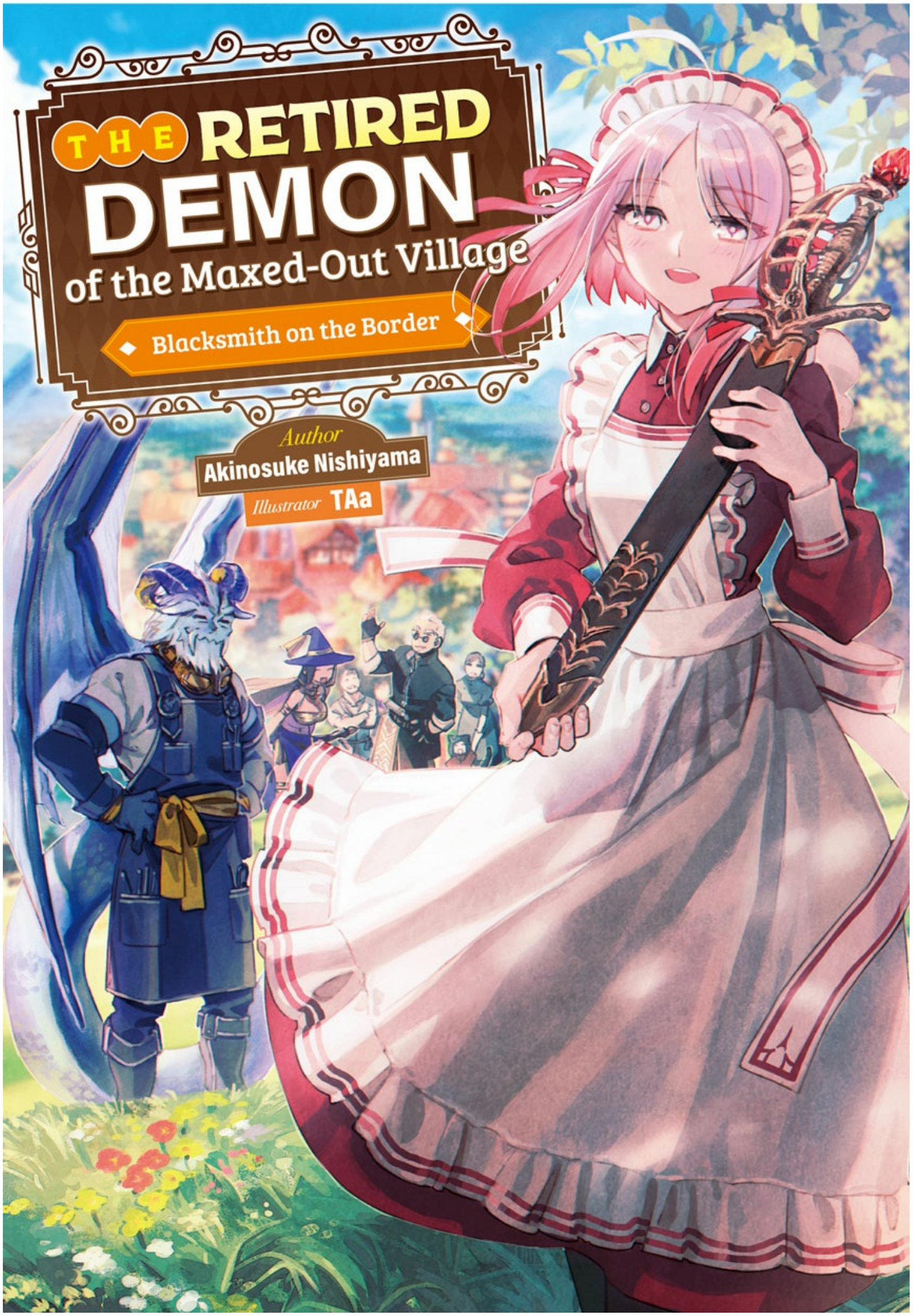

THE RETIRED DEMON
of the Maxed-Out Village
Blacksmith on the Border
Author
Akinosuke Nishiyama
Illustrator
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The Retired Demon of the Maxed-Out Village: Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

The wind gliding over the duke's horns was warm. It seemed that the spring breeze from the mountains had finally reached this remote village, far removed from the royal capital.

"Well, would you look at that? The sun is already up. I could've sworn it was still rising just a moment ago." The duke slightly opened his eyes, and sure enough, the sun was high in the blue sky, peeking over the mountains. Since he had woken up early, he'd planned to sit in the rocking chair by the open window and gaze out at the old castle nestled in the mountains, but he must have fallen right back to sleep the moment he sat down.

The pleasant smell of the neighboring home's boiling pot drifted in through the open window as the chirping of birds and rustling of leaves in the wind gently roused him from his slumber.

But he wasn't done with his nap quite yet. Just as the duke closed his eyes for a third time, he felt cold hands touch his cheeks.

"Master! Master! Please get up already!" A girl in a maid outfit stood next to him, pinching his cheeks, slapping them, and finally, pulling hard on them. For someone who called him "master," the way she tried to wake him up was rather harsh.

The girl had an expressionless face and gloomy eyes, but she was beautiful enough to make anyone do a double take. Her silver hair was silky smooth and had a pink tint, while the maid outfit she wore was an eye-popping red. To top it all off, her long skirt was both practical and traditional.

The fact that she had come to wake the duke could only mean it was nearly time to open up shop. He tried to stand up and get ready for work, but his drowsiness won out and he slumped back down.

"Master!"

"Mmm, I know, I know. But you see, Yoto, the spring breeze is tempting me to sleep. I suspect it's the mountain god's sleep magic... Perhaps Deep Sleep was

cast on me.”

“There you go again with your nonsense. Come on, get up. It’s time for work,” Yoto replied.

“No need to rush. I can’t imagine there’s anything urgent.”

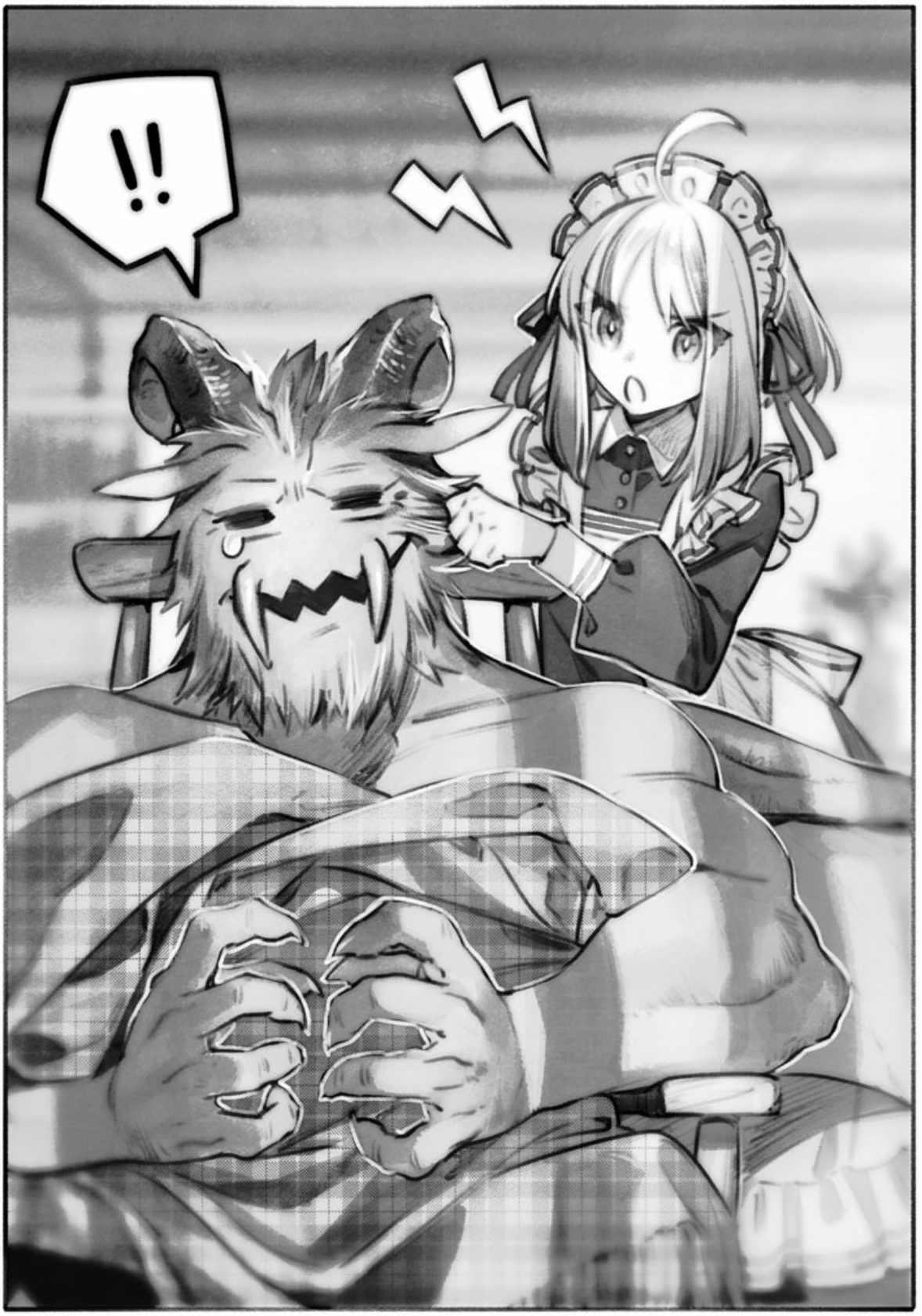
“Well, it’s urgent to *me*. We have a request from Lady Meikris to fix her pot. I won’t be able to have my favorite dish tonight if you don’t get to it.”

“Beef stew from the Chimera Tavern, hmm?” the duke mused. “That’s good stuff. Doesn’t matter if you eat it right away or let it sit, it always tastes great. Though I suppose I should expect as much from a dwarven dish.”

Yoto grabbed his chair and began to shake it. “If you understand, then get up already! Enough dawdling.”

“Now, now, you’re going to break the chair. It was a gift from the lord, you know? The craftsmanship is first-rate.”

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“Then get up. I want beef stew tonight.”

“All right, all right. Cut me some slack—the day’s barely begun.” With a great big yawn, the duke finally stood up.

He stretched out his arms, and the room went dark as the wings on his back unfurled all at once, blocking out the light for a brief moment.

The duke’s wings were massive—they had to be nearly twice his height. The pale blue, almost silver wings glistened in the sunlight. If a stranger were to see him, they would certainly think he was a powerful demon, or perhaps even the Demon Lord. Despite his old age, his body overflowed with magic, and his arms and legs were significantly bulkier than a human’s. He was a full 190 centimeters tall—towering over most humans—with a tail that swayed behind him like a large serpent. His smooth horns were rumored to still contain enough magic to blow away entire mountains.

The duke was a demon. Not only that, but he was a greater demon—one who sits at the apex of all demons. His ability to master and use over one thousand spells was proof of his natural strength. Yet, far from being afraid of him, the lovely maid at his side appeared quite annoyed. Her beautifully arched eyebrows were furrowed, and she was hitting him as if to say he was being a nuisance.

“Master, you’re kicking up dust. Please do that outside.”

“All the kids come running over if I spread my wings outside,” he replied as he finished his stretch. “Anyway, what’s for breakfast, Yoto?”

“Nothing for lazy bums like you.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’d like some bread.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ll make you some toast.” Yoto tightened up her apron and headed to the kitchen. She was so short she had to stand on a wooden crate, but she made her preparations with practiced efficiency.

As she was making breakfast, the duke groggily slipped on his shoes and went outside to the well. Listening to the chirps of the birds, he poured some water on the pump to prime it, then skillfully cranked the lever. The hand-pumped well was an innovation that the royal capital had finally gotten around to setting up. The duke was fond of novel technology, so he’d called engineers from the

capital all the way to this remote village to install it in his garden.

The unsuspecting engineers were shocked when the man they assumed to be a wealthy retiree turned out to be a greater demon. So shocked, in fact, that they had collapsed in fear at the sight of the duke—some frothing at the mouth, some clutching their prayer necklaces, and others falling to the ground and trembling as they chanted the name of the creator god.

The well water was cold and refreshing. The duke filled the palms of his large hands and splashed it on his face, instantly clearing away the drowsiness that had been stubbornly refusing to leave him. “Ahh, that’s nice.”

“Oh, good morning, Duke.” An early-rising villager waved to him as he wiped his face with a towel.

“Mmm, morning.” The duke smiled and waved back when he heard Yoto shouting at him from behind.

“Master, what do you think you’re doing going outside in your underwear? Are you trying to embarrass yourself in front of the neighbors?”

“Come now, don’t just call them neighbors. We know everyone in the village.”

“That’s not the point. I don’t care if you’re the Sacred Black Sword of Salvation, you know better than to go out dressed like that.”

“That was a thousand years ago... Besides, there’s no need to be so uptight. It’s just an old man in his underwear.”

“Ugh!” Yoto huffed. “Why must you fight me on everything? Forget it, just hurry up and brush your teeth. Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Sure, sure.”

Still in his underwear, the duke did as he was told and brushed his teeth with the well water. After rinsing out his mouth and confirming that he indeed still had teeth, he plodded his way over to the garden table and sat down.

Straining his ears, he could hear the sizzling of oil. Yoto must have been frying up some eggs. Judging from the savory smell wafting through the air, she had added bacon too. For health reasons the duke had mostly been eating vegetables lately, so he was wagging his tail like a puppy, happy to finally get

some meat.

Before long, Yoto sat across from him at the table. Steam from her homemade bacon, eggs, and toast rose up from the plate she handed him, and the duke couldn't help but lick his lips. There were three strips of bacon today, which he could only assume was intended to pep him up before work. "Good, good. Let us begin."

"No, Master. You have to put your hands together and say thank you for the food."

"Thank you for the food."

After their friendly morning ritual, the duke reached for the toast, only to immediately cry out in pain. "Tasty... Ouch! Hot!" He somehow managed to hold on to the toast, blowing on it to cool it down as he acted like his mouth was on fire. He was more sensitive to hot food than one would expect, given his appearance.

Yoto ate in silence as the duke struggled with the heat. Still, it tasted wonderful, and he broke into a smile after each bite.

"Master, mind your manners."

The way the duke ate was certainly anything but refined. By the time he had finished, his lips were sticky with ketchup, making him appear even more frightening than he already was. An outsider would have immediately assumed he had just consumed fresh meat.

"What are you, a child?" Yoto wiped off the duke's mouth as he sat there obediently, seemingly content with the state of affairs.

"I'm stuffed. Your cooking is always excellent, Yoto."

"It wasn't anything amazing. Here's your water," she replied, handing him a glass. "Once you're finished, it's time to get to work."

"I told you, there's no need to rush."

Yoto gave him a stern look. "I want to eat Lady Meikris's beef stew, Master."

"I know, I know. It certainly is good. Good enough that I really ought to get fired up."

Once Yoto cleaned up the plates, the duke stretched his back and headed to his workshop. He may not have looked the part, but he was a blacksmith.

The stone workshop attached to the house was an impressive structure, with a tall, black chimney extending far above it. The duke opened the furnace and snapped his fingers, using magic to light a fire without chanting so much as a single word. At first he had stubbornly insisted on lighting the fire himself, but eventually he couldn't be bothered and had started using magic instead. Before long, smoke was rising up through the chimney. For the rest of the village, this was the signal that the smithy was open for business.

"Guess it's time to get started."

The duke tightened up the waistband of his dragonhide work apron. He wore salamander gloves and had his trusty orichalconea hammer in his hand. Amongst all the mundane farm tools he had lined up to repair, there was one very obviously legendary weapon, but he chose an item on a whim, found the spot that needed to be fixed, and began the process of repeatedly putting it in the furnace and pounding it with his hammer.

Loud clangs rang out from the anvil in a steady rhythm. Had a skilled blacksmith been around to hear it, he may well have found it unbearable. The duke had never actually done an apprenticeship with a blacksmith. His workshop may have been a sight to behold, but blacksmithing was really just a hobby to him. Nonetheless, the duke was serious about his hobbies and meticulous in his work. This meant that the end result was often better than that of an unskilled blacksmith. But since it was just a hobby to him, he only charged for the materials he used and didn't accept additional payment, making him a great boon to the village.

He was satisfied with that life. The sound of his hammer pounding against steel filled him with the joy of hard labor—something he had never known back in the Demon Lord's army.

Eventually, villagers began stopping by. Not one of them feared the duke for being a demon. On the contrary, they brought him refreshments and made small talk.

The loud clangs continued their steady rhythm. The greater demon who could

rival even evil gods was hard at work fixing up a pot for the tavern. By the time the sun reached its peak, the sound of his hammer had been joined by the joyful voices of children.

In the northwest of the continent known as Malbenita, on the very outskirts of the Kingdom of Bilegga, there was a remote village by the name of Montt nestled in the mountains by the border. It sat in the foothills of the sacred mountain Sanctra Montt, and although it was quite beautiful, there was nothing particularly noteworthy about it.

Because the road led to a dead end, the village was generally only visited by merchants, hikers, and worshippers of the sacred mountain. The sole landmark of note in the area was the large castle in the forest.

It was a village nobody would go out of their way to visit, yet oddly enough people from all walks of life seemed to be drawn to it. When the occasional lost traveler would arrive, they would be shocked by the sight of the duke—and of the village itself. However, after experiencing it for themselves, they all had similar things to say:

"The *Song of Bilegga* was true! I saw the legend with my own eyes!"

"I can't believe the legendary father of the country is still alive! Didn't he disappear alongside the Demonic Sword?"

"The bandits who were unlucky enough to attack the village were driven back in the blink of an eye. I'm still not sure it wasn't a dream."

"The duke was both strong and kind. He truly is a hero. The Sacred Black Sword of Salvation himself."

All who visited that dead-end village would have their fates changed by their encounter with the duke and the other villagers.

A bard who claimed to be a friend of the duke described the remote village in one of his epics:

"Montt Village is the final paradise of those who have reached their peak. If you are troubled and lost, and you see a remarkably tall chimney out in the distance, go to it. The Sacred Black Sword is certain to receive you with a warm welcome one thousand years in the making, clumsily pounding his hammer all

the while.

“If I were to offer one piece of advice, it would be to never use any sort of divination magic on the inhabitants of Montt Village. Especially not spells such as Library, which allow you to see their level and status. I’m quite certain they view those maxed-out values as a curse.”

Chapter 1

The duke was satisfied. The world was at peace.

“Good, good. That ought to do it.”

The noon sun shone just overhead, lolling ever so slightly to the west.

The duke held a large stockpot up to the window and looked at it in satisfaction. There had been a rather large hole in it, but now not a single ray of sunlight leaked through. It was as good as new. “Deep pots are always difficult. Dwarven wares are quality stuff, and the ores they use are quite rare. Getting my hands on them wasn’t easy.”

Nodding in approval of his work, the duke set his hammer down. He had been hunched over for quite some time, so he took the opportunity to stretch and crack his back. He hadn’t thrown his back out in a long time, but one could never be too cautious. He pounded his lower back with his fists as if to massage it, then slowly—and very carefully—stood up and grabbed the pot.

The duke’s workshop was right next to his house and directly connected to his yard. As was to be expected of a structure built by architects from the royal capital, both the interior and exterior were equally impressive.



Letting the fulfillment of a job well done get the better of him, the duke stepped out of his workshop, spread his wings, and took a seat in one of his

garden's chairs. Right on cue, the children who had been playing in his yard gathered around him, his elderly neighbors right behind them with snacks.

"Afternoon, Duke. How about taking a short break for some tea?" one neighbor offered.

"I'd be happy to. I just reached a good stopping point."

"Yay, Duke! Let's play! Take me into the sky again!" a child begged.

"Sorry, kids, but I got yelled at last time. Yoto said it was dangerous, so no more of that."

The sight of a lone greater demon sipping tea and happily chatting with a group of humans and demihumans was peculiar indeed. His wings were filled with magic and capable of kicking up a gust of wind powerful enough to topple trees, yet the children happily climbed on him and clung to him, and despite his long, thick tail being capable of slicing a human in half, a cat-eared little girl chased after it. With only a little bit of magic, his demon eyes could obliterate a person's spirit, but right now the only thing in those golden orbs was the reflection of the manju his elderly neighbor, Daltorion, had brought him. He was completely enthralled by the sweetness of her gift. "Delicious. I never get tired of the taste of red bean paste."

"Glad to hear it. The shop they're from is supposed to be the best in the royal capital."

"Goodness, is that right? Now I feel bad for always taking them from you."

"Oh, no, I could never eat them all by myself. Besides, you're the father of our nation. Everyone in Bilegga is grateful to you, Duke."

"I never know how to respond when you guys say that. I simply assisted King Bilegga I in founding the country. I gave up my rank and title long ago."

"You're just being modest."

"No, no, you've helped the country far more than I ever did, Daltorion. You were the head of the kingdom's intelligence department, supporting the nation behind the scenes."

The seemingly kindly old woman's wrinkled face broke into a smile. "Ha ha ha,

that was a long time ago.”

As it so happened, there were many people in Montt Village who used to hold high positions. Almost everyone had mastered some skill or invented something of note. The old woman sitting next to the duke was no exception. As the duke had said, she had protected the Kingdom of Bilegga from the shadows by setting up the kingdom’s intelligence department.

“That reminds me, I happened to overhear something when I went to pick up these manju.” The old woman paused for a moment, then the look in her eyes turned sharp. “The third prince is apparently quite sickly.” This topic was of critical importance to the royal palace. Had any foreign diplomats been around to hear it, they would have been chomping at the bit for more information.

Daltorion was well-versed in the ways of secrecy. The duke knew she wouldn’t be mentioning the prince’s condition unless it was serious. Potentially even life-threatening.

“My word. The third prince is supposed to be the king’s successor. He’s still so young...”

“I hear he’s been unwell for a while now. Ah, but that doesn’t mean there’ll be any struggles for power. The king names his own successor these days.”

Upon hearing that, the duke sighed with relief. He had watched over the Kingdom of Bilegga through good times and bad, and he knew well how brutal conflicts over power could be from his time in the Demon Lord’s army. “Well, if there’s anyone I can take at their word, it’s you. I was worried we’d have to deal with that troublemaking bard again.”

“You mean Gilmeus? His prank went a little too far last time, but he’s a good kid at heart. Try to treat him well, would you?”

So she said, but someone who had spent as much time around the dark side of humanity as her was bound to have slightly different standards from ordinary people. The duke couldn’t help but feel that even someone potentially treacherous was liable to be considered a “good kid” as far as she was concerned.

“Anyway, Duke, you might consider having a suit prepared in your size.”

“Well, that’s certainly ominous. What for?”

Daltorion suddenly said something quite insensitive. “On the off chance a national funeral is held, I’m sure you’d be invited. And you know us old folks are prone to forgetting where our nice clothes have gone.”

The duke was taken aback by the indifference in the old woman’s words, but he understood what she was getting at now. “Ah, that’s what you meant. I thought it might have been something urgent. Come to think of it, where *is* my suit? I think I last wore it sixty years ago. Hmm...”

Daltorion smiled. “Ha ha ha, that’s probably a good thing for people like us.”

That was the end of the serious conversation. They went on to discuss things like the peace talks progressing with the country in the south and the latest fashion in the royal capital. Daltorion’s old lady gossip wasn’t the type to show up in the newspaper, but it was all as current as could be.

The duke spent the next hour or so enjoying his time with his neighbors, until he heard someone announce their presence behind him with a clank. After hearing the sound a second time, he finally turned around and found himself face-to-face with an exasperated Yoto.

“You never miss a chance to slack off, do you, Master? All right, break’s over. I’ll take the pot. It’s time to work the fields.”

“Hrmm. I wanted to take it easy a little longer.”

“Absolutely not. Once you stop, you never get started again. Now, here you are.” Yoto held out a large wicker basket. Inside was a sickle and a box containing earplugs with instructions that said “Make sure you put these on!”

“My, my, what a scary young lady. I think it’s time for me to take my leave.”

“Let me know if anything else happens, Daltorion.”

“Certainly. You’ll know before anything even goes up on the notice board. Not that I have anything to share except an old woman’s gossip, of course.”

Daltorion gave a slight bow and went on her way, and the duke’s other neighbors followed suit and headed home, only for the children who had been playing in the yard to take their place. Apparently they had heard the word

“field” and came running over.

“I thought the children might want to come along, so I prepared several pairs of earplugs,” said Yoto.

“Thanks, Yoto. Here you go, kids. Help me out and I’ll give you a reward.”

“Yay!” The children all shouted in excitement.

★

Children in tow, the duke walked down the village road. His basket swung back and forth as he greeted all the villagers. Though the village was filled with humans, demihumans, and of course demons, the duke was the only demon of devil lineage, making him the center of attention whenever he went for a walk.

They were headed to a field on the outskirts of the village. Located across a bridge and in the woods, it would have been hard to find if he didn’t already know where it was. As for why someone would clear a field in such a place, there was of course a good reason.

At the entrance to the plot of land, there was a signboard with several wooden name tags dangling from it. After confirming that nobody else was in the field, the duke took the tag with his name on it.

“Now, everybody line up.”

The children responded in unison and stood in a line. The duke made sure everyone was accounted for, then took the earplugs out of his basket and handed them out. “Raise your hand once you’ve put them in.”

A boy with a shaved head shouted, “I’m first!” and raised his hand, followed by all the other children. Once he had checked that all their hands were raised, the duke nodded and stepped out into the field.

The field was filled with rows of what appeared to be radishes or carrots. The crops were lush and fresh, growing straight up towards the sun like orderly rows of knights standing before the king.

The duke carefully evaluated them, grabbing hold of one that looked promising. Before long he decided he was confident enough in the bundle of leaves and stems he held and yanked the entire thing out of the ground all at

once.

“Gweeeeeeeeeeeh!” A hair-raising shriek pierced the air.

Beneath the bunch of leaves the duke held was a writhing and shrieking plant that resembled a carrot in the shape of a person, and its cry sounded like several humans all screaming at once. When combined with the duke’s silhouette, it made for quite the frightening sight.

Eventually the shrieking died down, and the struggling plant ran out of energy and went limp.

“The mandrakes certainly are lively this year,” the duke proclaimed. He then turned to the children and nodded with a grin. At that signal, the waiting children sprang out into the field.

Shrieks rang out all over the place, making the field sound like an active execution ground. However, despite the racket, the children weren’t the least bit afraid and merrily harvested the mandrakes.

Mandrakes were an important source of income for the remote village of Montt. They were an incredibly valuable ingredient in magic potions and catalysts, but they were exceedingly rare due to how difficult they were to grow.

The cry of a mandrake contained a wavelength that attacked the psyche and was powerful enough to make humans fall unconscious on the spot. In addition, if the mana veins where they grew became polluted, they would mutate into monsters known as alraune, making them particularly troublesome.

While many people dreamed of using the scarcity of mandrakes to get rich quick—only to promptly give up due to the difficulty—Montt Village was able to clear all the hurdles to cultivating them. The trees of the forest scattered any would-be parasites, so there was no impact on the village itself. The village was also home to skilled alchemists and earth mages, greatly increasing the productivity of their harvest.

“Good, good. They’re all looking healthy.”

After pulling up two or three mandrakes and putting them in his basket, the duke promptly began slacking off. He sat on a tree stump and snapped his

fingers, creating a magic circle from which he pulled a red lacquer pipe. With another quick spell, he lit the pipe and exhaled a puff of smoke.

While gazing out at the children, the duke slowly turned his head towards the sky. It was a sight he wouldn't have even been able to fathom in the past. "How lovely. The blessings of the earth. The blessings of magic. The village is as happy as can be."

A thousand years ago, the country had been embroiled in the flames of war. It was a hell filled with the sound of roars and screams. People were killed solely for the fact that they were born human or demon.

This land was rife with mana veins. As a result, demons—who obtained nourishment from that overflowing magic—gathered here, forming groups, villages, and even countries. Eventually, the Demon Lord, the one who brought them all together, was born.

Though they were called demons, they were by no means evil. The Demon Lord, too, was but a representative of the demons, no different from a human or demihuman on the inside. However, those like the duke looked sinister enough that their appearance alone was enough for other races to deem them enemies. They were even called devils who opposed the gods, and gradually became the targets of discrimination.

In order to avoid any unnecessary quarrels, demons and the other races mutually agreed to avoid contact with one another—but that all changed when someone discovered the value of the demons' land. An alliance formed around some particularly avaricious humans, and those leaders declared the demons to be evil, using that as justification to invade the demons' land.

The conflict that inevitably broke out was so one-sided at first that it could hardly be called a war. Demons weren't even taken as slaves—they were killed and cut into pieces like common monsters to be sold as ingredients for magic potions and the like.

The Demon Lord was unable to stomach that disgrace. In order to repel the greed that lay at the root of mankind, the demons rose up, formed an army, and fought to reclaim their lost peace—or at least, that was how it was supposed to go.

It was a holy war. Justice was on their side. The humans had started the conflict. Trample them. Slaughter them. Inflict any humiliation imaginable to regain their lost dignity. By the end of all the hatred and fighting, the Demon Lord had truly become a devil in every sense of the word.

“Ha ha. I’m sure my lord would be shocked by the state of the world now. But that’s all in the past. Nothing is immune to being washed away by the flow of time. Now there are no demons, humans, or demihumans. We’re all just people. People living happily as equals,” the duke muttered to himself as the warm breeze tempted him to sleep.

Left behind by the Demon Lord, he watched over the world and his beloved people in peaceful idleness. His maid would probably kick his rear for being lazy, but he figured he had shed enough blood and tears back then that it was all right for him to be swept away by the gentle flow of time.

He drowsily rowed along as he was carried down the river of slumber. The muscles in the duke’s face relaxed, his field of view growing narrow. Finally, as his vision went dark, he felt a small hand touch his wing.

“—!”

He turned around to find a panicked cat-eared girl shouting soundlessly at him. She was gesturing and pulling on his wing as though calling out to him.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Mill? Did something happen?”

“—! —?!”

“Oh, my apologies.” The duke snapped his fingers. The next instant, small magic circles appeared by his ears. The characters inside the circles fell apart, then the circles began to glow and lost their shape. It was the same sound insulating spell—Silence—that had been cast on the children’s earplugs.

Immediately upon regaining his hearing, a piercing voice struck the duke’s ears. “Meow! Duke! It’s an emergency!” Mill was known to overreact, but when things went awry, she was always the first to come running to him. Something was wrong.

“What’s the matter? Did somebody drop their earplugs again? Hmm, I should have some smelling salts I got from Porion...”

“No, it’s an emergency! Just come quick!” The catfolk girl ran on all fours like an animal. Her dress fluttered as she ran and showed her bloomers, but she paid it no mind and shot off like an arrow.

“Oh dear. Being too lively may be a problem in itself.” Pulling himself off the stump, the duke stood up, careful to mind his back. Hurried along by Mill, he plodded off in the direction she guided him.

★

Mill was hopping around a second mandrake field that had been dug further in the back. And she wasn’t alone—the other children had all gathered around and were staring at something with looks of concern on their faces.

“All right, what happened here?”

The children spread out, revealing a face-down woman in the center of the crowd. The duke flipped her over and his eyes went wide. He had never seen her around the village.

“Who is she? A princess from somewhere? Maybe a knight?” asked one child.

“Meow... She looks kinda bratty for a princess.”

The collapsed woman had beautiful features and was wearing armor of considerably high quality. Her shining silver armor was likely a magic-repellent alloy made of silver and mithril. On top of that, it was decorated with fine gold engravings. It was an impressive piece, far beyond the means of normal civilians. She was at the very least a noble, if not someone even more important. The deciding factor was the sword hanging from her hip. Its handguard bore an emblem of a winged knight holding up a sword, meaning it was a gift directly from the king himself.

“A winged knight crest? That means she’s a member of the royal family. Why would they come all the way out here again?”

“Duke, Duke! I think she’s a thief.” A young girl with goat horns pointed at something the knight was gripping in her hand.

Pulling back her stiffened fingers, the duke found the thick humanoid root and hollowed-out face of one of the field’s mandrakes. “Well, that explains it.

She must have pulled it up unprepared and been hit by its shriek. Now, what to do? This is bound to be a pain, but I suppose we can hardly just leave her here."

The duke snapped his fingers and cast a spell. A green magic circle rotated above the knight, gradually disappearing as it seeped into her body.

"I very *lightly* cast a Float spell on her. Let's see, now..." Mindful of his back, the duke lifted up the woman in a bridal carry. Just as he had hoped, the heavily armored knight was now as light as a feather.



“Mill, go on ahead and let the church know we’re coming. Inform the villagers as well.”

“Got it!”

Her eyes sparkling, Mill dashed away. She was certain to make a scene, but that made her a good substitute for alarm bells. For a small village like Montt, informing everyone as fast as possible when something occurred was of the utmost importance. Of all the children, Mill was definitely the best suited to the job.

“Hmm... Well, I suppose these things happen.” Despite his words, the duke had a bad feeling. He had lived a long life, and unfortunately his intuition tended to be accurate when it came to this sort of thing.

He wanted to believe she was just someone who had gotten lost, but the duke knew all too well that minor encounters had a way of leading to major issues.

Chapter 2

The duke was saddened. He frightened another human.

The sun was just beginning to set, dyeing the sky the slightest bit pink. Accompanied by the children, the duke headed towards the village church.

Because Mill had already delivered the message, the villagers weren't on guard and simply looked at the knight with concern. The duke calmed them with a confident and reassuring nod, but in reality he was deeply worried.

The church was a very ordinary building made of stone that inexplicably had a sign leaning against the entrance that said "Open hours: 8 AM to 6 PM." Mill was jumping and waving in front, her forehead dripping with sweat. She had probably run around the entire village. "Father! Father Blutgang! Over here!" Mill called out, and an impressively brawny man dressed in a priest outfit stepped out of the church.

Even through his clothes, his bulging muscles were plain to see. He towered about as tall as the Duke, with his gray hair cut short. He was dressed rather casually, sporting round sunglasses and wearing his cassock unbuttoned at the top to expose his chest. Scars covered his face, arms, and exposed chest, making him look more like a gang leader than a priest. A dagger would have suited him far more than the prayer necklace hanging from his neck, but much to the surprise of anyone who looked at him, he really was a genuine priest ordained by the church.

"Hey, Duke. The little kitty here told me what happened. Let me take a look at her."

"I appreciate it, Blut. Here she is."

The duke laid the knight down on a bench Father Blutgang had set out. Her beautiful blonde hair and sharp features made her quite appealing, but her face was a mess after being hit by the mandrake's shriek. The whites of her eyes were showing, and her tongue was stuck straight out. It was such a pitiful sight that the duke had hidden her face with a handkerchief on the way back.

“Looks like she’s pretty well off,” Father Blutgang observed. “Gettin’ done in by a mandrake’s a pretty stupid way to go.”

“I suspect she’s a member of the royal family, though she lacked any retinue. It’s hard to believe she would come all the way out here alone. Maybe something happened in the royal capital.” What Daltorion had said this morning popped into the duke’s mind. The third prince was in critical condition—perhaps this was related. Unfortunately, the duke didn’t have the slightest clue how the knight lying in front of him could be connected to the third prince.

“I dunno about that. Porion would be laughin’ her ass off with a drink at the Chimera if there was trouble in the capital.”

“True enough. The rest of the village should be aware of the situation by now. She’d be the first one to show up and laugh.”

“No way she’d miss it,” Father Blutgang agreed. “She stopped by earlier today and asked for a massage again, so I know she’s feelin’ good. I just wish she wouldn’t let her chest jiggle constantly while I work. I’m a celibate monk, y’know? More or less, anyway.”

“That just goes to show how good you are at massages and acupuncture.”

“Hah. Maybe I oughta consider a change in occupation.”

The priest placed his hands together in prayer, then tried to move the knight. Her armor seemed too heavy for him, so the duke was about to help out when the interior of her breastplate caught his eye. “As I thought, magic armor. It’s not mass-produced either. This is one of a kind. It has weight reduction magic embedded in it. Float...? No, this is the gravity spell Gravitea, isn’t it? Impressive work.”

“Where do you think you’re lookin’, old man? Still, I can tell she’s got a nice rack even through her armor,” the priest noted salaciously. “Not as good as Porion’s though.”

The duke shot a stern glance at the priest. “You’re the dirty old man here, Blut. Hurry up and treat her.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Father Blutgang as he took out an unusually large medical needle. Finally acting like a priest should, he held it between the middle and

ring fingers of his right hand and made a fist, reciting the incantation for a healing spell. “Duke, mind holding her down for a sec?”

“Like this?” The duke carefully placed one hand on the knight’s head and the other on her armor.

“Perfect. Let me get a good angle on her neck...” Satisfied with the knight’s positioning, the priest soon closed his eyes and began manipulating something more akin to a fighting spirit aura than mana. The words he uttered sounded like a peculiar prayer.

Then, the instant he opened his eyes—

“Hiyah!”

In one fluid motion, too quick for the eye to see, Father Blutgang plunged the needle into the bottom of the knight’s neck, then pulled it back out.

“That went in pretty deep. Is she all right?” the duke asked, a bit of worry crossing his face.

Despite the duke’s concern, Father Blutgang calmly put his needle away. “She’s just fine. See for yourself.” After a few moments, the knight’s warped face relaxed and returned to normal. Her skin regained its tautness, and soon she was sleeping peacefully. “She should wake up in an hour or so.”

“Excellent work. I should’ve expected as much from a master monk. You haven’t lost your touch.”

“*Former* master monk. Truth be told, I’m actually not too good at this kinda stuff,” he admitted. “It all worked out though! Wah ha ha ha!”

“Now you’ve got me worried. Maybe I should ask Porion to check on her later.”

“Don’t bother. She’s always cranky ’cause of her chronic back pain, and she hates the royal family, anyway. She’s in a good mood today, but make her angry and you might just lose a horn.”

“I certainly wouldn’t want that.” The duke turned his attention to the harvest he and the children had collected. “I think I’ll dry the mandrakes until she wakes up. Lend me a hand, Blut.”

“You’re a real slave driver, Duke. But mandrakes are an important source of money for the village, so I guess somebody’s gotta do it. It’d be a real shame if we couldn’t drink.”

“Weren’t you supposed to have discarded your worldly desires?” the duke asked skeptically. “Oh well, just help me out.”

The two headed out behind the church. Mill and the other children were playing with the knight by poking her face and sticking their fingers in her nose, but her reactions were dull, and it didn’t seem like she’d be waking up soon, so they ended up following the duke outside.

★

Most churches had Dispel fields surrounding them. Simply put, the blessing of the church’s god established a magical field around the building, and that god’s power nullified all other forms of magic. As a result, the field’s power grew in proportion to the people’s faith. Religious headquarters were said to even be capable of reviving people killed by curses.

However, although Montt’s church still functioned as a Dispel field, the effectiveness of its blessing had greatly diminished due to Father Blutgang’s decidedly irreverent behavior. At best, it was similar to a hot spring, capable only of relieving small pains and removing the bitterness of grains that were offered up.

On the other hand, that weak blessing happened to be perfect for mandrakes, almost as though by design. Once their bitterness was dealt with, they could be used as high-quality magic ingredients.

“Watch out for the sharp edges, everyone,” the duke warned.

“Okay!”

Everyone worked together to cut the mandrake stems. Though the children were experienced and knew how to handle the blades safely, Yoto was still adamant that the duke should never take his eyes off of them.

Once the stems were removed, the mandrakes were washed in well water blessed by the church and stripped of any excess roots. If this step was ignored, tiny mandrakes would sprout from the ends of the roots, making the base plant

rather ill-tempered. Although it was monotonous work that would quickly bore an adult to sleep, the children made it a competition to see who could do the best job and strip theirs the fastest. So long as they were monitored carefully, it was quite an efficient way of doing things.

Once the roots were removed and the mandrakes were clean, they were hung up and exposed to the mana of the sun and moon for three days. This would cause them to firm up and become the quality product Montt was known for.

“All done!” After hanging up the final mandrake, the children raised their hands and cheered. They were a well-oiled machine, so despite the large quantity, the whole process had only taken around an hour. The evening sky was red, and the sun would set in another thirty minutes or so.

“Good work, everyone! Now, come over here, kids. I’ve got the rewards you’ve all been waiting for.” With a snap of the duke’s fingers, a magic circle appeared in mid air, rotating as it descended. When it finally hit the ground, it made a sound like an egg cracking open and several baskets full of treats appeared. “Excellent, everyone did as they were told. You’re good kids. I’ve got enough for everyone, so there’s no need to rush.”

The children were delighted, but they still lined up in order, a habit Yoto must have drilled into them. She was the one responsible for disciplining the village children to make up for the duke spoiling them. He tried to placate the maid by telling her that as a duke, he couldn’t be too harsh on them, but he had no retort when she replied that he was too kind and far too lenient with the children.

The duke handed them baskets one at a time. He couldn’t get enough of the precious smiles on all their faces. Once the treats were distributed, the kids all held up their baskets as they left and waved goodbye. After losing sight of the final child, the duke nodded his head in satisfaction once again.

“You sure are a nice guy for someone who’s got a face like the Demon Lord’s.”

The duke turned around and found Father Blutgang lighting a cigarette. He claimed to be free of worldly desire, yet he ate meat, drank alcohol, smoked tobacco, and did all sorts of other self-indulgent things. Despite this, he was highly regarded by the villagers as a priest. He was mysterious if nothing else.

The duke smiled back at the priest. “Yet none of them fear me. I truly am blessed.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll grow up to be good people. That honesty may get them taken advantage of at some point, but they sure are a hell of a lot cuter than your mean-lookin’ mug.”

“This coming from a priest who looks like he could be a gang leader?” the duke quipped. “*You’re* the one who could have really used a better upbringing.”

“You got that right. Wah ha ha—hm?” The look on the priest’s face suddenly turned serious.

In the shadow of the church, there was a tense, deadly atmosphere—inappropriate for their peaceful village—growing more and more dense. The duke noticed as well, and his sharp ears went on high alert. The two looked closely and saw a silky white hand reaching around the corner.

“You’re...” the duke’s voice trailed off.

It was the woman they had found unconscious with a look of anguish on her face. The knight was glaring at them like a tiger stalking its prey from a thicket. She must have either just woken up or still been a bit numb, as she was leaning against the wall of the church and breathing heavily. Her other hand gripped her sword, trembling with fear.

“I saw you...Demon Lord!” The knight’s voice was loud and shrill, but still crystal clear. She punctuated her accusation by pointing the tip of her sword at the duke.

“Demon Lord?” Puzzled, the duke looked around. He tilted his head in confusion, completely baffled by the situation. “Huh? Has my lord revived? It doesn’t seem like it.”

Father Blutgang sighed. “No, no, she’s talkin’ about you, Duke.”

“Me? Oh!” The duke pounded a fist against the palm of his hand at this epiphany. “Noble knight, you’ve got the wrong idea. I’ve long since left that life behind. Calm down for just a moment.”

“I won’t be fooled! I, Albrea, see through your lies! I’ve seen for myself how

you use children to produce illicit goods! Your crimes end here!”

Being called a criminal stung the duke just a little bit. He snapped his fingers and summoned a magic circle. “It should be around here,” he mumbled to himself, sticking his hand inside and searching for something. After a bit of rummaging, he finally pulled out a piece of parchment. Unfurling it, he revealed a neatly written mandrake cultivation license with an official seal signing the document. “Look, we have permission. This is an official license with the seals of both the king and the lord of the territory. I understand where you’re coming from, but don’t you think you’re being a tad rude?”

Albrea was unmoved. “There’s no use in showing me that forgery! Enough trickery! Fight me like the demon you are!”

“Mrgh...” The duke let out an odd sound as his shoulders hung in dejection.

“Good grief.” After watching their conversation and chuckling at the duke, Father Blutgang rose to his feet. “Young lady, I get how you feel, but would you mind listenin’ to us for just a second? He may not look it, but the duke here is a harmless old man. His back gives him trouble and his memory’s only getting worse. Keep picking on him and he might just cry.”

“Silence! You must be a gangster! What do you hope to gain in working with a demon?”

“G-Gangster...” The priest was the next to slump his shoulders. He was used to hearing it in jest, but having someone seriously call him a gangster seemed to have wounded him.

“Say, Blut. Are all youths like this these days?” The duke put both of his hands in front of his face and moved them towards each other in what could only be taken as a gesture of narrow-mindedness.

“Nah, I think she’s in a league of her own,” Father Blutgang sighed, mirroring the duke’s gesture.

“Are you often told you need to listen to others more by any chance?” the duke asked the knight.

“H-How do you know that?” Albrea was startled for a moment, but she shook her head and gripped her sword. “Did you use magic to see my past?!” For

better or worse, she seemed to be the type to get serious when backed into a corner. Her shaking had completely stopped, as though she had never been afraid in the first place, and she took up a fighting stance with her sword.

“Ah, no, I didn’t do anything of the sort...” the duke muttered.

“The time for talk is over!” Albrea brandished her weapon, a beautifully adorned bastard sword with a blade around one hundred centimeters long. Pointing it up towards the western sun, her sword began to sparkle as she channeled mana into it. “You readily use forbidden magic and make illicit deals with gangsters! You must be the demon I’ve heard about, you villain! As the Knight of the West, it’s my duty to drive away evil by exterminating you!”

Albrea traced her fingers over the guard of her sword and a magic circle appeared behind her. The red gem in the sword’s pommel must have been a high-purity manastone, as it began glowing and rotating on its own, pouring mana into her blade.

“Seal Purge! My blade was forged to repel evil! The star I was given in the night sky shall burn bright to guide all mankind! Spirits, light the edge of my blade with the flames of our oath!” A stream of magic struck her sword as though responding to her anger as she held it overhead.

The duke’s eyes went wide. “A magic sword?!”

“H-Hey, Duke, this might be a problem. Her mana just keeps building up.” As Father Blutgang spoke, Albrea’s sword was glowing brighter and brighter, the gathering mana growing as wide as a pillar.

“She’s using herself as a link between the earth and the stars in the western sky. Has she been granted the blessing of a cardinal direction? This is bad—she’s one of the kingdom’s top knights!”

Albrea’s eyes went wide at the duke’s words. He had seen through her technique without the aid of any divination magic. Still under the wrong impression, this only served to further enrage her.

“I thought that might be the royal family’s treasured blade,” the duke continued. “I told them Sword Boost was dangerous magic so many times!

“Am I crazy, or have I heard that name before?” Father Blutgang looked at the

duke with concern.

“It’s exactly what you think,” the duke said, then turned to the knight. “Hey, enough of this! That’s someone’s house behind you! Take a look around! Are you trying to blow away the whole neighborhood?!”

“Now you’re taking innocent people hostage? You won’t get away with this!”

The duke wasn’t getting through. No, it was more accurate to say that his words were being interpreted however Albrea saw fit. The duke had hoped it was just a bad joke, but she seemed deadly serious. He once again hung his shoulders in dejection. “Do I really look that scary? The children like me, so I was feeling more confident...” he sniffled.

“Is this really the time to be crying?! Hey, girl! Knock it off already!” shouted Father Blutgang.

“I’ll never heed the words of a villain!”

“This is pointless. What should we do, Duke? I can stop her, but I’m gonna have to get a little rough.”

“Hrmm. This sort of magic has a lengthy incantation. The longer we wait, the more mana she’s going to build up.” Looking at it logically, using a magic sword like hers in the middle of a village was ridiculous. It would be like suddenly pulling out a blade in the middle of a crowded market. “I thought it was just a joke, but she seems quite determined... I suppose we don’t have a choice. Can you take care of it, Blut?”

“I sure can, but her insides might end up crushed if I hit the wrong spot.” Father Blutgang stowed away his sunglasses and readied his fists. Taking a big step back with his right foot, he lowered his hips and bent the fingers of his left hand, sticking out his palm. He opened his right hand the same way and brought it up to his cheek, taking up a stance similar to the Nioh war gods from a country far to the east.

“Ah, a Dragon Spirit technique?” the duke observed.

“If I’m gonna take her head-on, this is the only way.” An aura erupted behind the priest like flames. His unique breathing technique seemed to have an effect similar to that of a spell.

A cold sweat ran down Albrea's cheek in response to the sudden pressure, but her courage must have won out against her fear as she gritted her teeth and channeled even more mana into her sword.

The church had all but become a battlefield, filled with bloodlust and ferocity. Perhaps sensing that something was amiss, several villagers came to see what was going on.

"I knew this was a village of brigands!" Albrea proclaimed.

The duke sighed again. "Oh dear... What awful timing..."

Each and every one of the villagers was armed. Though they wore ordinary linen shirts and work clothes, the weapons in their hands had an unusual presence about them. The villagers all had focused glints in their eyes, their expressions those of trained warriors. There were even some who were emitting magical auras similar to Father Blutgang's.

"W-We've got it under control, everyone!" the duke shouted to the crowd.

"She's seriously trying to cut us down! Get ready for this!" Father Blutgang yelled.

Meanwhile, Albrea's magic had reached its peak. Her glowing blade pointed towards the sky. The magic sword of light that had formed was so large even a giant would have been unable to wield it. "The compass points due west! I have become one with heaven and earth! The unifying blade executes the will of the divine! Here I come! Magic sword... Sacred Punishment!"

A torrent of mana flooded into the pillar of light, rising like a tornado on the verge of engulfing all that surrounded it. Then, the moment she tried to swing her blade downwards—

Father Blutgang dashed towards her, the force of his speed cracking the cobblestone beneath him, and clearing the more than ten meters between them in an instant.

"I'll buy you some candy or something later, so bear with it!" Father Blut shouted. "Secret technique: Phantom Dragon's Roar!"

Shock flashed across Albrea's face. She had never imagined he would be able

to close the distance so quickly. Overwhelmed by the priest, she suddenly found a fist clad in concentrated fighting spirit headed right for her. Overlapping him was a vision of thick scales even steel couldn't penetrate, majestic wings, and jaws that could crush boulders. It was like being face-to-face with a dragon.

"Hraaaaah!" Pushing aside the force of his aura, Albrea gave it everything she had. Determined not to be defeated, she focused her strength into her core and tightly gripped the handle of her sword so it didn't fly out of her hands.

Father Blutgang was surprised. He had expected her to falter before his pressure, but the glint in Albrea's eyes had grown even sharper. It was past the point where he could hold back.

Magic sword or dragon fist? Just as the victor was about to be decided, there was a loud crack.

The sword of light abruptly vanished as Albrea's magic suddenly faded.

"Huh?" She swung her sword downwards, but it no longer had any force.

"Whoa!" Realizing the threat had dissipated, Father Blutgang stopped his fist just a hair away from striking her and quickly retreated.

Albrea dropped her guard in confusion. She knew exactly what had happened, but she shook her head in disbelief. Trembling in fear, she looked at her sword. "What's the meaning of this?! My sword is made of orichalconea! The hardest metal in the world!" Just as she had feared, her beloved sword was broken in half. And it was a clean break, as though someone had cut smoothly through a piece of cake.

"I was wondering what all the commotion was about..." A young girl's frigid voice came from behind Albrea, along with a frightening bloodlust that wasn't suited to it. The sound of it was overwhelming enough to make even Albrea go pale.

Albrea turned around to find a girl dressed in a maid outfit—Yoto. She was tossing the broken tip of Albrea's sword up and down in her hand like a fruit she was about to hurl, her eyes filled with fiery wrath. Veins were visible in her porcelain-white temple, bulging so far out they seemed to be about to burst.

"Th-That's impossible... Eek!" Albrea fell to the ground in fear—a natural

response to the hellish sight of the pitch black mana swirling around the maid and creating a sea of magic circles.

Countless eyes appeared in midair, staring down at the knight. Some appeared angry. Some appeared to mock her. Still others seemed to scorn her. A primordial fear, like being judged by devils in the pits of hell, overcame Albrea as she instantly realized she was profoundly outmatched. “A-Ah... Wha...”

“Do you have any idea what the hell you just pointed at my master? *Do you?*” Mana ominously poured out of Yoto, accompanied by a low rumbling sound. It was several times beyond what Albrea had amassed earlier, and it soon lifted the young maid into the air. Matching her rage, flames burst forth around her and formed giant serpents.

“Oh dear,” the duke sighed, knowing what was about to happen.

The villagers lowered their weapons and returned to their daily lives, confident there was nothing to worry about now that Yoto was here, and not wanting to find themselves on the receiving end of her anger.

“Sure you don’t wanna stop her?” asked Father Blutgang. “Yoto’s super pissed.”

“You’re asking the impossible... Let’s meet up at the Chimera later. We’re going to need one of Porion’s elixirs.”

Sinister chanting could be heard as Yoto was surrounded by darkness that formed an egg. Cracks soon appeared, and the shell began to crumble away. When Yoto reappeared, she had transformed from a maid into something else entirely.

From the egg emerged a giant, pitch-black greatsword. Around two hundred centimeters long, it had the shape of a sword, but it was far beyond what any human could wield. Its blade was deep crimson with pulsating veins running through it. Albrea didn’t know what it was made of, but she could feel life somewhere inside it.

In other words, it was a living sword. At the center of the blade was the upper half of Yoto’s human form. Embedded in the blade like a sculpture, her hands were clasped together in prayer. When she finally opened her eyes, the flame

serpents joined together and combined. An evil god of fire bearing the face of a crow manifested, pounding its fists and letting out a howl like a wolf.

“I asked you what the hell you just pointed at Master!” Yoto screamed.

“E-Eeeeek! I need to get out of he—what?! A wall?!” Albrea tried to crawl away in fear, only to find herself blocked by an unseen wall. It was a barrier. Yoto had already cut the two of them off from the outside world. “Th-This isn’t possible! How can there be such a thick barrier?!”

“There’s no escape for you. It’s too late to cry and beg for forgiveness!”

“Wha... It’s hot! Ack... I can’t breathe...”

“Of course not. You’re about to be burned alive. May the sight of the hellfire engulfing you sear into your eyes as you pass into the afterlife!” Yoto seemed like a different person from her usual calm and collected demeanor. She was aware of that, but her anger was far beyond the point of caring. Nor did she care that Albrea’s spirit had already been crushed and she’d lost the will to fight.

Praying with her metallic hands, Yoto began chanting in a voice that seemed to echo from the depths of the earth. The evil god of fire pounded its fists like war drums in response. “You stand at the prison gates. You are a sacrifice and a sinner. Come, fire of Amon, hum of the silent flame. Praise be your flickering blaze. In accordance with our contract, become a fist to crush injustice!”

The evil god of fire howled, its flaming fists flaring up as Yoto spoke.

“Th-That’s the magic of legend!”

“Fireburst Demon Fist... Daimon Flare!” At Yoto’s command, the evil god of fire lifted its bulky arm up to the ceiling, then brought its scorching hot, fire-clad fist crashing down.

“Ahhhhhh!” Albrea screamed as she was wrapped in flames so hot she felt as though magma had been poured on her head. Had Yoto not isolated them in a barrier, not just the church, but the entire village would have gone up in flames.

Yet it was only for an instant. In the blink of an eye, all the flames disappeared. From the smoke emerged a lovely maid patting down her skirt,

and an unconscious Albrea whose hair was slightly singed.

“Phew, I feel better now.” Satisfied, Yoto wiped a bit of sweat from her brow. Despite having nearly incinerated somebody just a moment ago, she was feeling refreshed as if she’d simply vented some anger.

This was of course because she had never intended to kill Albrea at all. The moment the fire hit the knight, Yoto had immediately cast healing magic. She might have seemed hot-tempered, but she was quick to cool off, and was just as compassionate as her master.

“So, who is this idiot?” Yoto kicked Albrea, but she showed no sign of waking up. It was to be expected. She had been incinerated, then revived just before her soul left her. It was fair to say she had died for a brief moment. It was a miracle she hadn’t wet herself.

“I guess I should consider it kind of her that she didn’t burn up the knight’s broken sword and underwear...” Hanging his head at his cherished demonic sword’s immaturity, the duke muttered to himself. “Right back to square one, I suppose.”

Chapter 3

The duke sighed. The bard was at it again.

“Would you be surprised if I told you that near our border, there was a village where a demon lived?”

At first, I was indignant he would even suggest something so preposterous. I had heard he was a good friend of my brother, but looking back at the interaction, everything about him was blatantly suspicious.

“After dragon slaying, demon extermination is a knight’s highest honor. Now is the time to show off the gift of the west—no, never mind that. I simply think it’s the least you can do for your brother as he lays ill in bed.”

That somber look hidden between his smiles seemed like a trap in retrospect. What a fool I had been to not see right through it.

Ever since I was a kid, I had loved the *Song of Bilegga*. As Bilegga’s descendant, I wanted nothing more than to become a proud knight myself, but many were opposed to the princess becoming a knight. My older brother was the only one who took me seriously. While everyone else looked at me coldly, my brother alone supported me. And when my training finally paid off and I was granted the title of Knight of the West, he was the only one who congratulated me.

That was why I had gotten impatient, and as a result, I’d been burned by the flames of my own hubris. Maybe everyone was right. Maybe knights were obsolete in this peaceful world. Maybe I never should have become one.

I’m sorry, my ancestor. No matter how much time passes, I never learn. Forgive me for passing to your side in such a pathetic state.

★

“Oh, you’re already awake.”

Albrea opened her eyes and tried to get up, but her body wouldn’t listen. There was an unfamiliar ceiling above her, and she couldn’t make out who was

speaking. It felt like she was trapped inside a narrow cave.

“Don’t push yourself. Take it slow and try making a fist.”

Unable to gather her thoughts, Albrea obeyed the faint voice and clenched her fist several times. She felt the blood gradually start to circulate back through her hands, and wondered if she had just hallucinated being dead until a moment ago.

Hands, then feet. Before long she regained control of her head, and with it, all her senses. Finally able to sit up, Albrea found herself in a boisterous tavern. “Where am I?” she asked.

“Montt Village’s tavern. Man, you sure are tough. Your soul was only just stabilized by the elixir and you’re already up. Seems like you’ve been through some intense training.” Father Blutgang was sitting next to her. Still in his priest clothes, he was drinking wine straight from the bottle.

“Ugh... A bandit drinking party. Are you planning on torturing me as entertainment—”

The priest silenced Albrea with a swift flick to the forehead, but the sound of the blow suggested it was something more. “I keep tellin’ you, listen to me for a second!”

“Ouch!” The force of the priest’s flick left her seeing stars.

Father Blutgang sighed, then his expression turned uncharacteristically serious as he stared Albrea down. “I need you to calm yourself, young lady. Why do you think you’re even alive after all that happened? Take a minute and mull things over.”

Rubbing her forehead, Albrea did as she was told and reflected on what had happened. A sudden chill ran down her spine as her final moments vividly returned to her.

Pitch-black mana had poured out of a young girl in a maid outfit and she had transformed into a terrifying blade. The black sword summoned an evil god of fire, bringing forth a fellow denizen of the darkness, and intense heat had rained down on Albrea from above, incinerating her so fast she didn’t have time to scream. She didn’t even feel any pain. The moment she thought, “Oh, I’m

dead”—as though it were someone else’s problem—her consciousness flickered out. The images she saw of her life flashing before her eyes may well have come from the soul rather than the brain.

“Hmm, she’s a pretty impressive girl. People usually can’t move for two whole days when their soul separates from their body. Or is my elixir just that well-made?” asked a woman as she walked over to the bedridden knight.

Albrea turned to face her, only to be stunned by her provocative appearance. “A-A dark elf...witch?”

The woman didn’t seem to take offense at being called a witch and smiled. “Right you are. But you don’t need to worry; I’m not going to eat your or anything. Besides, dark elves aren’t *that* rare, are they? No need to look so surprised.”

“N-No, that’s not it. Your outfit is just a little...revealing...”

“Hm?” The witch seemed confused.

“See, Porion! You’re dressed like a damn floozy!” Father Blutgang scolded. “Put on some clothes so people don’t have to be embarrassed to look at you.”

Porion pouted. “How rude, Father. You could at least call it innovative fashion.”

Albrea could hardly be blamed for her confusion. As Father Blutgang had said, the witch was very nearly half naked. She was tall and slender as was typical of an elf, with tan skin and pointed ears, and she had a bewitching, sensual atmosphere about her.

Her silhouette alone was provocative enough, but it became doubly so when combined with all the skin she exposed. The witch’s lower half was covered by a deep blue paleo skirt, the side slit daringly showing off her leg. Her upper body was covered by an extravagant gold cloth wrapped around her bountiful chest. She wore a number of gaudy accessories around her neck, which seemed to further accentuate her impressive bust.



Her presence wasn’t beneficial to the upbringing of children, to say the least. It would be no surprise if she were called a harlot. Enhancing that impression

even further, her glossy hair hung down to her waist and seemed to glow slightly, perhaps tinged with mana.

“You’d better be grateful. If it hadn’t been a request from the duke, I’d have never helped a member of the royal family. I’d sooner break you down to your basic elements and use you as potion ingredients.” With a captivating laugh, Porion brought her head up to Albrea’s. The knight’s blushing face reflected in Porion’s large eyes with pupils as deep as an ocean. The witch reeked of alcohol.

“Now, now, Porion. No threatening our guest,” chided the duke, seated in a chair behind the witch. Yoto was sitting in his lap and happily eating dinner—a large helping of beef stew. Her usual scowl had been replaced by a beaming smile.

“I’m only kidding. I’d never do such a thing.” Porion casually sidled up next to the duke and leaned towards him. “Would I?”

Aware that nothing he said to the drunk witch would make a difference, the duke took a drink and mumbled a response. “Right...”

“Your eyes didn’t deceive you, knight,” said Yoto. “I wouldn’t trust a word out of the Labyrinth Witch’s mouth.”

“Oh? Did the little demonic sword say something?” Porion interrupted. “You’re so tiny I couldn’t quite hear you. Why don’t you quit pretending to be a maid and go shove yourself in a drawer somewhere?”

“If I did that, Master would find himself surrounded by insects.”

Porion puffed up at the insult. “And what sort of insect might you be referring to? Surely it can’t be worse than an ugly, scowling little shrimp.”

“What was that?”

Yoto and Porion glared at each other, fireworks sparking between them. They weren’t necessarily enemies, but they always got like this when it came to the duke.

“Enough, you two. Get along like usual.” The duke attempted to calm them.

“Hmph,” Porion pouted.

“Yes, Master.”

“Labyrinth Witch? Right, I remember!” Albrea leaned forward in excitement. “You used to be the court magician... Uh...” She hesitated, trailing off when she noticed Father Blutgang was glaring directly at her. It wasn’t intended to be a threat, nor was he angry. He simply seemed to be scolding her.

At her age, it had been a long time since Albrea had been scolded harshly enough to make her freeze up. As she held her tongue, she began to think that perhaps she was the one at fault. Slowly but surely, her vision cleared up and she got a good look at her surroundings.

The tavern was crowded with people of all races, and not one of them appeared to be anything resembling a bandit. They were all smiling happily and making merry in peace. All she knew was that this was a village inhabited by a demon. She didn’t understand what was going on, but it was clearly at odds with what she had been told. No, it was more than at odds—it was the exact opposite.

The difference between her expectations and reality was so great it made Albrea dizzy. After a short pause to catch her breath and calm down, she once again faced Porion. “You’re the former court magician, Porion. I heard you were an immoral witch who disturbed the decorum of the royal palace, misused forbidden spells, and then created a labyrinth when you ran away.”

Disturbing decorum aside, Porion was a powerful witch who could use even people as magic catalysts according to the rumors, but she didn’t seem so frightening to Albrea. The way she dressed was a bit off, but she appeared to be a good person, albeit one set in her ways.

“My, what a fun combination of fact and fiction. They must really hate me. Ah, but let me correct you about that forbidden spell. I never used it, I just sealed it out of spite when I left.”

Though she was still on guard, Albrea believed her. In addition to the rumors about Porion being an evil witch, there was also a story about how a man who had been pursuing her had brought a forbidden magic scroll to get her attention, making her so angry she left the court. That would explain why only the bad rumors gained traction. In fact, Albrea hated the way the men of the

court used Porion as an example to speak ill of women as a whole.

That said, it did seem likely that her love affairs had in fact made a mess of the court. The freedom of her spirit was almost beautiful in a way.

“Are you sure you haven’t actually used anybody as potion ingredients?” Yoto asked. “You just threatened to take her apart. And that seal you mentioned is deep in a labyrinth.”

“Come on, have some faith in me. We’re friends, aren’t we?” Porion replied.

“Settle down, Yoto. That story always amazes me no matter how many times I hear it. Though I suppose I should expect as much from you, Porion.”

“Yay! The duke complimented me!” Porion clung to the duke, pressing her soft chest against him, but—as he was already a two thousand year old man—he paid it no mind. He simply squinted into the void as he drank his ale.

“You insect,” Yoto muttered, her veins bulging out of her head. The duke patted her head, and she returned to her beef stew after exhaling her irritation through her nose.

Albrea, meanwhile, was only growing more confused. Despite the chaos unfolding before her, there was also a sense of trust and camaraderie between them. And that wasn’t all—everywhere she looked exuded peace. The tavern was full of smiles. “What’s going on here? There’s a witch. A gangster. Even a devil. So why—”

“Hah, you exaggerate,” the duke said, smiling. “Why don’t you take a moment to clear your head and look around? Everyone is full of joy. There are no devils here.”

Everyone listening fought against the urge to play the straight man and say “but you’re a devil!” and instead agreed with the duke.

Ordinarily Albrea would have pulled her sword on him for making fun of her, but another glare from Father Blutgang kept her quiet. She timidly settled down and looked about the tavern. Just as the duke had said, everyone seemed happy.

Apart from the muscular priest, the buxom dark elf, the greater demon who

could have been the Demon Lord, and the maid who had burned her with hellfire, the rest of the tavern seemed normal. In fact, it seemed more cheerful than any tavern Albrea had ever been to. There were as many different races as one would find the royal capital, yet they were all getting along without any friction or discrimination.

Still, Albrea couldn't help but point. "Is that an orc? I thought they hated gnomes. Why are they drinking together?" Orcs and gnomes were said to have been at odds for generations, yet there they were sitting together at the counter and happily chatting away. She caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a dancing doll they were examining and discussing as they drank.

"Oh, that's Mordan from the Ogre produce shop and Majikim the woodcarver. Looks like they're playing with another wooden golem. Majikim keeps making them instead of working on the statue for the church altar," Father Blutgang complained.

"But they're cool, aren't they?" asked Porion. "What was it he called them when he came to my shop to find good manastones? Ac...act...action figures? Something like that."

"Indeed, indeed. Anything that brings new business is a good thing. I'm quite interested in them as well," the duke added.

"Master, I'm cutting off your tail if you go wasting money again. That witch there will pay a lot of money for it."

"Is that why you end up with more clothes whenever we fight? No wonder you're always after my horns and tail. They grow back, but it still hurts, you know!"

"I don't care. You bought an expensive fishing pole in secret, then went and won another sword in an auction even though you already have me," Yoto grumbled.

"Ugh... I suppose I can't argue with that."

Everyone burst into laughter and the situation finally sunk in for Albrea.

"Anyway, you see how things are, young lady. I don't know who told you otherwise, but this here's a peaceful village. There's nobody for a royal knight

to save. His Majesty the king actually comes here for vacation in secret sometimes," said Father Blutgang.

"His Majesty does?! I've never heard about that!" Albrea exclaimed.

Father Blutgang shrugged. "Of course not. Very few people actually know what this village is."

"B-But that bard said..."

The tavern went dead silent the moment the word "bard" came out of her mouth. The duke and the others looked at Albrea with grim expressions. Even the orc and gnome talking at the counter turned to face her.

"Huh? Wh-What? What's wrong?"

"You just said bard, didn't you? No, I don't even want to ask. I already know the answer..." the duke muttered.

Casting a sidelong glance at the duke, who was very clearly unhappy, Yoto asked Albrea a question. "Miss knight, would you mind telling us the name of that bard?" Her eyes were glued to Albrea, wrathful fire burning inside.

"Eek!"

"You have nothing to fear. I promised not to turn my blade on you again. Now, the name." Despite her assurances, the black mana pouring out of her was extremely terrifying. Albrea had flashbacks to what Yoto had done to her earlier and shivered.

For her part, Yoto was trying to be as unthreatening as possible and had a wide smile on her face. She had practiced it in private and was quite confident in her smile, but in this situation, it only made her scarier. "Out with it."

"Ah, umm, h-he's a friend of my brother, named Gilmeus—"

The entire tavern erupted into a chorus of "I knew it!" when she said the name.

"That con man again!" the duke shouted in complaint. "Is he trying to get material for a story? That must be it. That moron just *had* to bring us more trouble!" Covering his eyes with his hands, he looked up at the heavens.

“That asshole...” After scowling in anger for a brief moment, a smile suddenly appeared on Yoto’s face. “Ah, you have my sympathy, miss knight. I’m sure it was hard on you, but don’t let it get you down. You’re not the one at fault.” Though she tried to be apologetic, the edges of her lips were twitching with rage. She began drawing out a magic circle as she shoveled beef stew into her mouth.

Laughing, Father Blutgang offered Albrea a skewer of meat and patted her on the back. “Wah ha ha ha! Of course it was him! You’ve got a ways to go, young lady. You were outmatched. Best just to eat and forget about it.”

“Would you like a potion to lighten your spirits?” Porion asked, pulling a small bottle from her cleavage and placing it on the table. It had an unusual appearance, and with the way its richly colored contents were roiling, anybody could tell it was dangerous.

“H-Hey, what are you pullin’ out all of a sudden? Do you keep that stuff on you at all times?!”

“You’ve got the wrong idea, Father. This potion was passed down in my parents’ village. It has a long, respected history amongst the dark elves. And it gets you oh-so-very high.” She seemed to have good intentions, but the offer was still as suspicious as could be.

“So, what’s in it?” Father Blutgang asked, but he only received a wry smile in return.

Some people were angry, while others took pity on Albrea. There were some who laughed just as hard as Father Blutgang and offered her booze and food in consolation, and finally there were those who remained silent with serious looks on their faces that said “what are we going to do about this?”

“Huh? Huh? What’s going on?” Albrea asked, confused by the varying reactions.

“Don’t worry about it, knight. All is forgiven,” said the duke.

“Master, I just cast isolation magic.”

“Oh, you work fast, Yoto. Excellent job.”

Yoto smiled in satisfaction as the duke patted her head. To an outsider she may have just looked like a cute maid being doted on, but to Albrea she seemed more like a purring wildcat. “This is him we’re talking about, so I bet he used that capture magic he’s good at. He probably used a spell like Hijack to take over a slyph’s senses.”

“As such, cutting off his sight and hearing is standard procedure. Now, listen up, everyone. Someone needs to go inform Somerset the hunter, but that bard is skilled at concealment magic, so don’t let your guard down,” the duke instructed.

A few villagers stood up and got to work. They had been red-faced with intoxication just a moment ago, but they immediately sobered up and even paid their tabs after returning their mugs and plates and bowing to the owner of the tavern. Albrea was shocked by their professionalism.

“Wh-What just happened? I knew this village was weird! Not even trained scouts carry themselves like that! They’re like ninjas from the east!” shouted Albrea.

“Anyway, you got played for a fool, young lady. You’re good with a sword, but your head needs some work,” said Father Blutgang, changing the subject.

“Played for a fool? Me?!”

“I’m sure he told you there was a devil livin’ here and that you’d become a great hero if you defeated it.”

“How do you know that?!”

“It’s just how that idiot tends to do things. He lights a fire under some unsuspecting sap’s ass and sends them off into danger, all the while using invisibility magic to secretly tail them and get material for his stories.”

Albrea’s face went pale. Normally Yoto would have added insult to injury and asked, “Are you really that stupid?” but she took pity on the knight and refrained from doing so. Aware of Yoto’s restraint, the duke wordlessly started patting her head again. Perhaps to hide her embarrassment, Yoto made her hair bounce back and forth with magic, slapping the duke on the cheek.

“That can’t be! He’s a bard recognized by the royal palace! He even knows His

Majesty! He wouldn't trick me!"

"That's how he gets you. Then he flees the scene as soon as things go south. Don't let it bring you down. You're right that he's affiliated with the royal palace—that's what gives him the power to pass through any checkpoint in the country in search of stories for the king. I don't blame you for trustin' him. Wah ha ha!" The priest gave another big laugh and patted Albrea on the back.

Albrea finally realized her error and slumped her shoulders, her face red with shame.

"Good grief. We can let the ninjas comb the mountain tonight. What happened is all water under the bridge now. I was fooled by him myself once, so I can't blame you. Allow me to welcome you, knight," said the duke.

"I'm in your debt..." Albrea's voice trailed off. She was already depressed, so it was hardly the time to make fun of her.

"Here, drink up!" said Father Blutgang, handing her a drink.

"Actually, there's one thing I have my doubts about, Master."

"Hm? What is it, Yoto?"

"I put an illusion curse on that bard the last time he caused trouble. My apologies to Lady Daltorion, but I made it so he can't set foot in Montt for ten years."

"Hmm. That's a good point." The duke tilted his head to the side. "This village also sits at the foot of the sacred mountain. It's a long way from the capital. Even if he followed Lady Albrea, he would be exhausted before long."

"That *is* pretty weird," said Father Blutgang, his hand on his chin.

The duke looked around. "Where did Porion go?" The witch—who stood out even when completely silent—had vanished. Waving his hand, the duke called out to a nearby woman. "Hey, Meikris! Over here!"

A female dwarf even more muscular than Father Blutgang walked over. She was Meikris, the owner of the Chimera Tavern. "What do you need, Duke? Another drink?"

"Ah, Lady Meikris. I'd like another bowl of beef stew please. It's so delicious I

can’t help myself,” said Yoto.

“Well, aren’t you a sweetheart? You were raised well.” Meikris patted Yoto’s head and ruffled her hair. She knew what Yoto actually was of course, but she still treated her like a little girl. Yoto had taken her current form because she yearned to be like a human, so this made her quite happy.

“I’m fine,” said the duke. “I just wanted to know if you’ve seen Porion.”

“The potion seller? She snuck out a little bit ago. She looked guilty, but she paid her tab, so I didn’t give her any trouble.”



“She’s in on it too. No doubt about it,” said Father Blutgang.

“Come to think of it, I did notice she was wearing a new bracelet,” said Yoto. “She goes to the capital all the time, so I bet she met him there and he gave it to her in exchange for casting Uncurse on him and teleporting him here with Spoldia. The Labyrinth Witch is known for that sort of magic.”

“I see... Goodness, I suppose that’s one way to make a living.” The duke gave a big sigh. “I think I’ll have another drink after all. One for the knight here as well.”

Albrea was still hanging her head, quite deflated. “Thank you for your generosity. I’m very sorry...” Her voice was faint, but she clutched her mug tightly. She downed her drink in a way that must have impressed the villagers, as they kept pouring her more.

Those left in the tavern ended up throwing her something of a welcome party, but one man remained sober through it all. Silently standing up, Father Blutgang left a few coins on the counter.

“Where are you headed, Blut?” asked the duke.

“Just off to take care of a pitiful lost lamb. That idiot knows how to handle ninjas. They’re pretty similar, after all. Which means it’s my time to shine.” Father Blutgang quietly left the Chimera.

Watching the doors swing behind him, the duke narrowed his eyes. “Hrmm, it seems the Holy Fist has acknowledged his valor. Gilmeus is in for it now.” The duke pulled out his pipe and went to light it, but Yoto instantly grabbed his arm.

“No smoking here. It’s an insult to the Chimera’s cooking—no, to my beef stew.”

“All right, all right.” The duke raised the white flag and put his pipe back in his pocket dimension. Smoking was technically allowed, but mentioning that would just make her mad.

★

The night grew late. Around the time Albrea’s drinking had advanced to the point of her crying and complaining about all her troubles, a man sat beneath a tree, illuminated by the moonlight in the forest just outside Montt Village. He wore a green wide-brimmed hat, and beneath his matching green poncho was a

black jacket with beautiful gold decorations. He had knee-length boots, and his pants were made of thick leather. The holster on his belt held a bulky book, and he carried a harp on his back, looking every bit the traveling bard.

“Seems like the sound’s been cut off. Yoto’s a smart girl, but the plan’s already around eighty percent complete. All that’s left is to turn it into a good story.” As he muttered to himself, a bright light fluttered in front of his face. At first he thought it was a wil-o’-wisp, but it turned out to be a fairy-like wind spirit known as a sylph. “Ah, thanks. This concludes our temporary contract. Sorry to be rude, but we never met, understand?”

The sylph flapped its wings in confusion, then flew off and disappeared.

“Sneaking past Yoto is no easy feat. Luckily I was able to find a sylph, but I didn’t expect her to ward the entire village against spirits. My capture magic took a long time too. I’ve got a cramp in my harp-playing finger.” Pulling himself up off the ground, he readied his harp. No sound came out when he plucked the strings, but he continued playing, and before long several magic circles appeared and floated through him.

He cast several kinds of support magic on himself. The first was the sound eliminating spell Silence, and the second was the concealment spell Stealth. The ability to use his harp to cast magic without any incantation was one of his skills as a bard. He became one with the forest, down to his mana itself. After playing a little while longer, he took a breath.

“The moon’s nice and bright tonight. It’s a shame I can’t sing it a song—ninjas might turn up if I get too loud. A happy ending needs a song of celebration—of praise and unity—then you connect to the listener’s heart through the melody.” Although he spoke of avoiding getting caught, his monologue was anything but quiet. Yet due to the many spells he had cast on himself, all the noise he made was eliminated. Any branches he stepped on, any plants he pushed out of the way—even his breathing.

“Still, I wish there had been more of a climax. Personally, I think happiness is nothing without a struggle. Oh well. Knowing her, she’s bound to cause another scene for me.”

“Oh? For you, huh?”

The bard stopped in his tracks. “That voice...” Though he’d taken every precaution to erase his presence, someone had been able to read his lips in the darkness. He broke out into a cold sweat. Looking around, he saw nothing. The only things he heard were the leaves blowing in the night breeze and the hooting of owls. It was perfectly silent. “H-Hey there, Holy Fist, my friend.”

“I don’t recall ever being your friend, Gilmeus.”

Turning around, the bard saw a man illuminated by the moonlight. It was Father Blutgang, still wearing his trademark sunglasses despite the darkness of the night. He was like a predator watching his prey.

“Let me go ahead and give you that old cliché line: ‘Impossible! My concealment techniques should have been flawless!’” the bard said with a dramatic flourish. “Master Daltorion passed her skills down to me. I’m proud to say I can even give ninjas the slip.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to be humble and admit you need further training. I’m sure you’ve heard of my technique. It’s the Dragon Spirit, one of the Eight Flowers of Eirimt.”

“I certainly have. It’s one of the embodiments of salvation handed down from long, long ago. Dragons are creatures that dwell in dark caves. The name Dragon Spirit comes from the fact your fist can break through even their scaly hide. Dark nights and pursuits are your specialty...but that’s a load of crap. You just tracked me with that chakra energy you monks use, didn’t you?”

“Bingo. Can’t hide it no matter what magic you use. If you wanna break it down, it’s an ascetic technique. It’s the opposite of the magic you know so much about, so I doubt you’d be able to wrap your head around it.”

Gilmeus gulped. The moment he reached down to the book in his holster, he heard three thuds as something pierced it. They were needles. The same medical needles Father Blutgang always had at his hip. “You threw them?! In this darkness?!”

“Surrender now and I’ll let you off with just a punch. Give up and spit it out. What are you plotting this time?”

“What a simple yet powerful line. I’ll have to remember it for later.

Unfortunately for you, I can't afford to be captured just yet. I still have a happy ending to write!" Gilmeus slammed something on the ground and was immediately enveloped in a smoke screen. It was the Smoke spell, but he hadn't cast it with an incantation or a melody from his harp. It must have been a manastone with the spell sealed inside, allowing it to activate the moment it broke on the ground.

"I'm no good at playing tag!" Gilmeus strummed his harp as he ran, casting a spell. He picked up speed as though being carried along by the wind. "Sorry! I don't stand much of a chance against the Holy Fist! He who flees lives to see another day, so flee I shall!"

"You're not bad for a skinny little bean sprout!"

Startled, Gilmeus turned to find the priest keeping pace with him, kicking off the trunks of trees. Gilmeus immediately strung his harp to cast the defensive magic Kon Shield, but it was too late.

"Nice try! Double Dragon Kick!" Father Blutgang, who had leapt sideways into the air, unleashed a kick clad in fighting spirit. It was a two-staged attack. The first kick broke through Gilmeus's defensive magic, while the second hit him straight in the chest.

"Gwah!" Letting out a sound like a frog getting squished, Gilmeus went flying into a tree. Coughing, he got back up and found himself face-to-face with Father Blutgang, who stood with his arms crossed in the moonlight.

"I held back, so quit bein' all dramatic. It's over—you slipped up at the very end. No point in straining your eyes looking for someone hiding. Close your eyes and hone your senses, then you'll be able to see the unseen. That's who you're dealin' with here."

"Urgh... Is that why you're always wearing those sunglasses? Impressive as always, Holy Fist. Would you let me off the hook if I beg for my life? I have a good reason this time. I meant you all no harm, I swear."

"You're a pain in the ass, but I know you're harmless. Your desire for salvation is the one thing I respect about you, but that greed of yours is no good. It's always stories with you. Are you tryin' to play god and write people's lives for them?"

“It’s nothing so grand, but I do have my conviction. Every story I tell has a happy ending. And what good is a story if it’s not entertaining? A thrilling life is a wonderful thing, no matter the day and age, no matter the person!” The bard’s words were despicable, but the look on his face said he truly believed it.

“You’d make the young lady cry for that?” Understanding his resolve, Father Blutgang clicked his tongue. “It’s been a while since someone had the valor to not fear my fist. That dedication is almost like faith—it can lead you to salvation. It’s something to be protected.”

“You’ve quite the discerning eye, Holy Fist. I completely agree. But tears are the essence of a good story. Far cheaper than blood, wouldn’t you say? And the maiden’s hardship is the sweetest honey of all!”

“That’s it! I’m gonna beat some sense into you!” Incensed by Gilmeus’s egotistical words, Father Blutgang raised his fist.

Just as he swung at the bard, Gilmeus pulled out yet another manastone and tossed it into his mouth. The moment the priest’s fist hit his face, something cracked between his teeth.

Father Blutgang was just a little too slow to realize his intentions. “Another manastone! He pissed me off on purpose!”

“Sorry... I’m serious about this...” After speaking those final words, Gilmeus fell unconscious from the sleep inducing spell Hypno, passing out on the spot. The spell was ordinarily used on others, but he cast it directly on himself, taking it through the mouth to make it immediately effective. Father Blutgang wouldn’t be able to wake him up with a needle like he had Albrea.

“He sealed his own lips. Gotta hand it to him. Guess I still need some more training myself.” Father Blutgang picked Gilmeus up by the scruff of his neck and carried him on his shoulders. He had half a mind to leave him to the wolves in the forest, but still a softy at heart, the priest shook his head and lumbered back to the village.

Chapter 4

The princess knight couldn’t believe it. The maid was the demonic sword.

It was morning and Albrea awoke with a pounding headache. “Mmm, where am I? Oww...” Holding her temples, she slowly got up and found herself in an unfamiliar room. It was modest but clean, with the faint scent of wood in the air. The ceiling was a little high, but beyond that it was an ordinary guest room.

Albrea tilted her head, wondering how she got there. She had to think for a moment, but eventually her shameful conduct the day before started coming back to her. Her impatience and stubbornness had gotten the better of her. On top of that, she had gotten drunk and cried all over the very people she had pointed her sword at. It was too shameful to be summed up in a single word.

The pain was only natural after how much she’d had to drink yesterday. Men and women alike were considered adults at fifteen, so her drinking wasn’t a problem in and of itself, but Albrea had minimal experience with alcohol.

As her vision cleared up, so did her memory. The elderly demon she’d pointed her sword at had turned out to be quite friendly—he’d happily listened to all her sobs and complaints. The scowling maid had offered Albrea the beef stew she called a culinary masterpiece. Even the other villagers had offered her drinks and were empathetic to her situation. It was oddly comforting.

Until last night, Albrea had never been able to feel at peace even in her own home, let alone the royal palace. At last able to let loose, she had cried and cried. Burning with embarrassment over the memory, she couldn’t help but squeal. Fortunately for her, there was nobody around to hear it. Burying her face in her pillow, she mumbled to herself. “Ahh... What have I done?”

“Finally awake, Lady Albrea? Breakfast is ready.” Someone else’s voice echoed through the room. Turning her head in surprise, Albrea found Yoto standing next to her bed in a red maid outfit. Hands on her hips, she was scowling at her guest.

“Eeeek!”

Yoto didn’t even flinch. “What am I, a ghost? I’m a little hurt.”

“S-Sorry... Umm...”

“You may call me Yoto, Lady Albrea. Or would you prefer I call you Princess Albrea?”

“Um, I’d prefer no title at all, actually...”

“Then Albrea it is. Once again, welcome to my master’s home. Though humble, it does still have a bathroom. The well water has already been drawn, so you may go wash your face.” Yoto’s voice was cold as she encouraged Albrea to wash up.

Albrea crawled out of bed, embarrassed and still frightened of Yoto due to the hellish nightmare that she’d inflicted on her the day before. “U-Umm...”

“Yes? Oh, the bathroom is down the hall to the right.”

“N-No, not that. Are you still mad about yesterday?”

“Not particularly. In fact, as Master’s sword, I feel I owe you an apology. We both bear the blame for what happened, but it’s in the past now.” Despite how angry she had been, the maid brushed it off like it was nothing. Albrea felt like she had piled up insult upon insult and wanted to bow in apology, but Yoto quickly ended the discussion before she had the chance. “Now, enough of that. I’m going to start cleaning up if you don’t eat soon.”

“A-All right. Thank you.”

“Good. This way, please.” Yoto walked off.

Albrea was taken aback by Yoto’s nonchalance for a brief moment, then hurried after her. Her vision and thoughts beginning to settle, Albrea looked around at her surroundings as she walked.

It was a modest but quaint wooden house. The black floor of the hallway was polished to a shine, reflecting the sunlight entering through the windows. Turning the corner, she saw a small shelf decorated with a lovely flower vase filled with yellow crocuses, providing a nice accent to the chic atmosphere of the hall.

The ceiling in the hallway was just as high as it was in the bedroom, adding to the fantastical feeling of the home. Albrea felt like she might see a spirit poke its head out around the corner at any moment. If she were ever to live outside the royal capital, she would want it to be in a beautiful, comforting place like this. She could hardly believe it was the home of the other founding father of the country—the legend once known as the Sacred Black Sword.

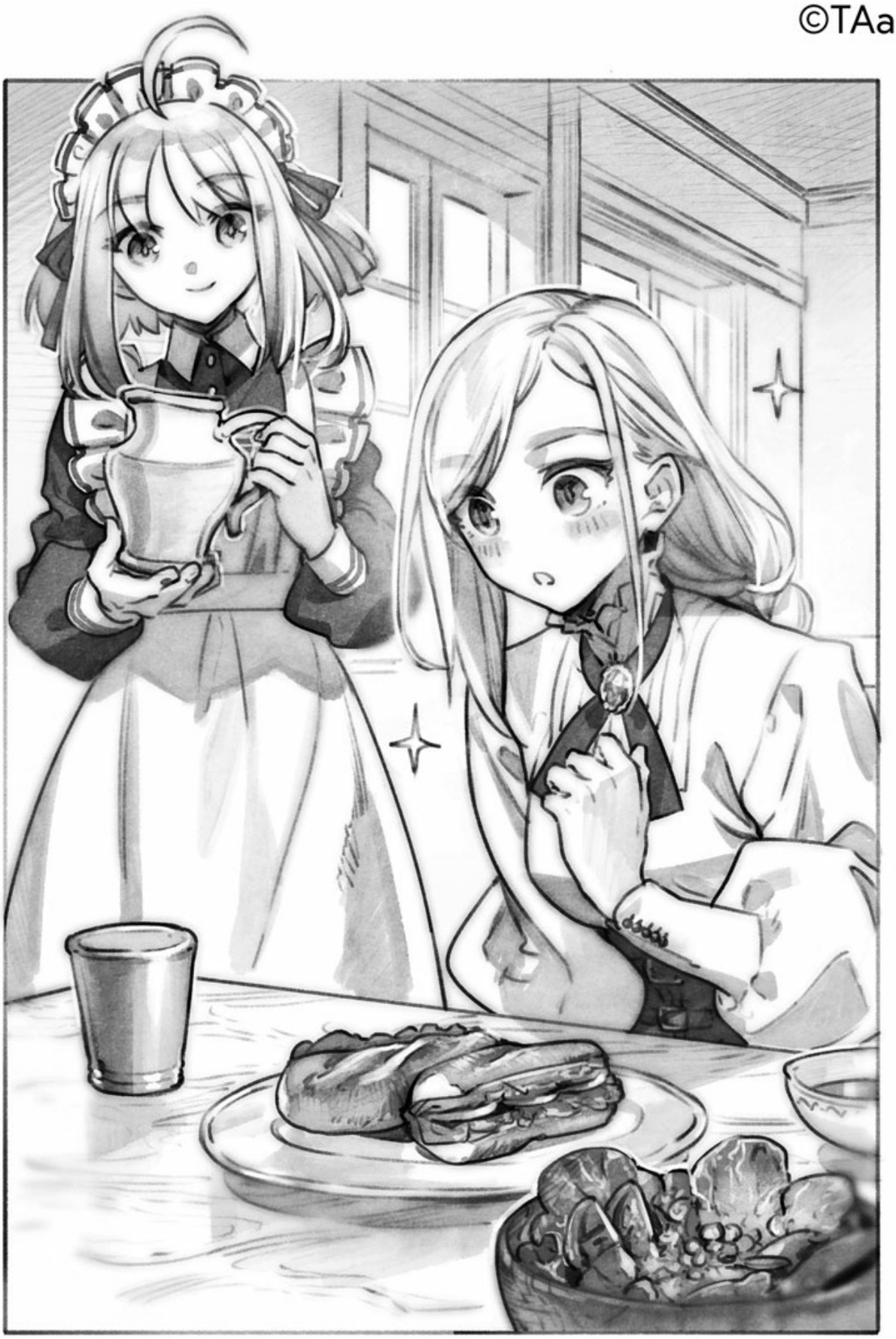
"Here we are. Go ahead and wash up. I assume you know how to use it." The washbasin Yoto led Albrea to was quite luxurious. It had a three-sided mirror large enough to rival the one in Albrea's own home. There were also several makeup containers, presumably for Yoto.

Albrea used a bucket of water to wash her face, the cool well water easily clearing her lingering drowsiness. When she raised her face, Yoto was waiting next to her with a towel to dry off. Her maid skills were impressive; she reminded Albrea of her family's servants.

When she arrived in the living room, she found a sandwich, milk, and a salad waiting for her. The vegetables in the sandwich were the picture of freshness. "Is this all for me?"

"Of course. You are our guest. Please, help yourself. Our village's vegetables are first-class."

Silently praying, Albrea timidly took a bite, and instantly a taste unlike anything she had ever experienced spread through her mouth. "I-It's delicious!" She couldn't help but cry out in wonder.



It was so good it made her want to praise the food no matter who heard. The sweetness of the vegetables seemed to melt together with the bread, and the

ham was salted just right. The slight hint of herbs balanced the taste to perfection. “What’s with this sandwich? It’s better than anything I’ve ever eaten in my life!”

“Glad to hear it. The lettuce and tomatoes from Mordan’s Ogre produce shop are excellent. Even in the royal palace, I doubt you often get produce fresh from the field.” Yoto smiled. She normally kept a composed expression on her face, so this could only mean she was genuinely happy to have someone who had grown up eating in the royal palace compliment her food.

“Did you make this, Miss Yoto? It’s as good as a master chef’s cooking.”

“No need to call me ‘Miss.’ And you’ll gain nothing from flattering me.” Despite her words, Yoto was clearly happy. Being complimented had made her drop her guard, and her mana was leaking out.

Albrea had no ulterior motives, but she had exaggerated a little. Still, she was relieved to see she had delighted Yoto. She wanted to reach out and pat her head, but was still too afraid of Yoto to do so. Albrea imagined herself as Yoto’s master, the maid’s pouting face breaking into a smile when she patted her head.

Lost in her daydreams, she devoured the rest of her food. Albrea had never imagined there would be a day that she would be willing to throw out the manners she had respected so much as a knight.

Seeing the rapid way Albrea ate only put Yoto in an even better mood. “It *is* quite well-made, if I do say so myself. I wonder what I should make you next?” The striking beauty puffed out her chest in satisfaction as her true thoughts sneaked out.

Although Yoto had only just yesterday burnt Albrea to a crisp, her reaction was so cute Albrea just wanted to hug her and ruffle her hair. However, afraid of being turned into charcoal for good this time, she resisted the urge. She didn’t have to go so far as to hug her, but after her meal Albrea prayed to someday at least be able to pat her head like the duke did. “Thank you for the food. It was delicious.”

Yoto seemed amused. “Heh heh. Your attitude is nothing like it was yesterday.”

“I-I’m really ashamed...” Albrea said, bowing her head. There was a question still tugging at her. “Umm...”

“What is it now? There are no seconds. It’s not good to eat too much first thing in the morning. We live simple lives here, so there are no full course meals like in the royal palace.”

“No, I’m just not sure how to ask this... Are you really the...”

“Hm? Ah, yes. I’m Jotunn. My full name is Jotunn, Demonic Sword of Frost. Nice to meet you.” Yoto lifted her skirt and gave a curtsey.

Demonic Sword of Frost, Jotunn. Bearing the name of the frost giants said to have existed during the age of the gods, it was an autonomous magic weapon that manipulated the wrathful imprisoning flames—one of the legendary demonic armaments said to unite with its wielder. It was the name of the destructive demonic sword once wielded by Demon Duke Tyrfing.

Originally it had just been an ordinary greatsword, but it was given life by the duke’s personal spell, the creation magic known as Craft. It may sound odd, but this in essence made Yoto the duke’s daughter.

In terms of abilities, it was fair to call her a weapon. She utilized her wielder’s mana, but she acted and thought independently, on top of having her own overwhelming raw power. A single swing of her blade could rival the strength of an entire knight order. For that reason, battles one thousand years ago were said to have hinged on whether or not she could be defeated.

That excessive strength made her a legendary character who made frequent appearances in the story of the Kingdom of Bilegga’s founding, the *Song of Bilegga.* She was also referred to as the Black Blade of the Abyss, the duke’s more demonic counterpart. Together they were said to have taught the hero Bilegga swordsmanship.

As a result, she was a beloved figure to the children of the nation. They all dreamed of being able to wield her, and Albrea was no exception. In fact, as a child she had engraved Yoto’s name into a wooden sword when she played with the boys of the kingdom.

Such a legendary weapon was now a short, scowling maid. It was no wonder

Albrea had a hard time believing it. The sword had even fed her a top-class meal. It was too much for Albrea to wrap her head around. “It’s an honor to meet the demonic sword of legend.”

“I’m nothing more than a maid now. No, maybe it would be more accurate to say I’m just pretending to be a maid. With the world at peace, there’s no need for weapons.” A hint of sadness on her face, Yoto withdrew to the kitchen. However, it had been a long time since someone had said they were honored to meet her, so her good mood quickly returned and she hummed as she washed the dishes.

Albrea drank the rest of her milk in disbelief that such a sweet young girl was one of the demonic armaments.

★

Despite being told to make herself at home, Albrea couldn’t settle down. After hesitating in the doorway for nearly an hour, she finally found the resolve to put on her shoes and head into the yard. She had slept in quite late, so the sun was already directly overhead. It had been a while since she’d taken it easy like this. Ordinarily she would be beating herself up for her laziness, but just this once, it wasn’t so bad.

Stepping out onto the deck, she gazed at the duke’s house. It was a wooden, two-story structure a little taller than was typical. It had beautiful white walls that contrasted with the exposed black pillars. The surrounding homes were constructed similarly, giving the village a plain, orderly appeal.

The yard was spacious, complete with a fancy table, chairs, and even an umbrella. Yoto and the duke probably relaxed there. The smithy attached to the home was impressive despite its small size. The equipment inside was every bit as high quality as what could be found in the royal capital. Children were playing in the yard and watching the duke as he hammered away inside. Not one of them feared the demon blacksmith, and some even played with his tail as he worked.

“Excuse me...” Albrea said as she timidly approached.

“Oh, already awake, are you?” the duke replied, pausing his work for the moment. “You’re made of sturdy stuff. Excellent. It’s good to be full of energy.”

“All thanks to you, father of the country...”

“No need for all that. It was a long time ago. I’m retired now, so you can just call me old man. Call me Duke like everyone else if that’s too much for you. Though you should know I’ve long since discarded my court rank.” The duke laughed heartily, causing the children to mimic him and echo his laughter.

“I-I can’t apologize enough! I pointed my sword at the country’s hero without realizing it! Then I called you an evil demon! Please find it in your heart to forgive me!” Albrea bowed, on the verge of tears.

Albrea had committed one of the worst blunders possible as a knight of the Kingdom of Bilegga. Though she hadn’t known it at the time, she had turned her blade on one of the two men known as the founding fathers of the kingdom. She couldn’t be more ashamed. After all, the emblem of the winged knight on her sword was inspired by the duke. He would be in the right to ask her to give up her life for her disrespect.

“As I said before, it’s fine. I’m not mad. All the blame lies with that con man.” The duke wiped his sweat with a towel he had around his neck. “Look over there,” he said, using his tail to point at the bell tower in the center of the village. It was a tall structure surrounding a statue of the creator god, and tied to the top was a bruised and battered man.

Albrea’s eyes widened in recognition. “That’s the royal palace’s bard!”

“He’s Gilmeus, the one who tricked you. Blut captured him yesterday. He sealed his own mouth when Blut tried to make him talk. His accomplice is being punished too.”

“He had an accomplice?”

“Go take a look around the square. It’s practically a regular event at this point.”

At the duke’s encouragement, Albrea headed down the village road. The square was just around the corner from the duke’s house, so she didn’t have far to go. Once there, she found the Labyrinth Witch Porion kneeling on the ground beneath the bell tower Gilmeus was tied up on. Her chest jiggled as she squirmed, but from the waist down, she wasn’t moving at all. It seemed like a

spell had forced her to sit.

“Nooooo! Don’t take my goods! I can’t sell them for that price!” she cried out.

“Heh heh heh, I love your punishment sales!” Father Blutgang chuckled. “Sorry, Porion, but you did this to yourself.”

“Stooooooop! Don’t make me sell at a loss!”

“You were hiding elixirs by the dozen!” Blutgang said accusingly. “No wonder they were always out of stock. Were you trying to drive up the price?”

“Noooo! I only let them sit in the back for a little while!”

“Wow, she’s the worst. Let’s buy up her whole stock! We’ll take everything she’s got for a fair price!” said another villager.

“My profiiiiiits! I’m losing so much money!” she cried.

An orc turned the corner. “I just came here to get some fertilizer for my field. Thanks for the discount, Labyrinth Witch!”

“Hey! That’s high quality fertilizer for medicinal herbs! Mordan! You can’t get it for that cheap! Stop it! Don’t take it all!”

“Yay! Free candy!” The village children cheered.

“Get out of here, you brats! Go play at the duke’s house!”

Albrea looked closer and saw that Porion had her goods lined up in front of her, with a sign nearby that said “To apologize for putting the village in danger, I’m selling my goods for bargain prices today!” The villagers were crowded around her, enjoying the steep discounts.

“Goodness, Porion never changes.” The duke said when Albrea returned. “She always lets her greed get the best of her. Anyway...” The duke held up an oddly thick single-edged sword. No, upon closer inspection, it was actually a kitchen knife. It was clear from a glance that it was well-crafted. “Hey, Mogul! The butcher’s knife is ready!” The duke called out to one of the children playing in his yard and handed him a sheathed butcher’s knife. “I added in a sheath too. Make sure you take it directly to your parents. I’ve already received their payment.”

The human boy pulled the knife slightly out of the sheath and was instantly taken by its beauty. “Thanks, Duke! Now dad can finally get back to work! We’ll give you our best cut of meat next time you come over!”

“Ha ha, I’m looking forward to it. Sagulga’s meat is to die for.” The duke waved to the child as he left, his eyes full of affection. Nodding his head with the satisfaction of a day’s hard work, he stretched his back and spread his wings. The children immediately gathered around him as if on cue. They seemed to recognize it as a sign he was taking a break. “Mmm, I think that’s enough for today.”

“U-Umm, Duke... What is all this about?” asked Albrea.

“You mean why do I act like I’m a blacksmith?”

“Yes. You’re one of the founding fathers of the nation. What are you doing all the way out here?”

“Ha ha ha! I suppose you could say it’s a hobby of mine. I’ve always enjoyed making and fixing things.”

Albrea was stunned into silence once again. Everything she thought she knew was collapsing all around her.

“Now, you said your name was Albrea, correct?”

“Yes, I’m—”

“No need. I’ve heard all about you from the old lady next door. I suppose I should call you by your full title, sixth princess Albrea van Bilegga.”

Albrea shook her head, bashful. “N-No, just Albrea is fine!”

“But you are sixth in line for the throne. I hear you’re one of the kingdom’s four top knights as well. You’ve received the blessing of the west, the direction the Demon Lord’s army first appeared from. They even call you the Sword Princess.”

“Yes. You see right through me.” Albrea bowed once again—a knight’s bow this time. Despite not wearing her armor at the moment, she held herself as though she were, appearing as refined as a suited-up knight. Both the duke and the children climbing on him were impressed.

“You truly are a knight. There aren’t many who could match your grace and manners. But why are you here, princess knight? No, let me rephrase that—why are you in such a hurry?”

Albrea frowned at the duke’s question. Not letting the slightest subtlety slip by him, the duke sighed knowingly.

“You really do see through everything, Duke. What gave it away?”

“For better or worse, humans are greedy creatures. You can see the devil in their eyes when they’re in a hurry. Woaaa...” The duke suddenly let out a goofy sound.

“Your mouth is so big, Duke! Stretch!” At some point, a kobold girl had climbed onto his shoulders. She started pulling on his cheeks from behind, cackling all the while.

“Ah! How dare you do that to the duke!” Albrea shouted in surprise.

“Now, now, Naza. Didn’t I tell you not to climb on my head?” The duke reached up and grabbed the kobold girl with both hands, gently placing her on the ground. She seemed to have found this amusing, as she immediately asked him to do it again. “I’m having an important discussion with the princess knight right now,” he said gently. “Here, you and the other kids can go eat these on the bench over there.”

The duke snapped his fingers and created a magic circle in the garden. A blanket and basket of cookies appeared, much to the children’s delight. “Yay!”

“Make sure you share them equally!” The duke called as the children all raced over to the basket like pigeons flocking to bread in a park. However, the moment Yoto appeared at the back gate, they all instantly turned around in fear and went to the well to wash their hands.

“Master, it’s fine to give the children snacks, but at least tell them to wash their hands first.”

“Sorry, Yoto. Now, where were we?” He turned back to Albrea. “Right, yesterday I saw the devil in your eyes. It was painfully apparent. What happened?”

Albrea was at a loss for words. What *had* happened to her? She was always on edge, always frustrated—and before she knew it, she had been tricked by a con man. All she could think was that she must have lost sight of herself. The way she swung her sword had surpassed foolhardiness and moved on to pure foolishness. Bringing back glory for her brother was just an excuse. There was something behind it, but Albrea couldn't put it into words.

"It's not simple greed. Given your birth, status, and skill with a blade, renown would come to you regardless. You're a full-fledged knight now. You aren't of the age where you should be fussing about your standing."

Albrea hung her head at his words. The corners of her eyes heated up, and she had to stop herself from breaking into tears. Her fists trembled though she wasn't clenching them very tightly. She glanced up at the duke and saw him smiling cheerfully. He had pulled out a pipe and was smoking as Yoto leaned against one of the workshop's pillars and looked in her direction.

As Albrea tried to find the words, the duke turned his thoughts to the distant past. She was just like him. Now that he'd had the opportunity to speak with her calmly, he could tell. The intelligence. The way she had turned her sword on him in her impatience. Everything. It was like replaying a scene from a thousand years ago. That rambunctious warrior had been the exact same way. They do say the branch doesn't fall far from the tree... The duke couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he reminisced.

"Duke?" Albrea asked.

"It's nothing. Why don't you try telling me what's on your mind?"

"I'm not sure—"

"Don't worry. This village is a place for lost folks like yourself. You don't need to be coherent." A smoke ring floated up from the duke's pipe. "It doesn't matter if your words are jumbled. Just try getting them out. The first step to finding your footing is putting your problems into words. This isn't the royal palace. Only the sky is here to laugh at you," the duke said gently.

His voice was too compassionate to be speaking to someone he had only just met. Albrea had never heard such kind words at home or at the palace. They thawed her heart, gradually seeping in like the warmth of a human body against

cold iron. She did her best to hold back her tears. She kept her mouth straight, pushing her sobs back down her throat. But even if she had cried, the duke wouldn't have minded.

The silence continued for a while. The only sounds that could be heard were the voices of the children and the chirping of birds in the blue sky. The warm breeze tempted her to sleep. No one hurried her on. No one looked down on her. Albrea stood alone, as though embraced by Montt's earth itself. Eventually she stopped thinking and just let the words come from her heart.

"I believed..."

"Hmm?"

"I believed that if I wielded a blade, I could become a knight and protect the kingdom. But the world is at peace now. Swords are a last resort. The reality is that policies and governance are more important now." Albrea herself wasn't sure why she said what she did. Perhaps it was the root of her troubles—a truth she didn't want to admit. The words flowed out of her mouth one after another as though a dam had broken.

"You're absolutely right," she continued. "I was born into a household where I could have done nothing and luxury would have fallen into my lap. But I couldn't accept that. I wasn't satisfied being praised without getting hurt or putting in any effort." Albrea took a deep breath, getting her rampaging emotions under control. If she hadn't, she would have burst into tears like she had the day before. "Before I am a princess, I am a knight. As such, I practiced with a wooden sword every day. To become someone capable of facing hardship and protecting the people. Just like the kingdom's founders. I wanted to be like you, but with the current state of the world, it wasn't meant to be."

"Countries settle their differences by talking things out these days," the duke said. "I hear peace talks are underway with the country to the south over the border dispute."

"Yes. And knights have no place at that table."

"Hmm, but I can't imagine you desire war," the duke replied. "You're struggling with the idea that military might should not exist because the world is at peace. Is there a place for knights in such a world? It's a difficult question."

Albrea nodded her head silently in agreement. The duke was starting to see what troubled her. To put it bluntly, she was honest to a fault. No matter the state of the world, life was about compromise. There are times when one must do something even if they don't want to. Albrea knew this, but she couldn't accept it.

Honesty was said to be a virtue, but the duke knew that for some people it was a curse. She had pursued her idealized version of a knight, and as a result, she had found herself rejected by others, society, and the world itself. The duke had no doubt she was scorned within the royal palace.

It is a fool who prides themselves on the righteousness of their arguments, for without action, words hold no value. On the contrary, the ill-intentioned use words to incite others to action. But she had realized her ideals through her actions—the duke could see that much. As a member of the royal family, she had no choice but to do so. Dependence on others wasn't tolerated. She had been taught to act as an example to the people. That was how she believed she should carry herself, and she saw it through without error.

Which was precisely why she had been resented. Ordinary people—those who had to compromise between their ideals and reality—couldn't stand her. The duke's heart ached as though he had experienced her difficult days himself.

"How could that idiot do this to such a sweet girl." The duke turned his head and glared at the man tied up on the bell tower. Gilmeus must have been able to see what she was going through and wanted to use her struggle for his stories. That said, the root of the issue was still her impatient pursuit of glory.

It would have been easy to dismiss her as a fool. It should have been easy, but the duke couldn't do it. He loved humanity. Kinder than a human, and arguably even more human than a human, the duke felt he had to help her—though it greatly irritated him to be playing right into Gilmeus's hands.

There was but one thing to do. A thousand years ago, a hero—unable to sit back and watch the hell that was unfolding—set out to save not humans or demons, but simply people. That hero's blood ran through Albrea's veins, which meant all the duke had to do was recreate that fateful encounter.

"You want to become the last line of defense. A towering fortress to protect

the people. You swore upon your sword and came here seeking to prove that. Am I wrong?”

“Yes. But I see now how foolish I was. You have every right to take my head.”

“Good, good. That is how a knight should be. Carry yourself with honor. You have nothing to be ashamed of, but simply telling you that won’t clear the fog of doubt covering your blade, will it?” The duke stood and snapped his fingers once again, and two wooden swords fell from the sky a moment later. The sword that was before Albrea was around the same length as her bastard sword, while the duke’s was shorter, seventy centimeters long with only a single edge.

“Wooden swords? What’s this about, Duke?”

“First you must see the fog clouding your blade. I don’t imagine there are many who can match your swordsmanship. I may be retired, but I’ve still got enough fight in me to bring a princess to her senses.” The moment the duke picked up his sword, he seemed to become a completely different person from the sluggish old man Albrea had become acquainted with. Yoto always loved when he got like this and looked on happily. “Now, let us speak through our blades. That’s what knights do, is it not?”

Albrea’s face lit up into a smile. The joy of being acknowledged by the founding father of the kingdom made her blood rush for the first time in a while. The sadness that had been clinging to her was blown away in an instant. She stood and took up the sword without hesitation.



“Now, bring it on!” the duke commanded.

“Right! Here I come!” Albrea brandished her sword after wiping away the tears that had managed to escape, a fierce look on her face. She stood straight, her heels together and her sword at her center, looking every bit a proud knight. No, she was like a sword herself. She was the embodiment of a life dedicated to the blade. Like a single rose blossom in a field, or a white lily on a mountain cliff, she bloomed as an unmistakable, untarnished sword.

“Beautiful.” Albrea’s appearance was so refined the word slipped right out of Yoto’s mouth.

“I am a knight of the Kingdom of Bilegga. Granted the blessing of the west, my name is Albrea van Bilegga! My swordsmanship may look like mere child’s play in the face of a true hero, but the sweat I have shed and calloused skin of my hands is all real!”

Chapter 5

The princess knight was disheartened. Her training had all been a joke.

“In the end, the blessing of the west is but a form of divine protection magic,” Albrea said, standing before the duke with the wooden sword he’d provided her. “My sword technique is that of the Bilegga style. Allow me to show you one of our three signature moves: Wyvern Break!” She began with a swordplay technique she had mastered in her own unique style. In other words, an ultimate move.

Albrea lowered her hips and brought her wooden sword horizontally up to her face, adjusting the tip of the blade until it was level. This was a common longsword style known as the Ox Guard, intended to protect the upper body while targeting the opponent’s throat or gaps in their breast plate.

The duke, on the other hand, simply pointed his sword at her throat and was otherwise relaxed. His grip was slightly off-center, allowing the sword to flow away from him as he put his right foot forward.

He appeared unprepared for a sudden thrust. His stance was practically begging her to hit his right flank. Albrea hesitated, wondering if it was a trap, but the duke didn’t seem like the type to use underhanded tactics. She tossed aside her doubts and was about to strike when the duke suddenly adjusted his sword’s position.

The tip of his sword went from pointing at her throat to right between her brows. The purpose of this move was simple: to take the wind out of her sails before she even began. He was prepared to restrain her movement, or lunge the moment she struck—which meant she had no choice but to beat him to the punch.

“Wyvern Break!” Albrea dashed forward with a fierce battle cry, far too fast for any defensive posture to stop her. Her feet barely touched the ground as

though she were a giant arrow fired from a ballista mounted upon a castle's walls. Wyvern Break was the personification of that power—capable of shooting down wyverns, the underlings of dragons and harbingers of disaster.

Albrea was no berserker who simply relied on her magic sword and abused her blessing. She was a peerless fighter who had mastered the swordplay of a royal knight, and she had put her all into this attack. She was confident that no ordinary swordsman would be able to dodge it. However...

"Huh?" Her sword hit only the empty air, yet the duke didn't appear to have moved a muscle. Just like before, he was standing with his right foot forward—no, upon closer inspection, it was his left foot now. He had dodged Albrea's lightning-fast thrust with a single step backward.

As she stood dumbfounded, the duke bonked her on the head with his sword. "I see why they call you the Sword Princess. There aren't too many people who can do what you just did. I almost spit out my lunch when I first heard that boy founded his own school of swordplay. Reminds you of him, doesn't she, Yoto?"

"Yes, she has excellent form. Albrea's technique is far better than the boy—excuse me, than Bilegga I was at her age."

They were essentially saying she was even better than the founder of the kingdom, but Albrea was so stunned the high praise never reached her ears. "I gave it everything I had. I put more into that strike than I ever have."

"I can tell. It's exactly like the form I passed on to him so long ago," said the duke. "Now, let us continue our introductions." The duke had a gentle smile on his face, meanwhile Albrea's knees were about to give out.

His skills were simply on another level. She wasn't even close. If she were to take his words at face value, it meant the *Song of Bilegga* was true; the technique she used had been passed from the duke himself. Encouraged by that realization, Albrea took another stance.

"My, my." Yoto let an unusually cheerful voice slip out. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Hmm. The Fool's Guard," the duke observed.

"I assure you I mean no disrespect, Duke," said Albrea.

The Fool's Guard was a low stance where the arms were relaxed and the tip of the blade was pointed towards the ground. It invited attacks against the upper body by leaving the head seemingly unguarded, only for the attacker's blow to be countered and leave them looking like the fool, hence the name.

"In the Bilegga school of swordplay, it's called the Initiation Stance," Albrea explained. "It's the first stance we're taught, so it isn't named based on the position of the blade. All swordplay is said to begin from here."

At the word "initiation," the duke narrowed his eyes and nodded. "I see. So that's his legacy."

"Duke?"

"It's nothing. I suppose I'll take the bait." The duke raised his sword above his head. "It's been some time since I was this fired up. This technique is from a country far to the east, and is called Kage no Kamae, or Shadow Stance. It may look like I'm about to fire off a magic sword, but that's where the similarities end." The image of a large, imposing tree or tower seemed to appear behind the duke. The attack seemed entirely linear. "Now, allow me to make my own introduction."

Albrea immediately put herself on guard, yet the attack never came. All the duke had done was take an exaggerated stance. She was suspicious at first, but his intention gradually dawned on her. *The duke is trying to tell me confidence comes not from the fact that you wield a sword, but because you are one with the sword,* Albrea thought to herself. Though she said nothing out loud, the duke smiled as if to affirm her understanding.

"Here he comes!"

Finally, the duke began to slowly walk forward. He appeared relaxed, but Albrea felt as if an unstoppable boulder was approaching. A dark gray light that must have been an illusion emanated from his sword, emphasizing its significance all the more.

Another half a step! Albrea thought, readying herself for the attack.

The duke closed the distance slowly, but the moment he got near, it was like the boulder had suddenly picked up speed and was tumbling at her, or a tree

being cut down had finally tipped into falling. The duke's sword approached with terrifying speed, and Albrea quickly raised her own sword in response. Initiation Stance was a counter technique. Typically, after parrying the oncoming blow, the user would bring their sword back around and target the opponent's now defenseless head or collar. However, instead of waiting for him to strike, Albrea was going to make the first move, targeting the duke's arm before he could swing. But just as she swung her sword upwards—

Whoosh! Once again, her sword flew harmlessly through the air.

"Ha ha ha. Got you," the duke said cheerfully.

Albrea's eyes went wide. She had been certain an attack was coming. She had felt like she would be cut down at any moment. Her upwards slash had been intended to intercept it, but the duke deliberately delayed his timing, dropped his guard, and grabbed Albrea's arm. Still holding on to her, the duke took a step forward. Using the force of her upwards swing, he knocked her off her feet with a martial arts throw and left her lying on the ground, looking up into space.

Albrea didn't know what had happened. By the time it all clicked, she had already been thrown to the ground. All she could see was the blue sky. Ordinarily the throw was intended to slam the back of the opponent's head, but the duke had thrown her so gently it was like putting a baby to bed.

"And that's one." The duke pointed his sword at her neck. With the bout concluded, tears welled up in Albrea's eyes, her frustration and fear boiling over.

"No making girls cry, Master," said Yoto.

"Ha ha ha! My apologies. I couldn't help playing around like old times. Shall we continue? It's only our second bout."

Albrea could hardly take that lying down. Her face was that of a meek young girl only for a moment before she got back up and faced off against the duke, wooden sword in hand.

The duke smiled. "Good, good. Let out everything that's on your mind."

★

“I lost. I was completely and utterly defeated...” Albrea sniffled. Frustrated with herself, she sat by a river just outside the village. Just like the duke himself, his sword was kind and gentle.

At first, he had seemed to be both an immovable boulder with no openings and completely unguarded at the same time. Unsure whether she should make a move or not, Albrea had let herself be lured into attacking and missed completely.

It would have been one thing if he had blocked or parried her attack, but he didn’t even give her that. He simply took a half a step back. That was all he needed to render her best effort pointless. In all their bouts, they’d only crossed swords a single time, and even then she had been effortlessly batted away. The sounds their swords had made when they met still rang in her ears.

Albrea had unleashed technique after technique, but each time, it was the duke’s sword that ended up on her neck, shoulders, or torso. Had they been on a battlefield, she would have died twenty or thirty times over. Her pride as a swordswoman was in tatters.

“Sword Princess? Don’t make me laugh. All my training has been a joke...” Albrea slumped her shoulders. What the duke had said echoed in her head like a curse:

“Your sword is too honest. You look straight at the place you intend to strike. Your path is a righteous one, but you’d only be making yourself an easy target if you set foot on the battlefield.”

His words cut deep. Albrea had seemed like a rabid dog when she first arrived, but now she was more like a puppy shivering in the rain. Her eyebrows drooped with disappointment, but her wallowing was interrupted when she noticed something pulling on the hem of her pants. Turning around, she found a cat-eared girl hopping in place.

“Meow, meow, meow! Let’s play, Princess!”

“Hm? Sure, I guess.”

“Yay!” Mill jumped up and down. Several other kids were playing in the river with her.

Albrea was currently watching the children at the duke's request. He'd said she didn't have to worry about them too much, but they had a knack for finding themselves in precarious positions. Warning them did no good, and things would only get worse if she chased after them. But the children understood when they were actually in danger, so Albrea quickly gave up on admonishing them and joined them in playing.

The children changed interests so fast it was hard to keep up with. One minute they were skipping stones, then the next they were catching fish, swimming, and looking for bugs underneath rocks. Albrea had trouble at first, but after an hour she was enjoying herself as well.

"Hey, you're a princess, right? What are you doing here?" A human boy asked Albrea so straightforwardly she wasn't sure how to answer.

"U-Umm... Good question. I guess you could say I got tricked."

"Was it the guy who was hanging from the bell tower? He comes here a lot even though the duke keeps punishing him."

"I can't believe a knight got tricked! You're a dummy!" another child chimed in.

The childlike innocence made the words all the more cruel. Although Albrea laughed it off, she was hugging her knees and on the verge of tears. She managed to hold back from crying, but she couldn't stop her hands from shaking. "You're right. I am a dummy, aren't I? What was I so worked up about?"

Albrea got up from the river, sat on a nearby rock, and sighed. When her tears receded, she turned her attention to the mountains and realized something. Her field of view was wider than usual. She could see the forest on the other side of the river clearly, and make out differences in the trees that had all seemed the same just a moment ago. She could see the birds flying by and every single cloud in the sky. She felt like she could see the entirety of Sanctra Montt peacefully towering in the background.

Of course, nothing she was seeing had actually changed. What had changed was Albrea herself. It wasn't just her field of view—her hearing had improved as well. It felt as though her voice was separate from other sounds. The river was

quiet, with only the occasional splash. The sky was filled with the sound of the blowing wind, and she could make out each of the children's distinct voices.

"Huh?" She felt like she could see more of them at once now. Before, she could only chase after a single child, even tripping and falling into the river. Yet now she could see everything—like one big painting. She could see the smiling faces of the children jumping in the water, running, and swimming, all together. "It's beautiful."

A girl spoke softly on a rock next to Albrea. "I think you're more beautiful, Princess." She was a demihuman with curved goat horns who always carried around a stuffed animal. She didn't seem to be very athletic, so she had been hanging out with some of the meeker children.

"Really? I've never thought so," Albrea replied.

"Then people in the royal palace must not have very good eyes. How come you use a sword when you're so pretty?"

"I'm not really sure how to answer that." She pondered the question for a moment. "If I had to choose a reason, I guess it'd be because I've loved swords ever since I was a kid."

"That makes sense! Everyone has something they like. I like dolls and stuffed animals!"

"Is that why you always carry that bear with you?"

"Yeah! Right now all the stuffed animals I have are hand-me-downs from my mom or ones the duke gave me, but one day I want to make one myself!" The goat-horned girl took her teddy bear's hand and presented it to Albrea as though asking for a handshake. Albrea patted the girl's head, then shook the bear's hand.

"Yay, Koko! You got to shake the princess's hand!"

"Is Koko her name?"

The goat girl nodded. "Yeah. My mom named her."

"Then you should make Koko a child of her own. Are you learning how to sew?"

“Yep! I need to learn how to make clothes too!”

“Why is that?”

“Don’t you feel bad for stuffed animals who don’t have any clothes?” She held her bear out so Albrea could see. “Look, Koko’s naked, so I need to make her some clothes!”

“Ah, I see. That explains it.”

“I tried making pictures of all the stuff I wanted to make, but I couldn’t draw very well, so I asked the duke how I could make clothes for Koko, and he said maybe I don’t understand clothes well enough yet.” The goat girl gave an embarrassed laugh, then stood up and walked into the shallow part of the river. “At first I felt like I knew all about clothes, but when I really thought about it, I realized I didn’t know anything. I know collars and I know buttons, but I don’t know what the end of the sleeve or the part under the armpit are called. Here, and here too.” She pointed at various parts of her outfit. “They all have their own names and shapes, but I don’t know what they are.”

The girl spun around the water’s edge with a carefree smile on her face, the water kicked up by her small feet sparkling in the sunlight. The sight of the girl frolicking with the sacred mountain in the background dazzled Albrea. “There are all kinds of clothes,” the girl continued. “Even different clothes for boys and girls, but I don’t know any of that. The clothes you’re wearing look familiar, but they’re totally different from anything I know.”

“Why do you—”

Why do you seem so happy about not knowing things? Albrea was about to ask, but she cut herself off. However, the answer came all too easily from the girl’s mouth:

“Because I want to know about all kinds of things! I don’t know anything, so there’s a lot to learn!”

The breeze lightly tickled Albrea’s cheek, like a wind spirit was laughing at her. As people grow older, they come to view ignorance as shameful. All the more so for someone in Albrea’s position. How a princess should conduct herself had been thoroughly drilled into her from a young age, before she had ever even

picked up a sword.

For someone expected to be a role model, ignorance could even be considered a sin. Yet the goat-horned girl hadn't been ashamed at all—she had gone so far as to call it fun. She had hopes and desires precisely because there was so much to learn and so much room for growth. She didn't compare herself to others. There was no judgment. No calculations. She said she was looking forward to it without a hint of fear or worry.

Suddenly Albrea felt ridiculous. She finally realized she was the one who had tied herself down with her idea of how a knight should be.

"Meow! Splash!" Mill splashed water on the goat girl, but the goat girl just laughed and splashed water right back at her, leaving them both soaked.

"It's because you don't know anything, huh?" Albrea muttered to herself, looking like she really was going to cry this time. "Right. All I know is the sword. All I know is chivalry. I'm just like an innocent child. No, I willingly turned my eyes away from everything else. I'm worse than a child." Albrea laughed at herself. She was so pathetic it was humorous, but for some reason the realization took some of the weight off her chest.

"There is no better or worse. No matter how old you get, there are always new doors to open, and there'll always be a blank canvas waiting for you. Everybody's gotta start somewhere," a nearby voice said.

Albrea wiped the tears that were about to roll down her face with her sleeve, then turned her head to find Father Blutgang smoking a cigarette, a fishing rod and tackle in his hand. "'Sup, young lady. That's a good look on your face."

"Holy Fist."

"Oh, don't call me that. I'm retired, so I'm just a priest now. An irresponsible priest who drinks and smokes." Father Blutgang sat next to Albrea. The smell of his cigarette made her frown, but he just said "my bad" and laughed it off. "Well, well, I knew you were a beauty. Your spirit's a lot calmer than it was yesterday. I like you better this way."

"Really?"

"For sure. You're actually listening when people talk, for one. And children

aren’t afraid of you. That’s all the proof you need right there. That goat-horned girl’s named Nito. She’s real sensitive to people’s feelings. If you had any malice in your heart, she wouldn’t’ve come near you.” Father Blutgang pointed, and Nito waved back. Mill promptly splashed her and left her soaked to the bone, but she was still smiling. “Nice day, isn’t it? Wonder if it’d be all right for me to drink this early.”

“Umm, Holy Fi... No, Father.”

“Hm? What is it? If you’re tryin’ to ask me out on a date, do it later. Once you get to be my age, you gotta make some preparations first,” Father Blutgang chuckled.

“N-No, that’s not it. What exactly is this village?”

“Just a village way out in the sticks,” he replied. “Guess the duke’s a little unusual though, eh?”

“Not just him. You, Porion—everyone in the village seems to be a person of note.”

“Oh?” Father Blutgang’s expression turned somber for a split second, his eyes narrowing behind his sunglasses.

“As far as I can tell, everyone living here has done something impressive enough to have a book written about them. For example, the proprietress of the bar is the Conqueror of the Sandstorms, Lady Meikris, isn’t she?”

“You got it. But she’s retired now, so she won’t be accepting any duels.”

“I wouldn’t even dream of it!” Albrea shook her head. “She’s a hero amongst the dwarves! She’s a legendary adventurer who crossed the Desert of Time all by herself with just a single ax and cleaved a corrupted sacred beast in half. I couldn’t beat her even if she had a hand tied behind her back!”

“Probably not. She’s definitely one of the five scariest people in the village when you piss her off. That’s why she was able to open up a bar here in this village of good-for-nothings! Wah ha ha ha!”

“But why is someone so famous here? I’m pretty sure that orc in the bar was Mordan, the earth mage who was called the Sage. And the woodcarver was

Professor Majikim, the man known as the Heretic Alchemist, wasn't he? What are all these highly renowned people doing in a place like this?"

"A place like this, huh?" Father Blutgang blew out a puff of smoke. "Look, I don't blame you for havin' doubts, but let me clear one thing up. This place is all we have." The smile on his face was gone, replaced by a lonely expression as though he were gazing off at his homeland in the distance. "Just about everyone in Montt was once the top of their field. The duke is just one of many. Once you get that much fame, everything you do affects people's actions, wealth, and hearts, whether you want it to or not. The people who gather around you are scavengers looking to pick at your scraps. Then there's your obligations."

"Obligations?"

"People say leaders, pioneers, heroes, and so on have a duty. But you know, when people put someone on a pedestal like that, they also harbor deep, deep envy and resentment for them. Once that goes on for long enough, at some point the hero stops being so heroic. You get what I mean, don't you?"

Albrea hung her head. She had thought the village was weird, but she never would have guessed it was a haven for living legends. As someone born into the royal family, Albrea understood what Father Blutgang meant. Once, she had volunteered at a church entirely out of the goodness of her heart, yet as time passed, she started hearing people make sarcastic comments about her motives. She had ignored them, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

The people of this village took it another step further. They had deliberately cut themselves off from other people because those interactions only brought trouble. It didn't matter that they had used their skills for the good of those very people and continued to inspire them with tales of their heroism.

Perhaps they would have been better off conducting themselves like arrogant gods instead. Maybe people would have accepted that as the natural way of things. But none of the inhabitants of the village were like that. They didn't want fame or glory. They had become legends by holding on to their beliefs.

Which was why they had fled and lived in hiding—so their abilities and strengths wouldn't burden the people. That was the true nature of Montt

Village. Everyone living there was a champion who had earned the title of maxed-out. People who had reached their peaks.

“So, does that mean—”

“Yeah. You could call this place a refuge. Everyone’s lived different lives, but the one thing we all have in common is that we never asked for anything in return. Or maybe I should say we just didn’t care about that. We fought and mastered our skills all for the sake of other people, but they couldn’t understand that. So we were betrayed.”

“Huh?!” Albrea couldn’t help but cry out. She was sure they had suffered, and she could relate to that, but the word “betray” felt extreme.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re human, demon, or demihuman—courage and righteousness without compensation is hard to stomach. The ugliness in your own heart is revealed by the selflessness of those great people.”

“So in the end, the people turn on their heroes?”

“Heroes who have served their role turn into inhuman monsters,” Father Blutgang replied. “They can’t stay around others, so they wander from one place to the next until they end up here.”

“That’s...so sad.” Albrea felt like she was about to cry for a third time—this time out of pity.

The village was a happy place. The tavern she had been at seemed brighter, more cheerful, and freer than anywhere in the royal capital. But if what Father Blutgang said was true, then each and every villager had gone through unimaginable hardship to get here. Something even more unbearable than what she had been subjected to in the royal palace.

“Well, don’t let it get you down. At the end of the day, we’re just a band of outcasts. We do as we please, help raise the children, and celebrate each other’s hard work. We’re happy with that.” At that, Father Blutgang stood up and tousled Albrea’s hair. She could feel the warmth from his hand. “Maybe it was the Creator’s will that brought you to this village. You’ve faced the same hardship as everyone else here. Stay as long as you want—you’re practically a member of the village at this point. I’m sure everyone else feels the same way.”

“Father...”

“Whoops, I actually sounded like a priest for a second there. Can’t have that. I’m gonna go do some fishin’ upstream. It may be a bit cruel, but it’s still a hobby of mine.” The priest turned around and waved, then started walking along the river.

Left all alone, tears rolled down Albrea’s cheeks. What was she crying for? Was it herself? Pity for the villagers? Anger at the masses who drove out their heroes? Envy towards those heroes who could still smile in spite of that? She didn’t know, but she nonetheless couldn’t help but shed tears.

“Are you crying, Princess?” Nito had returned to her side, joined by Mill and the other children who wanted to see what was going on. Their pure eyes peering at her were more beautiful than any jewel Albrea had ever seen.

“It’s nothing,” Albrea said, wiping her eyes. “I think it’s about time for lunch. Mind going to get the others? I have sandwiches from Yoto.”

Yoto’s sandwiches were as delicious as ever. The slight saltiness was something Albrea was certain she would remember for the rest of her life.

★

The remote village of Montt warmly welcomed all people, be they knights who had lost their way, disloyal bards, or captivating witches pursued by the royal palace. For that reason, it sometimes attracted unwanted guests as well.

Far from the village, the forest terrain grew quite rugged. It was said to be the result of a spell used in a great war long ago, powerful enough to shake the earth itself. From the more elevated areas, one could look out on their surroundings.

“Have our scouts returned?”

A camp had been set up in the shade of the trees, and the mood within was grim. Knights clad in pitch-black armor sat around a fire, not one of them appearing the slightest bit happy.

The scouts kneeled before a knight in a winged helmet sitting by the fire. “Reporting in. The sixth princess has been located, but we couldn’t approach

her. There are several Alert Shell spells cast around the perimeter of the village."

The black knights murmured amongst themselves, exchanging looks of surprise. "What is the meaning of this? Wasn't it supposed to be a backwater village?" asked the knight in the winged helmet.

"And that's not all," the scout continued. "There are countless alarms hidden in the vegetation, meaning there are both physical and magical barriers for a full kilometer in every direction around the village. All we could do was observe from a small hill."

"Sounds like this isn't going to be quite so straightforward. I had my doubts once I heard that bard was involved." The black knight with the winged helmet took a deep breath and hung his head. He sounded incredibly tired, and the other knights were similarly pessimistic.

"What should we do, Commander?"

"Proceed as planned. Barriers or not, this is a village of has-been retired mages and knights. They may have some runaway ninjas as well, but they'll all fold before our might. Therefore..." The knight held his tongue for a moment, his next words seemingly weighing on him. The surrounding knights waited with bated breath. After a brief moment of silence, the commander stood as though he had made up his mind and continued. "Inform the runners to gather our troops. We'll be activating the golems according to plan. Take the sixth princess's head and burn the village. Don't leave a single villager alive. Return it all to nothing."

Massacre. It went against everything knighthood stood for, yet not a single one objected. There was no joy, nor was there scorn. The only emotion present was the conviction to carry out their mission.

"What we are about to carry out is a forbidden spell sealed long ago. The disgraceful result of those conceited, rotten old men's pathetic attempt to prolong their own lives. But to us, it is a blessing." The commander pulled a roll of parchment from the bag at his hip. The edges were stained a sickening purple, and the cloth holding it closed was tattered and torn. The red sealing wax had melted such that it resembled a screaming face.

“The sacrifice must be the target’s closest blood relative,” the commander continued. “One who is deeply loved. Put simply, the sixth princess. This is the only way to bring our lord back to health. It must be done. Toss away your prayer amulets and shatter them with your blades. We have discarded our faith. We may be traitors standing against the gods, but we are knights. And what is a knight if he does not save the life of the lord to whom he is indebted? Now, my knights, swear your oaths.”

The knights surrounding the fire stood up, drew their swords, and swore an oath. It was the same action Albrea had done, but in this instance, was filled with grief and resolve. They dropped the amulets they once wore around their necks at their feet and pierced them with their swords. No one said a word. The only sound was the crackling of the fire.

They had willingly chosen this path. The commander was the last to drop his amulet and shatter it. His was the most worn of them all, the image of the creator god no longer visible as a testament to his deep faith. He almost gave his pre-battle prayer by habit, but stopped himself with a self-deprecating chuckle. “We have no god. Harden your hearts, my knights. His Highness the third prince is our god now.”

Chapter 6

The princess knight was surprised. She could move so quickly.

“Is Princess Albrea already asleep?” asked the duke.

“Yes,” Yoto answered. “She went to bed right after dinner. She was quite tired.”

The sun had set, and the duke was seated in a large rocking chair, enjoying the night breeze coming through the open window. “Good, good. She needs time to rest. Haste makes waste, or so they say. The princess needs to realize that there’s no reason to rush.” The duke narrowed his eyes and drank from a silver goblet filled with wine.

“I suppose it was obvious they would, but the village seems to have accepted her with open arms. I went to check on her while I was out shopping, and everyone was serving her tea and giving her goods from their stores. She’s quite popular,” Yoto reported happily. “Especially with that gathering of warriors who call themselves a women’s association,”

“It makes sense. She’s walked the same path as many of the villagers here.” The duke nodded his head in approval. Yoto was looking out for Albrea in her own way. He knew how uneasy she got when Albrea went off on her own. “Letting her watch the children was a good decision. She meets their parents when they come to pick them up, and as former heroes, those parents are certain to empathize with Albrea when they see her.”

“Just as you planned. You’re as kind as ever, Master.”

“If only I could have known this joy a thousand years ago.” The duke laughed, but his expression also showed a hint of sorrow, as though he had left something behind.

“She’s changed. At first her sword seemed terribly heavy, as if she had stone shackles weighing her down.” Yoto wasn’t referring to the bastard sword Albrea possessed; she was talking about her behavior, her posture, her technique, and

her mind. All of these traits together had made Yoto liken Albrea herself to a sword.

“You can tell?”

“Of course. I’m a sword myself. She shed more of that weight with each swing. In the end, she was even able to cross blades with you. I was shocked, truth be told.”

“I was as well. I haven’t faced an opponent capable of touching my blade in several hundred years.”

“If I recall correctly, there hasn’t been anyone since Bilegga I.” Yoto abruptly stopped in front of the rocking chair. Then she sat on the duke’s lap, appearing more like his granddaughter than his maid. She was surprisingly needy for someone who was always scowling and spoke so curtly. Perhaps because she was a sword, she felt most at home near her wielder, the duke. She nuzzled her head against him as though to tell him to pat her. “She has talent.”

“Indeed. Too much talent for this peaceful world. Combined with her status, I’m sure she’s been subjected to great envy.” The duke patted Yoto’s head. Like a meek kitten, the maid slowly closed her eyes.

“But I think that sword she has is just a little too long for her.”

“Right you are,” the duke agreed. “Her stature isn’t suited to wielding a bastard sword. I’m sure she’s just imitating the bo—excuse me, Bilegga I, but sometimes one’s ideals and reality don’t align. What she should really be using is a shortsword and shield.”

“Her sword was weeping. It wasn’t being wielded properly, but at the same time, it didn’t want to leave her. I heard it cry out when it was pointed at you.”

“You mean to say it let itself be broken?”

Yoto nodded. “Only I could tell, as a fellow sword. It was looking for an executioner, so I obliged.”

“It broke itself for its master’s sake, hm? Well, that certainly sounds like a job for a blacksmith. I can hardly abandon a sword that cares so much for its master.” The duke laughed, but Yoto, the one who had broached the topic in

the first place, seemed irritated. She brought her hands up to the duke's face and pulled on his cheeks. "Ahh...what are you doing, Yoto?"

"No cheating on me or I'll cut off your tail again."

"No need to say something so scandalous. You're an extension of myself, are you not? Besides, all those who came after are like children to me."

"And now those children are currently sleeping their days away in the old castle. My siblings are all so lazy. Even on the anniversary of Mother's death, they usually wake up only to go right back to sleep."

"It's fine. The demonic armaments aren't needed in peacetime. I have you here with me, so I'm not lonely."

"You're too kind, Master," Yoto replied flatly. "You're just going to laugh it off when you get wrapped up in trouble again, aren't you?"

"That's just part of being human. Or demon, in my case."

"You're too much of a people person. This is why Mother got fed up with you."

"That was a thousand years ago," the duke replied, solemn. "My lord made her own decision. It wasn't a matter of love."

"You're spineless." Contrary to her harsh words, Yoto leaned against the duke. Her eyebrows were furrowed, but she clung to the duke's arm and soon fell asleep.

"Ha ha, what an innocent sword. You're going to catch a cold falling asleep like that." The duke snapped his fingers, and magic circles appeared at her head and feet. They scanned her body as they moved towards each other, then disappeared in the middle. The moment the circles vanished, Yoto's maid outfit was replaced by cute pajamas.

"You've been with me a long time, through all sorts of carnage. Now I just want you to laugh, smile, and enjoy the rest of your life. You did your best back then. I'm sure the Creator will allow you another thousand years." The duke gently lifted Yoto and carried the maid to her room.

★

“My sword?”

“Yes, I was thinking I’d repair it.” The next morning, the duke was in higher spirits than usual. Albrea’s cruelly shattered bastard sword lay on the workbench in his smithy. “I’m going to take this opportunity to be frank with you, Albrea. You’re not a good match for this weapon.”

“Bwuh...” Shocked yet again, Albrea seemed to revert to an infant. The overwhelming drive she’d had when she first arrived was nowhere to be seen. Her pride smashed to pieces, she trembled like a newborn fawn.

If it had been an ordinary blacksmith or swordsman speaking, she would have had a rebuttal, but this was the founder of the country, the man known as the Sacred Black Sword. After getting beaten to a pulp by him in their sparring match the other day, she didn’t have room to argue. “I’ve spent half my life with that sword...but I guess I should just give up and go be a princess.” Albrea sniffled and hung her head.

The duke laughed boisterously in response. “Hold on, don’t get ahead of yourself. I’m not telling you to give up the blade altogether. I just think you should find one you’re a little more suited for.” The duke had chosen several swords from his smithy’s sword rack and placed them on his workbench. There were several varieties, both double-edged and single-edged, but every one of them was shorter than Albrea’s bastard sword.

“Are these...shortswords?” Albrea sounded a little unhappy and her expression was conflicted.

Yoto appeared from behind Albrea and chastised her. “Now, now, don’t knock it before you try it.”

This only made Albrea furrow her brows further. “I-It’s just...” She hesitated.

The duke and Yoto had expected this resistance. Knights tended to be biased against shortswords because they couldn’t be used on horseback. As a result, knights focused most of their training on longswords and spears. Shortswords were backup weapons. They were used in tight melees when an army’s ranks had been broken and maneuverability was needed. The two of them knew that Albrea would have a hard time accepting it since she prided herself on her knightly identity.

“Don’t look so down. I’m not finished yet. You should also use a shield. It came to me during our bout yesterday. I noticed your range is shorter than that of a longsword user. When combined with your flexibility and movement, you’re more like a gladiator than a fencer.”

“Umm, Duke...with all due respect, as you showed me yesterday, I only look directly at where I’m striking. Shortswords are one thing, but shields are even more difficult. They’re sophisticated weapons that require anticipating your opponent’s attack and then finding a way to fend it off. As someone who was ridiculed for fighting like a wild boar, I don’t think I’m really cut out for it.”

Indeed, someone who wasn’t familiar with battle might not understand it, but a shield was also a form of weapon. There was more to weapons than just inflicting wounds on opponents. Even limited to only weapons with a sword’s general shape, there were still weapons like swordbreakers and jitte that were intended to disarm opponents.

A shield was a tool that could be used to gain an advantage based on the opponent’s attack. The wielder could throw their opponent off-balance, draw them in, block their path, restrain them, or even conceal themself. It deflected all forms of hostility and transformed them into an offensive opportunity. In essence, a shield created a state of checkmate before delivering the final blow.

“All the more reason. In order to change your habits, you must change the weapons that act as your limbs. Because you’re pointing a shield at them, you have to watch for your opponent’s strike. Then you need only use the skills ingrained in you to turn the tables on them. Also...” the duke trailed off.

“Also?”

“To master the shield is to develop the tolerance to accept all. It’s a matter of the heart, not of training. And I can tell, there’s a kind heart on the other side of your blade.”

“Kindness, huh?” Albrea sounded only half convinced. She tilted her head to the side and the duke gave her a warm smile.

“It’s a simple enough concept to explain, but this is as far as words can take us. Now you have to select your sword.”

Urged on by the duke's sinister yet gentle clawed hand, Albrea put her own hand on her chin and considered each option. They were all technically shortswords, but each blade lined up on the workbench in front of her was of a different type.

There was a simple, ordinary shortsword, a rapier specialized in thrusting, a katana like the duke's wooden sword, and even a heavy, curved kukri, all around sixty centimeters in length. Albrea gave in and grabbed the hilt of the plain shortsword. It had no special features and looked just like a shorter version of the sword she had been using.

Not going for anything out of the ordinary, I see, the duke thought to himself. *She picked up the one most similar to her old sword. Good, good, I think that's the right choice*. Albrea brought the sword out into the yard, took up a comfortable stance, and swung without any particular intention.

Whoosh! Her sword cut through the air, the sound of it audible even from the opposite end of the yard. "H-Huh?" Albrea was the most surprised of all. She swung another two, then three times, her movements smoother than usual despite the unfamiliar sword.

Part of it was certainly due to the shorter blade, but her movements were so precise they couldn't be explained by the lighter sword alone. "What's going on? My sword goes exactly where I want it to!" In the past, her body had simply flowed along with her sword as though she were the one being swung—like being pulled along by the leash of an energetic puppy. But now it was like holding the reins of a horse she'd ridden for years. Her sword moved precisely, without putting any undue strain on her body.

"Though you've changed blades, you grasped the principles just as easily as ever. The sword is not something to be wielded—it's an extension of your body like your arms and legs. That is the ideal form." The duke stood up and grabbed something off a shelf. He blew on it to remove the dust, then put a small metal buckler on his left arm.

"Duke?"

"No matter how experienced you are, there's only so much you can learn from slashing the air. I'll take your blows."

Just as Albrea was about to say “but that’s dangerous,” she swallowed her words. She knew just how big the difference in strength between them was. She’d only clashed with his blade a single time. It would be a simple feat for him to block her blows.

“Striking a dummy alone won’t get you where you need to be. Now, come at me however you like.” The duke stood in front of Albrea and brought the shield up to his chest. It was a basic stance, but despite his lack of a sword, the duke’s form didn’t betray a single opening.

“Th-Then I’ll take you up on that.” Albrea took a stance. She lowered the tip of her blade and relaxed her hips in a position similar to that of the Initiation Stance. Albrea herself wasn’t sure why she took that particular form, but just like her earlier swing, it felt as if the sword was making her do it. “Here I come.” Albrea tensed up, then stepped forward.

The distance was the exact same as before. No matter what stance she took, no matter how she braced herself, it wouldn’t matter. Her opponent was simply in a league of his own. So she just moved forward without thinking any unnecessary thoughts, and then—

“Wh-Whoa!” cried the duke.

“Huh?” A panicked voice hit Albrea’s ears, and a work apron appeared right before her eyes. At first, she thought she was seeing things, but the image of her sword slashing at the duke’s torso replayed in her mind. She had swung purely on instinct, no thought involved.

“Whoa there,” the duke said as he seemed to stumble back. Though he sounded flustered, his movements were still those of an expert. Her sword had just barely missed, but something that would have been unthinkable during their last bout had happened—the duke had been overwhelmed by surprise and dropped his form.

Albrea didn’t seriously think she had a chance of winning. Her sword was simply happy to be able to swing, joy seeping out from the hilt. Next she brought the sword back as though resting it on her shoulder, then unleashed a vertical slash.

“My word. I didn’t expect such a drastic improvement,” said the duke.

Clang! Metal clashed against metal, scattering sparks in all directions. A slight feeling of unease remained in Albrea's hands, the hilt of her sword seeming to express regret at letting the perfect timing slip.

"Excellen—Oww, I think I threw out my hip." The duke was blinking his eyes and pounding his hips, yet even in that state, he still seemed to have no openings. His shield was pointed downwards, defending against any follow-up strikes.

If Albrea were to try to raise her blade back up, the shield would get in the way and she would lose the momentum of her sword. In that case, there was only one thing to do. Albrea made a surprisingly calm decision. She took a big step to the left and did something she'd never done before—she turned her back on her opponent. Using her foot as a pivot, she held her sword high and circled around the duke. She saw his swaying tail, and beyond that, his hunched-over back. All she had to do was bring down her blade.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, the duke pivoted the very same way, facing her. "Ha! I won't be done in that easily."

As soon as she began her downward swing, Albrea's sword was repelled to the side by the duke's shield. It was the same thing that had happened on her last swing, but this time she felt a little more resistance. She had missed as expected, which meant it was time for her next move. Then her next.

"That's enough. Excellent job, Albrea. I don't mind continuing further, but you may not want to. You should wipe yourself off." The duke stuck out his hand as though signaling the end of their bout, and Albrea suddenly felt a wave of fatigue wash over her.

"Huh? When did I get so sweaty?!" She hadn't been swinging her new sword for that long, but she had sweat so profusely it looked like she had been training for hours. She was soaked. The shirt she had borrowed clung so close to her that her underwear was visible through it. Overcome by surprise, Albrea dropped her sword on the spot.

"You were wonderful, Albrea." Albrea looked to the side and Yoto was there, already waiting with a clean white towel.

Still gathering her wits, she wiped herself off as a glowing magic circle passed

through her body. The next moment, her sweat-soaked shirt was completely dry. “Thanks, but what just happened? I wasn’t even thinking.”

“This little one is overjoyed.” Yoto picked up the fallen sword and stroked its pommel. It looked like she was praising a younger sibling. “A sword’s greatest joy is touching the heart of its wielder. The shorter the distance between the two, the better. You two were so close just now it was like you were reading a book on a sofa together.” She spoke in a way only a sword could, but Albrea understood what she was getting at.

“It really did feel like another limb. Like it was part of me. Like it always has been.”

“That’s because your hearts were connected,” Yoto agreed. “But you showed some greed at the end there, didn’t you, Albrea?” Yoto gave a mischievous laugh and handed the sword to Albrea, who scratched her head in embarrassment as she accepted it. “Swords like wielders who keep them close, but they’re sensitive to their wielder’s desires. They won’t cooperate if they disagree with those desires. Think of swords like cats. Nonetheless, it’s been a long time since I last saw someone dance with their sword so well. You deserve a reward.” The maid stood on her tiptoes and patted Albrea’s head. She then turned around and headed back inside the house, clearly in a good mood from the way she was skipping.

“That just goes to show how heavy your shackles were. Had I not seen through your greed at the end, I may well have lost my hip. Here, take a look at this.” The duke held out his buckler. It was a solid piece of metal that reflected the sunlight, but it was no longer a perfect circle. Part of the outer edge had been sliced clean off.

Albrea was in disbelief. “Did I...?”

“Indeed. It may be an old buckler, but it’s still made of orichalconea. And you cut it with an ordinary iron sword. You truly are deserving of the title Sword Princess.”

“I never expected it to feel so natural. To be completely honest, I’ve always thought shortswords weren’t fit for knights and looked down on them.”

“But now you see you can make powerful strikes from a greater distance,

no?”

Albrea nodded. Just as the duke said, she had easily closed the distance between them. She could hardly believe she had pulled it off. Moreover, the force she could put behind the sword was incredible. Her field of view had also expanded considerably. Towards the end, she’d picked up on even the slightest movements, like the flicking of the duke’s tail. When the duke turned around, she had clearly seen his mouth open wide with astonishment.

The duke smiled at Albrea as she shook with excitement. He may have been retired, but he was still a man who had lived by the sword. Nothing made him happier than seeing a new path open for a fellow swordsman.

“That’s what humans are capable of when they remove their shackles,” he told her. “Now, you’re welcome to keep that one at your side until I finish repairing your sword. As for your shield...” The duke scratched his cheek in embarrassment. “I’m afraid we’re out of stock.” He felt bad for leading her on, only to tell her he didn’t have any. Albrea’s mouth hung open in disbelief. “W-Well, hold on a minute, I don’t mean to say I have none at all. Do you see that stone building on the hill over there?” The duke pointed at a large stone structure a little ways away from the village. “That used to be my castle.”

“Your cas... Huh?!” Albrea could hardly be blamed for her shock. The duke’s—in other words, Demon Duke Tyrfing’s—castle was one of the main settings in the *Song of Bilegga*. According to the song, Bilegga I arrived there by mistake while trying to defeat the Demon Lord and promptly challenged the retired Demon Duke Tyrfing to a duel, losing seven times before finally defeating the duke on the eighth. The castle was said to still be standing, but strangely few people knew of its location. Albrea never would have guessed it was all the way out here.

“I have an armory there hidden by the illusion spell Phantom. I’ve stockpiled a lot of quality wares over the years, so there should be something lying around. I could forge something from scratch, but it’d be much faster to simply adjust something you choose.”

Albrea hesitated. “Still, I can’t accept all this for free.”

“Oh, it’s not for free. I’ll be expecting you to watch the children again. Take

the kids on a trip to the castle, and bring whatever catches your eye back to me." The duke turned his head and winked, and Albrea saw Yoto approaching with a line of village children.

"Everything is ready. Here's your lunch. The children are waiting." Yoto handed Albrea a basket filled with the sandwiches she loved. Yoto turned to instruct the children. "Make sure you listen to everything Albrea says. She'll protect you, but running off in the forest is a good way to end up as monster food. Am I understood?"

The children all replied in the affirmative. Satisfied with their answer, Yoto remembered something and stuck her hand in her apron pocket. She pulled out a beautiful cloth bag that fit in the palm of her hand. "This is the key to undo the castle's Phantom spell. It's called an omamori by the berserkers from the far east known as samurai. You can't enter the armory without it, so take care not to lose it."

"Thank you," replied Albrea.

"Good, good," said the duke. "Now, princess knight, go find your shield as you escort the light of the future. Though truth be told, the roads are well-maintained and the children know where the armory is. This is basically a sightseeing trip. Feel free to take it easy."

"Understood. I'll make sure no harm comes to the children. Let's go, everyone!"

"Okay!" the children all replied happily. Albrea and the children turned towards the old castle as the duke saw them off.

As they walked down the main street, they were greeted by all the villagers coming and going. Father Blutgang was smoking on the steps of the church and waved to them when they passed by. On the road just outside the village, Mordan from Ogre Produce smiled at them from underneath his straw hat as he returned from his field. "What a cute little group of explorers. Make sure you listen to the princess, y'hear?" he said, waving them off.

Albrea and the children continued on, crossing a bridge over a creek and heading up the mountain path. The duke must not have been kidding about it being a sightseeing attraction, as the road up to the castle was very well-kept. It

was paved with beautiful cobblestones despite being in the middle of a dense forest. It didn't seem like there was any need to worry about the children losing their footing.

Looking back at the children lined up behind her, Albrea thought to herself. Why was the duke—no, why were all the villagers so kind to her? She may have been a princess, but she had still only been in the village for three days, yet they trusted her enough to leave her in charge of the children. Then she remembered what Father Blutgang said by the river. They must have been so welcoming because she had experienced the same pain they had.

"Everyone here is so kind. Especially the duke," she said to herself.

"Yeah! The duke's super nice!" A boy in the back spoke up, and all the other children joined in agreement.

"But you know what? He always tells us that if we have the power to share our kindness, we should share it someday!" added another child.

"Meow! He says that all the time! But kindness isn't solid. You can't even count it. How are you supposed to share it?" Mill asked a difficult question as she hopped around.

Albrea thought about how she should answer, but the words never came. Normally she would fall back on words like "should" or "must." After all, she was a princess and a knight—she had to act like a role model in front of the children. She still felt that way. As a knight, it was her duty to guide them.

Yet the words wouldn't come out, and she couldn't understand why. She just had a feeling. She had been a manufactured version of herself, meant to serve as an example to others. She had lived in her own little world, sitting atop the comfort of her ideals. And before she knew it, she had been swept up by the wind and carried somewhere far away.

Chapter 7

The princess knight was excited. It was like a tale of adventure.

After nearly an hour of walking, Albrea and the children arrived at the old castle. Even bigger up close, its appearance was befitting of a stronghold of the Demon Lord's army. It lived up to its reputation in the *Song of Bilegga*.

Although it no longer had its defensive ramparts, the central structure alone was quite large. Tall watchtowers stood at each corner, and foundations for ballistae could be seen on the roof. The castle's entrance had a massive, rugged iron gate, but unlike modern castles, there was no magically powered mechanism to open it. It was possible there had been giants among the duke's retainers who had been in charge of opening it. Farther inside there was a large residential tower, but all the windows were shut tight. It was readily apparent nobody was living there.

"This place is huge. Did Bilegga I really come here all by himself?" Albrea gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "I couldn't even imagine doing that."

Even in its run-down state, the duke's castle hadn't lost its majesty. Were a war to break out today and enemies broke through the castle's nonexistent walls, they would still be stopped in their tracks by the structure's imposing presence.

But now, with its purpose fulfilled, it lay secluded deep in the forest. Yet it wasn't neglected. The lack of vines encroaching on the structure and the weeds neatly plucked around the castle vicinity were proof it was still being maintained.

"It's so quiet, but it doesn't feel dead. What is this ambience?" Albrea asked.

"It's like it's sleeping," the goat-horned Nito said softly, holding her doll tightly.

Albrea nodded in agreement. It certainly did feel like it was dozing off in the

cozy light filtering through the trees. It reminded her of the duke in a way. Turning her head, Albrea couldn't help but express her wonder at the rest of the scenery around her. "The castle looks out over the village."

"Meow, meow, meow! It's higher up than it seems! The duke said he used to love the view up here!" Mill hopped up and down, as energetic as ever. Albrea looked at the other children and expected them to be just as lively, but they were surprisingly docile.

"Ah, that must be it." Albrea looked up and saw the sun already directly overhead. The walk wasn't a big deal to her, but for the children it must have been a long distance. No wonder they were out of fuel. "This seems like a nice place to have lunch."

The children's eyes lit up the moment she mentioned food. They immediately sat down around Albrea and started opening up lunch boxes they must have gotten from Yoto. She joined them and opened up her basket. Before long they had all given their thanks for the food and were stuffing their faces with Yoto's sandwiches.

Albrea took a bite and the sweet bread and fresh vegetables mixed together with the taste of the juicy meat and spread throughout her mouth. Yoto's sandwiches were always delicious. They were good enough to make Albrea want to invite Yoto to be a chef at the palace or open up a shop in the capital. As she enjoyed the flavors and gazed out over the village, it once again occurred to Albrea how unusual Montt was.

From her high vantage point, she could see for the first time that the village was set up in a square, evenly divided by the main road. Despite that, all the roads besides the main one were rather haphazard. The separation of houses and land seemed to be freeform, yet there was a certain regularity to it. It was as though the village's layout had been pieced together like a puzzle.

Montt was centered around the square where the belltower was, with roads spreading out in each of the four directions. To the north was the road they had just traveled, which led to the sacred mountain. The road to the south connected to the highway leading to the capital, and the eastern road likely led to another village near the border.

Finally, the western road led to a large river. That was where she had played with the children the other day. When she explored the area, she had found a wharf for transporting lumber, so it must have been the village's distribution hub. Across the bridge was another field, separate from the duke's mandrake plot.

Montt was abnormally orderly for such a remote village. Even presuming it had once been a castle town under the duke's governance, it was still miraculous.

"It's beautiful. And it seems like it would be difficult to attack." To Albrea's trained knight eyes, it might as well have been impregnable. "Attacking from the main road is a bad idea. All the buildings around the square face the center. The villagers would open fire on you from the second floor. So what if you attacked from the side streets?" Albrea tried to imagine herself attacking the village. Bringing a squad down the narrow side roads wouldn't go well either. "Only two heavily armored knights would be able to fit at a time. Any more and it would slow down the pace of the advance. Even if you broke up into small groups, you'd be wiped out if you were ambushed from the surrounding houses."

So what if you set fire to the village to eliminate any potential hiding places? Albrea shook her head yet again. "The canals running through the village are every bit as thorough as those in the royal capital. There are wells and pumps everywhere, so fires can be put out without knowledge of water magic. Even children could put out fires in the village if they needed to."

The village of Montt had formidable defensive capabilities. It was like a fortress. Even the complex, narrow roads became something else entirely when viewed as a whole. "A labyrinth?" A certain free-spirited witch popped up in Albrea's mind.

Perhaps the village had been constructed with self-defense in mind. If it really was a gathering place for people who had been cast out because of their extraordinary abilities, it would stand to reason that some of their lives were being targeted.

Albrea slapped her knee in awe, only to hear the same sound again just a

moment later. The children were copying her, slapping their knees in the same way. Were they making fun of her for suddenly making a serious face? Or maybe they found it amusing how she seemed to have turned entirely into someone else all of a sudden. Smiling in an attempt to brush it off, Albrea finished her meal and asked the children to guide her again.

★

Even knowing it's nothing more than a tourist attraction, entering an unoccupied castle is always thrilling, Albrea thought to herself as she placed her hand on the doorknob of the side entrance by the gate.

Entering abandoned castles was a common plot point in adventure stories, and they were always inhabited by undead or dragons. Whether full of hope or trying to stifle their fear, the protagonist would quietly open the door, careful not to alert a powerful foe. Fact or fiction, Albrea loved those kinds of tales.

The side door opened smoothly, without making a sound. A slightly moldy smell mixed with oil struck her nostrils. The door's hinges must have been regularly lubricated. There was something resembling a reception area right by the entrance, but nobody was there. It was dimly lit at first, but magic circles responded automatically to their presence and illuminated the area like torches.

The counter had a book and a quill sitting on it. The book seemed to be a visitor's log, and was filled almost entirely with Yoto's name. She had meticulously recorded her cleaning visits every single week. Her handwriting was rounded and cute, ill-suited to her usual irritated demeanor, though she'd probably get angry if someone were to mention that.

Albrea wrote "shield selecting" in the log, then continued on through the side entrance. It was cramped and seemed to be intended for servants. The door further in wasn't locked, and Albrea slowly opened it like she was the main character of an adventure story.

"It's so big!" Anyone who saw the room would have had the same reaction. From the outside, Albrea had assumed the central building was two or three stories tall, but in fact it was all one incredibly spacious room.

The ceiling was oddly bright, and upon closer inspection, it turned out to be

made entirely of glass. There was a grid of window frames tightly packed with glass panels each a square meter wide. Supported by a mere eight pillars, Albrea wondered what sort of structural calculations must have gone into building the castle. Thanks to its unique design, the main hall was bathed in sunlight to a degree that was hard to believe given how closed off the structure seemed.

Battle standards hung from the walls, dyed a beautiful deep crimson. Each flag had an unfamiliar crest at the bottom, but they were also quite different from what Albrea had heard about the Demon Lord's army. It was likely the duke's personal crest.

For such an old castle, it was in surprisingly good condition. It looked as if it would still be able to function as a fortress even now were an army to be raised. That it was kept so beautiful despite its obsolescence was likely a testament to the duke's, or rather, Yoto's disposition.

The children dashed out from behind Albrea. She was about to tell them to watch their step when she noticed a deep blue carpet stretching from the entrance all the way to the throne opposite it. It was the most magnificent carpet she had ever seen outside of the royal palace. She wondered how proud the duke's subordinates must have felt to stand there. Frankly, she was a little envious.

The children ran off not towards the armory, but the throne. It was large and rustic, and sat upon a dignified three tiered platform. It was surprisingly humble. Albrea had expected something a bit more elaborate given the duke's status, but despite its simplicity, its construction was as solid as one would expect from a throne made of iron. Although there was no chasing or any engravings, the smooth, shiny surface was clearly the work of a master craftsman. It was made to fit the duke's large body, and would have appeared like he had a grand shield at his back when he was seated there.

The children climbed on the throne and sat for a moment before disappearing behind it. Albrea watched with curiosity when a pair of cat ears appeared from beside the throne and Mill beckoned her over. "Meow, meow! Come look, Princess!"

“Is something over there?” Albrea walked behind the throne and followed the children’s gaze. Hidden behind the throne, what was hanging on the wall was certainly peculiar to say the least.

“Weapons?” Albrea tilted her head to the side. They were weapons, without a doubt, yet each of the weapons hanging from the wall had a shape she had never seen before. It seemed more accurate to call them sculptures. They were all the color of lead, so at first she had dismissed them as ordinary wall decorations. There were six on the wall, but the rightmost slot had only empty wall mounts, so there were likely seven in total.

“Meow! You know the *Song of Bilegga*, right? Look at this!” Mill pointed at the empty space on the right, where a small metal plaque had been installed.

“Demonic Sword of Frost, Jotunn?” It was Yoto’s full name. “Wait, are these...?”

“Heh heh, this is what I came to see,” said a short haired boy with sparkling eyes. The other boys were similarly enthralled.

Albrea took another look around and inspected all the metal plaques in order.

The double-edged greatsword was named the “Dragon Tail of Ignorance, Barobute.” On the sword’s guard, the upper half of a valiant figure was depicted, eyes closed and arms outstretched. The blade was layered like scales in ten centimeter segments, and Albrea wondered if it was flexible as a result.

The twin swords that were hung across each other were named the “Twin Wings of the Clear Storm, Shuza Merz.” Each of the blades’ handguards had the profile of a lovely young girl embedded in them. Their blades curved beautifully like a crescent moon.

The giant bow—too large to have been wielded by a human—was named the “Bow of the Azurite Moon, Belrock.” On it, the upper body of a stern, bespectacled young man was depicted lying on his back. Who in the world was capable of drawing such a bow?

The hammer that appeared to be a rock with a handle attached was named the “Stone Hammer of Ebony Waves, Wighthilde.” The figure of a beautiful, long-haired woman was embracing the large stone. It was miraculous

something that seemed so heavy could hang from the wall without falling.

The long, spiraling spear was named the “Spiraling Tower of the Crimson Flash, Spiralumo.” The form of a beautiful girl making a somewhat longing expression hung over the spear’s shaft. It was so bulky it almost seemed to be a siege weapon.

“And finally we have the ‘Fortress of Seclusion, Egmort,’ huh?” Unable to resist its beauty, Albrea reached out and touched the long, narrow shield. Beneath the center, the upper body of an astonishingly handsome young man posed with his arms hugging his chest was embedded into the shield. The engravings were so exquisite, she almost didn’t want anything to ever strike it. “Are these the duke’s legendary demonic armaments?”

“That’s right!” The children’s voices echoed through the hall.

The demonic armaments were living weapons like Yoto. According to legend, due to their overwhelming power, they could only come alive while bound by a pact. In the *Song of Bilegga*, it was said that Bilegga I’s allies had all formed pacts with the demonic armaments and used them to fight the Demon Lord.

“I never would have imagined this was where they were sealed,” said Albrea.

“It’s more like they’re sleeping,” Nito corrected.

“Sleeping? Oh, then I shouldn’t raise my voice.”

Nito shook her head. “Yoto said it was okay. Unless they wake up on their own, they can’t hear any outside voices. They don’t even wake up when we race around or hit them with dusters.”

Was that because of a strict seal? Or was the duke just a concerned parent who didn’t want his sleeping children to be woken up?

“We wanted to show you. We’re the ones who clean them.”

“I see. They must be very happy.” Looking at Nito’s bashful face stung Albrea’s heart a little. Yoto had said that with the world at peace, there was no need for weapons. Resting was what they should be doing. And perhaps the same could be said for knights. The hint of loneliness on Yoto’s face came to Albrea’s mind. “No, enough of that. Nothing will come from worrying about it.”

“Princess?”

“It’s nothing. I was just wondering if maybe it was for the best that knights didn’t draw their swords. Maybe we’d be better off sleeping too.”

“What are you talking about, Princess? What if something happens to the kingdom?” The short haired boy spoke like it was the most obvious thing in the world, then sniffled his snot back up into his nose.

Albrea’s eyes went wide. The young boy said what she had wanted to hear the most. And he hadn’t thought twice about it. Albrea was overjoyed. She was just as happy as when the duke had called her a knight. In a world where people were fed up with the mere mention of wearing a sword at your hip, he had said she was needed.

She ran up and hugged the boy. Paying no mind to her chest or anything else, she squeezed him tight. “Thank you,” she said.

Unsure what had just happened, the boy’s face flushed bright red. “Huh? F-For what?!”

“Heh, I’m sorry. Your father must be a great man. You understand the meaning of valor.”

“Of course he is! My dad used to be a dragoon! He was in the fortieth—uhh... Anyway, he’s really strong!”

Now that he mentioned it, Albrea remembered that a white haired man had come to see the boy off the other day. He hadn’t said much, but it was clear at a glance that he was a soldier who had seen his fair share of conflict. The hand that had patted Albrea on the head and given her some candy without a word was without a doubt that of a skilled spear user.

Gradually she began to connect him to another memory. His face was an exact match with the man whose portrait was featured prominently on the opening page of a textbook on mounted tactics. “That’s right. You’re all the children of legendary figu—”

“No fair!” The other children clung to Albrea. After hugging them all back, Albrea stood up and moved on so as to not wake the sleeping demonic armaments. Unbeknownst to her or the children, the shield had begun to glow

faintly after she touched it.

★

While Albrea and the children explored the castle, the duke was in his smithy, grinding a sword against the whetstone. He ground it, held it up to the sunlight, then ground it some more. The blade in his hands was the shortsword he had promised Albrea.

Ordinarily, fixing her sword in such a short period of time would have been impossible. Had her bastard sword been a mass-produced weapon, pouring liquid metal into a mold may have been enough, but it had been custom-made to withstand battle after battle, so the process for making her new sword was significantly more complex.

Swords were generally forged by melting iron, hammering it, sometimes folding it, then heating it back up and repeating the process. Of course, the exact method depended on the type of sword, quality of iron, the furnace, and even the use of magic. It was an intricate process that was impossible to sum up succinctly. The only thing that could be said about forging was that no matter the method, it took a considerable amount of time, yet the duke had only been working for a few hours—he had begun immediately after seeing Albrea and the children off.

“I can’t believe you wanted to get her sword back to her so fast you used the dimensional furnace, Master.” Yoto shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t you think you’re spoiling her a bit?” Finished with her housework, she was reading a book under the umbrella in the yard. The doors were always open while the smithy was in use, and Yoto enjoyed listening to the duke work and occasionally glancing over at him in the smithy as she read.

The dimensional furnace was an extradimensional space within the duke’s smithy furnace. The normally wood-powered device was currently emitting a faint blue light. Inside was a zone that resembled the night sky or outer space.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” the duke replied, waving off Yoto’s concern. “If I don’t use the dimensional furnace every once in a while, the subspace workshop I worked so hard to expand will close.”

“You’re using magic to copy yourself and do the work of several people at once while time is distorted in there. Are you trying to throw out your back again?” Yoto put down her book and walked into the smithy. She peered into

the dimensional rift, only to be promptly hit by a gust of hot air. “Bleh. It’s like a kaleidoscope in there. It reminds me of an apartment complex made up of different dimensions, all forging one blade. All the separate Masters doing the same action. You’re really going overboard again...” Yoto sounded annoyed, but the duke was the only person in the world who could pull off such a feat.

Simultaneously performing all of the necessary processes of forging a single sword in several parallel worlds was no simple task. If any researchers from the capital had been around to see it, they would have been thrown off their feet, frothing at the mouth.

“I did my best to create as many copies of myself as possible. I wonder how long it’s been since I last exerted myself this much?”

Yoto looked away from the furnace and up at the duke. “Good grief. There’s a limit to how compassionate you can be. Doesn’t that technique exhaust you? Did you at least use a catalyst?”

The duke held up a large jar he had nearby and shook it. There were several sharp gold objects inside. Yoto took a closer look and knit her eyebrows, letting out another “bleh.”

“They’re my claws. Hair and nails have always been the best catalyst for creating copies.”

Yoto’s face didn’t hide her disgust. “A jar full of nails. Yuck.”

“That hurts. Devil claws are valuable magic catalysts, you know? Valuable enough that Porion is always trying to steal them.”

“Oh, to be young like her,” Yoto sighed. “Anyway, I have what might be a silly question.”

“What is it?”

“Why aren’t you using your Craft magic? You’d be able to make the sword easily with it.”

“Because then I’d just be using magic, not doing the work. Those may be copies of me in there, but I’m still pounding and tempering the iron myself.”

“I can’t believe you. Your ridiculous obsession with your work is almost

impressive. Well, it doesn't make any difference to me. I'll allow you to work on other swords, but I'm going to be mad if you cheat on me."

"Ha ha ha, no need to scowl. This sword is like a younger sister to you."

Yoto repeated the word "sister" with a conflicted expression. Instead of returning to her chair under the umbrella, she sat across from the duke in the smithy. "In that case, I should see her birth for myself. Hurry up and sharpen her."

"Get a good look, then. She's almost done." The sound of the whetstone grinding against metal filled the smithy. The sword went back and forth several times as it was dunked in water. Through the use of several whetstones, a longsword that had been snapped clean in half was reborn as a splendid one-handed shortsword.

It might have been more accurate to say it had been turned into something else entirely. Its shape was that of a shortsword, but its once silver blade was now a layered alloy of different metals, resembling wood grain. The duke had mixed together mithril and several other rare ores, a technique that was seldomly used on swords.

"It's finished—reborn as a fine shortsword. Look, Yoto, I based it on your lovely figure. The curves have been faithfully reproduced, wouldn't you say?" The duke smiled, showing off the blade.

"I get enough of that unpleasant language from Egmort, thank you. But it does look wonderful." Yoto took the sword in her arms like she was cradling an infant. "My younger sister is quite beautiful. Still, isn't this a little much? You've turned her into a formidable magic weapon. Can the seal's manastone handle that?"

The duke looked at the pommel Yoto had picked up off the table and smacked himself in the forehead. He had been so engrossed in his work that he completely forgot about it after he removed it. The manastone embedded in the pommel was the blessing of the west itself. It was a form of magic booster that allowed the sword's user to borrow mana from the sky and the earth. "I tried to maximize the mana transfer rate, but I suppose it backfired."

"If she unleashes her full power like she did before, the manastone will

quickly run dry. You need to make sure you inform her of that."

"W-Well, on the bright side, it requires less mana now. It's not so bad if you just think of it as more fuel efficient." Taking the sword from Yoto, the duke inserted the grip into place with a wooden mallet, then secured it with the pommel. Pulling himself onto his feet, he went out into the yard and swung the sword through the air. "Good, good. It cuts straight and nothing is loose. An excellent piece."

Yoto looked past the duke, towards the yard. "So excellent you just sent a blade of wind flying. At least it'll save me time weeding."

Nodding his head in satisfaction, the duke pulled his pipe out of his pocket dimension. He sat down and let out a puff of smoke, enjoying himself.

"I don't mind you smoking, but try to keep it to a minimum. It's bad for your health," Yoto scolded.

"Oh, don't be such a stickler. I've been around for two thousand years now. Let an old man enjoy what time he has left."

"You could easily live another thousand years if you—hm?" Her face immediately turning cold, Yoto looked up at the sky.

The duke followed the direction she was looking. "What's wrong, Yoto?"

"A red signal flare!" the maid cried out.

"Not good. That's an emergency signal from Somerset!" The duke stowed his pipe away in a magic circle and stood up. The other villagers were already beginning to stir at the sight of the signal flare.

"Master! The barrier is reacting! Hostiles have made contact with it!" Yoto cast a spell, creating a translucent window in midair—a map of Montt Village and the surrounding area. Points of light began to appear on the map, steadily increasing in number. The assailants were slowly but surely advancing on the village.

The duke shouted panicked questions. "Who are they?! How many?!"

"Forty, fifty... They just keep coming! There are probably 150 of them! Around forty are headed towards the castle!" Yoto replied. She very rarely lost her

composure, but Albrea and the children were currently at the castle.

“Yoto, go alert the mayor! It’s an emergency! Tell somebody to ring the bell on your way there! I’m going to take all the noncombatants to the church! Hurry!”

“Understood!”

Chapter 8

The princess knight met the demonic armament. It seemed like fate.

Guided by the children, Albrea arrived at an interior hallway. The entrance was to the left of the throne in the main hall, hidden behind a cosmetic pillar. It was considerably larger than the hallway they had passed through to enter the castle, so it must have been intended to be used by soldiers moving about.

“Meow, meow! Princess! This way!” Mill was beckoning her towards a wall. It seemed somewhat out of place the way it abruptly cut off the hallway.

“Here?” Albrea asked as she approached. “It just looks like an ordinary wall.”

“That’s where this comes in.” Nito pulled out her omamori charm, and the rest of the children gathered around her, similar charms in all their hands.

Albrea took out her own charm. “I’m supposed to use this thing?”

“Yes, just like this.” Nito slowly walked up to the wall, but Mill impatiently shouted “meow!” and jumped straight at it.

“Be careful!” Albrea cried out on reflex, but instead of colliding with the wall, the cat-eared girl sailed right through it. “It’s the illusion spell Phantom?! But it feels so real! What a powerful spell!”

“Oh, Mill,” Nito sighed. “Anyway, this is Yoto’s barrier. You have to wear your charm or this happens.” Nito placed her charm on the floor and touched the wall. It had returned to being ordinary solid stone. Then, picking her charm back up, she passed straight through. The other children all proceeded inside the same way.

Albrea could hear the children hurrying her on from the other side of the wall. Mustering up her resolve, she took a step forward and found herself in a completely different space from where she had been before. “So this is the armory. I didn’t expect it to be so big.” It was breathtaking. Shelves were lined up all the way to the ceiling just as high as the royal library, weaponry neatly

arranged on each shelf like decorations.

Situated between the main hall and the living quarters, the space had likely been a bunch of guest rooms for soldiers originally, which meant all the dividing walls had to be removed to turn it into an armory. Signs of where they used to be could be seen on the aged walls and ceiling.

“It’s like a museum,” Albrea said in awe. Had it been open to the public, it surely would have attracted a lot of visitors. The hanging battle standards and magnificent carpets made quite the impression. They were more ostentatious than the ones in the main hall, perhaps intended for more formal use.

There were rows of shelves for two hundred meters in every direction, each one clearly numbered. The ends had signs detailing the items on display. In the center there was a space free of shelving with a round table in the middle, surrounded by four chairs. Perhaps the duke would sit there and enjoy looking at his collection as Yoto cleaned. It was easy to imagine him reluctantly dusting the shelves after Yoto told him to get up and help already.

“No wonder Yoto gets mad at him for buying new swords,” Albrea mused. The swords on display were all high-quality. Even considering only the longswords, there was everything from bastard swords used by the royal knights, to claymores, to a flamberge that seemed more ceremonial than practical.

The next shelf had knives and small weapons from all over the world. The most unusual were the ninja shurikens, said to deliver death without the user ever being seen, and the swordbreaker, a toothed blade that could hardly be called a sword and was intended to catch and break opposing swords.

Farther in, Albrea found legendary weapons even she had heard about displayed among the rest. “Where did he get all these? A dragon killer, a gnome sling capable of felling giants, an elven crossbow renowned for its accuracy, and a mithril sword too. What’s this strange katana? Handle with caution? Muramasa...no, Murasama? I think I’ll leave this one alone.”

Although there had been a thousand years of peace and no need for such weapons, the duke’s collection was so massive it almost seemed like hoarding. Still, Albrea could relate. Her own collection of books was stuffed full of tales of adventure.

“The shields are over here!” Nito took Albrea’s hand and led her to a shelf of shields. On it were kite shields, round shields, tower shields, and even shields in shapes she had never seen before.

“I never knew there were so many different kinds,” Albrea said in amazement.

“Cool, right? The duke’s been collecting them forever. We all clean them whenever we come here, so we’re the reason they’re so beautiful!” a chestnut-haired boy boasted. The excitement of the children—the boys in particular—had been on another level since they had entered the armory.

Despite their excitement, the children didn’t reach out for the weapons. Albrea thought it was strange, but she soon understood why. Plaques with Yoto’s face and the words “Don’t touch!” on them were hung all over the shelves. There were traces of magic over the shelves, which Albrea could only assume served as both a warning and a punishment.

The boys were hanging their heads, disappointed but obedient. “I’m sure Yoto will let you hold the weapons when you grow up,” Albrea assured them. Albrea wondered if the boys’ restraint was because of Yoto’s discipline or simply because they had been raised by heroes. It felt like she was looking at her past self.

“Now, the duke said I could pick whichever I liked, but...” Quite frankly, there were too many shields to choose from. Every kind imaginable was present. Some had “handle with caution” labels on them and were emitting a faint film of light over their surface. They were presumably magic weapons of some sort.

“What kind of shield do you all think would suit me?” Albrea tried asking the children, but they all gave vastly different answers. Filled with curiosity, Mill pointed to one that was hard to tell whether it was even a shield at all or a gauntlet. “Yeah, that figures,” Albrea muttered.

The children looked around and talked about the shields, placing the ones that seemed usable on the table in the center of the room, but none of them really felt right the way her sword had. “What to do? Shields really aren’t my area of expertise.” Albrea had mainly studied longsword techniques, so she had minimal experience with shields. She didn’t know how she was supposed to choose. “Well, I’m sure the duke will help me out. He has one of the kite shields

I trained with here.”

“Aaaaaaahhhhhhh!” A screaming child startled Albrea. She tossed the shield away and ran towards the sound, turning a corner around a shelf to find the chestnut-haired boy so afraid that he was unable to stand.

“I-It’s a ghost!” The boy pointed, and sure enough there was a suspicious figure standing there. The person’s silhouette was hazy, giving off a ghastly presence that gradually grew clearer. The figure appeared to be a teenage boy, his tanned arms covered in intricate tattoos.

“Who goes there?! How did you get inside?!” Albrea shouted.

The figure didn’t respond. With his face covered by a hood, his expression was unreadable, but Albrea knew he gazed directly at her from the darkness. “Hee hee, found you, Master.” His voice sounded as youthful as his appearance suggested, and was smooth enough to sweep an inexperienced girl off her feet.

“Master?” Albrea echoed.

“Hee hee hee.” Giving an innocent laugh, the sound of the robed boy’s footsteps faded as he walked away.

Albrea raced up to the scared boy on the ground. “Are you all right?!”

“I-I’m fine, Princess! He just scared me a little!” The boy brushed off his knees and got back up without taking Albrea’s hand. There was a hint of bravery in his eyes. Girls like Nito still showed signs of fright, but overall, the children were handling the situation well.

“Meow, meow! Princess, over here! The ghost ran this way!” Mill pointed at a row of shelves and dashed off, prompting the other children to shout “wait up!” and chase after her.

Albrea tried to stop them. “H-Hold on! It’s dangerous!”

Albrea stood up to chase after them, but Nito pulled on her clothes. “Princess...” Tears were welling up in her large eyes.

“It’s okay, Nito. Anyone who’s scared can get behind me. You’ll be all right.” With the remaining children in tow, Albrea proceeded carefully. The tiny scouting party ran ahead, going down the hallway opposite the one they had

entered through. This hallway seemed to lead back to the main hall, and judging from the carpet on the floor, it seemed to be intended for the lord of the castle. In other words, it was the duke's personal hallway.

Passing through another Phantom wall, Albrea quickly caught up to the children who had raced ahead. But something was off. They were pushing and kicking what seemed to be empty space.

"Princess! Bad news! There's an invisible wall!" Mill was pressed up against nothing. There certainly seemed to be an invisible wall present. Beyond it was the main hall, entirely unchanged. The children simply couldn't pass through.

"Are we locked in? That can't be—Whoa!" Albrea pushed against the invisible wall, and much to her surprise, she alone was able to pass through. She had pushed with so much force it threw off her balance and she fell to the ground. "Ow... I hit my nose."



“Whoops, are you all right?” she heard a voice ask. “Sorry about that, princess knight.”

A sweet smell struck Albrea's nose. She lifted up her head and found the boy from before standing in front of her. "Y-You're..."

"Yeah, this is perfect." The boy pulled down his hood, revealing the face of a breathtakingly handsome young demon. Albrea tried to put up her guard, but her strength suddenly left her. She unwillingly fell to her knees, her heart pounding for some unknown reason.

"Princess!" Albrea could hear Mill and the other children shouting. They threw themselves at the invisible wall, only to be bounced back as they tried to break through.

"Wh-Who are you?!" Albrea demanded.

"Hey. Look at me." The boy's golden eyes drew closer. The uncanny, alluring glow combined with his androgynous features to make him all the more appealing.

Albrea wanted him. She yearned for him. She wanted to take him right this instant.

The pounding in her chest grew louder. It was a feeling she had never experienced before. Her face grew hot. Her breathing grew labored. She tried to rise to her feet, but her legs wouldn't listen.

Albrea felt her face flush. Every time she looked at the boy, she felt like she was looking at someone precious to her. The feeling gradually morphed into possessiveness, and even affection. "You won't fool me... Gah..."

"Oh, wow. You still have it in you to glare at me. Good, that's the way a princess knight should be." The demon boy laughed, still staring directly at Albrea.

Albrea crumpled under his gaze. "Ahh, stop! My head feels like it's splitting open... My chest is burning up..."

"Hee hee, surely you're no innocent maiden, Princess. Sharing a bed without knowing each other's names isn't *that* strange, is it?" The bewitching glow in his golden eyes grew brighter.

Unsure what was happening to her, Albrea found herself leaning forward on

her elbows. Her field of view grew hazy. All she could look at was the boy. It felt like a voice in her head was whispering to her that he was more dear to her than anything in the world. If she relaxed for even a moment, she would collapse on the spot. She longed for his touch.

Albrea shook her head. She was a knight. A noble knight the duke had left in charge of the children. Yet the more she tried to resist the feelings, the more her heart twisted in anguish.

“Hee hee hee, can’t even speak anymore? Let’s see how long you’ll last. You’re fighting the urge to pin me down right now, aren’t you? Hee hee, hee hee hee hee!”

“Who...are you?” she managed to ask.

“You want to know my name? Then I’m happy to tell you. I’m the Fortress of Seclusion, Egmort. Does it really matter, though? Come on, set yourself free. I’ll show you pleasure so great you forget all about being a stupid knight.”

“A stupid knight?”

“That’s right. It must be so boring being a knight. Just let it go. You’re beautiful, you know?” The boy who called himself Egmort gave a vulgar smile, confident those words would finish her off. Albrea would succumb to her lust, and he would do all sorts of things to her.

He had no idea he’d just stepped on a land mine.

Albrea raised her head and saw him grinning. Seemingly confident in his victory, he held his arms out to welcome her. Her vision returned to its normal colors, no longer tinted pink and gold.

Her fingers were the first to move, forming a fist, and her elbow followed. Then her shoulder. The boy tilted his head in confusion. He strengthened the glow in his eyes just in case, but it was too late. A jolt ran down Albrea’s spine, accompanied by soreness as she steadily regained control of her body.

“Huh? Wh-What’s going on?” The boy no longer sounded confident.

The amorous emotions that had welled up inside Albrea were being consumed by the flames of her fury. She saw the boy’s playful expression grow

stiff, sweat dripping down his forehead. Her cheek twitched, and her sense of taste finally returned to her. The tang of iron spread through her mouth—she had been unknowingly biting down on her lip.

“What gives? That was a really powerful Charm spell I cast on you!”

Now Albrea understood. His magic was responsible for the lust she had felt. “What did you say?” Roused by her fury, she was finally able to stand up. The children would have burst into tears if they could have seen the expression on her face.

“Wh-Wh-What do you mean? Eek!”

“I asked what you just said!” With that shout, the spell was completely lifted. Albrea raised her fist without a second thought. She looked down on the boy on the verge of tears in front of her, his nose dripping.

“E-Eeeeek!”

Albrea swung her fist without the slightest hesitation. “You insolent fool!”

“Gaaaaah!” Her fist sunk straight into the boy’s face, his skin unsettlingly smooth. He flew a full three meters before his head collided with one of the main hall’s pillars. “Agh!” Holding the back of his head, he rolled around in pain.

The charm magic cast on Albrea was long gone. “A stupid knight?” She walked straight up to him and grabbed him by the neck. “I may be dumb. People may make fun of me behind my back. But before I am a princess, I am a knight. And knights are the symbol of the kingdom! I won’t allow you to mock them!”

Being a knight meant something to Albrea. Her dedication to wielding her sword for her country and people was genuine. To have her honor as a knight tarnished by an unknown man who had dared cast charm magic on her went beyond insulting. The only mercy she offered him was not thrusting her blade through his chest then and there.

“Aaagh! Time out, time out!” the boy begged. “You’re gonna kill me! Demonic armament or not, I’m seriously gonna die!”

“Quiet. Unless you’d like to be my ‘first time’ taking a life with my bare hands.”

“Scary! That look in your eyes is terrifying!”

“No one will have any sympathy for a man who laid his hands on a princess. I’m quite confident I could beat you to death and feel nothing at all. Now apologize!” Albrea demanded.

“Eek! I-I-I’m sorry! I got carried away!”

Albrea let the boy go, and he slumped to the floor. Holding his neck, he coughed violently. “What the hell! Aren’t you supposed to be a knight?! You seem more like a berserker to me!”

“Who’re you calling a berserker?!” Albrea clenched her fist and punched him again. The force of the blow must have dispelled the invisible wall, as the children immediately came rushing in.

Crowding around the demon boy, they kicked him as he lay on the ground. “What were you trying to do to the princess?!”

“A-Ahh! Hold on! Wait a second! I’m the Fortress of Seclusion, Egmort! The demonic armament who fought alongside Bilegga’s companion, Lord Alberzeit! The great shield who blocked the Demon Lord’s light beam magic, Sting Ray!”

“Who’s that?”

“Dunno. Is he stronger than Yoto?”

“Never heard of him.”

The children’s innocent words seemed to be the finishing blow. Kicked and beaten, Egmort slumped down limply. The children returned to Albrea’s side satisfied, leaving the young boy sobbing, his body covered in footprints. It wasn’t acting. His tears were genuine.

“Y-You guys are awful. I’m a hero, you know? After I worked so hard... I guess Yoto’s that much cooler than me, huh? I’m just a lame shield...” Egmort pouted like a child, his alluring atmosphere from earlier entirely dissipated.

“So, Egmort or whatever. What did you want with me?” Albrea asked.

“What do you mean?” His golden eyes peeked out from a gap between his fingers. “You’re the one who touched me, aren’t you? Our wavelengths matched, so I knew you had to be a wonderful person.”

“Touched you? Wait, are you...” Albrea and the children turned to look behind the throne. They counted up the weapons, and just as expected, there was one less than before. Another set of metal wall mounts was empty. As he had said, it was the one Albrea had touched. The one the plaque had called the Fortress of Seclusion, Egmort. “*You’re* Egmort?!”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! Ugh, I only made a move because I thought you were someone who could wield me! They always say making a princess fall for you is the sweetest honey! How was I supposed to resist? It’s not my fault!” Egmort pouted with his legs crossed and arms folded. His refusal to take responsibility for his actions infuriated Albrea. The wrath clearly emanating from her startled Egmort, prompting him to back up. “Eek! H-Hold on! Don’t hit me again!”

“I remember you now, Egmort. You were the demonic armament who fought against the Demon Lord alongside Lord Alberzeit. Then the two of you chased after a woman and ended up foolishly falling into a succubus’s trap.”

“What?! Is that what they say about me now?! That’s way exaggerated! I’m being slandered! Al left me at the inn to go hit on her! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Albrea slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “So the legend is more or less true. My word.” Lord Alberzeit’s depiction in the *Song of Bilegga* was rather comical. His story was used as a cautionary tale that even the bravest heroes are not immune to being corrupted by lust.

The story was so outrageous it was the subject of frequent debate among historians, but it was generally agreed to have been exaggerated by dramas and plays. Albrea herself had taken the story with a grain of salt, considering it to be comic relief within the grander epic. However, judging from Egmort’s words, the most damaging part of the story was true.

“C’mon, I still saved the world with Papa,” Egmort pouted. “In any case, how about you and me form a pact?”

“A pact?”

“Yeah, demonic armaments have unique powers only usable by their wielders. I’ll become yours if you’ll take me. Then you’re free to use my power

as much as you'd like."

Albrea considered it a moment. "That sounds too good to be true. What's the cost of this pact?"

"Well, you might become a fiend," he mumbled.

"If you're still half asleep I'd be happy to hit you again."

"N-No violence! Look, what's the harm? Don't you wanna get stronger? And I wanna see the outside world! If I leave the village and get far away from Papa, I'll run out of mana and turn into scrap iron! I need a pact to prevent that! You'd really be helping me out!"

"Why would I accompany some incubus?! I'm going to ask the duke to seal you again!"

"Aww... I finally woke up after so long..." Dejected, Egmort slumped his shoulders. "I wanna flirt with women! Sleep with them! Make the ultimate harem!" Finding the situation amusing, the children burst into laughter, rolling around on the floor.

Despite being on the verge of tears, Egmort's face turned deathly serious. "Hm?" The change was so abrupt Albrea and the children instantly put themselves on guard. Something was wrong. "Princess knight, you wouldn't happen to have brought any heavily armored individuals with you, would you?"

"No, just the children. I came to the village by myself, anyway."

"Huh. Well, we might be in some trouble. They have us surrounded."

"What are you talking about? I don't see anybody—"

"So you noticed." A low voice echoed through the hall. Unlike with Egmort, this voice was clearly full of hostility. The children picked up on the tone and hid behind Albrea, Egmort scurrying not far behind them.

"Who is it this time?!" Albrea demanded. "Enough of your games!"

"This is no game." The voice came from the vicinity of the gate. Albrea readied her hand on the grip of her sword as the owner of the voice stepped out from the shadow of a pillar and revealed himself.

“A black knight?” There was no other way to describe him. His platemail was pitch-black, his expression hidden by a full-face helmet. Wings were attached to the sides of his helmet around his temples, marking him as a commanding officer.

With a loud crash, the glass windows overhead shattered, and ropes were unfurled through the fragments. Several lightly armored men climbed down, their equipment all black like their commander’s. Shortly after, heavily armored knights charged into the room with their swords drawn, joining their commander in formation.

Albrea was stunned upon seeing the formation they took. It was one she had performed many times herself. “Is that the royal knights’ defensive formation?! What unit do you belong to?! Identify yourselves!”

“We’ve given up our names. Even our very words are tainted. But know this. For the sake of our lord, we must take your life, sixth princess Albrea van Bilegga.”

Chapter 9

The villagers rose up. Knights were nothing to be afraid of.

Yoto ran like the wind. Soon the sound of the alarm bell was reverberating through the village, setting it astir with activity.

The duke immediately headed for the square, spreading his wings wide as a focal point to guide the villagers. Montt Village was inhabited by heroes, yes, but it was also home to their spouses and parents. Not everyone had the means to defend themselves. Applying the defensive magic Protect to everyone who had gathered in the square, the duke calmed the noncombatant villagers with a soft voice and instructed them to head to the church.

Yoto returned just as he was finishing. In the meantime, the village's warriors had been gathering nearby.

"Good, good! Thank you for coming, everyone!" The villagers silently nodded in response to the duke's loud declaration. They were all itching to fight. "As you heard from my demonic sword, attackers are closing in on the village. This village is our home—the peaceful paradise we were finally able to grasp. Are you all prepared to protect your families, your neighbors, and tomorrow's drinks?!" the duke roared.

The armed villagers let out a high-spirited battle cry, each and every one of them looking the part of a hero. Father Blutgang, dressed in his monk vestments, pounded his wrapped fists together. Meikris cracked her neck and hefted the very ax she had once used to cleave a sacred beast in half. The village's great fighters didn't often have the opportunity to let loose, and just as their morale reached its peak—

"Excuse me. Just one moment, please." A voice spoke out, cutting right through the excitement. Porion stepped into the center of the crowd.

"What is it, Porion? You're not going to tell me you have another stomachache, are you?" asked the duke.

“No, it’s not that.” Porion seemed offended by the implication. “I’m a member of this village too, y’know? Think of how many potions I’ll sell if everyone fights and gets hurt. I’ll even put in a little more effort into this battle than usual. It’s just that there’s a person who might know something awake and groaning up there.”

Everyone looked where Porion pointed. The court bard and notorious con man Gilmeus had finally awoken, squirming around in the ropes tying him up.

“Weren’t you working with him?” the duke questioned.

Porion shrugged. “No, not really. He just said he’d give me a nice bracelet if I transported him here. But that look on his face says he knows something. No doubt about it.”

The duke had a bad feeling. Porion was a free-spirited woman who had won over every man in the court with her feminine wiles. As a result of her swamp of love affairs—her recounts of which were unbearably painful to listen to—he knew her ability to read men was legitimate.

“You think he knew about this?” The duke took a deep breath, then snapped his fingers. A moment later, Gilmeus fell to the ground, no longer tied up.

The bard must have landed on his rear, as he started rolling around in pain. “My butt!”

“All right, Gilmeus. What are you planning? Out with it!” the duke demanded.

“Ow...” Gilmeus looked up to see he was surrounded. “H-Hello there, friends! Long time no see!”

“Enough with the greetings. Talk!”

“Calm down, my friend. Though to be honest, I didn’t expect this either. I’ll start with the important part: Princess Albrea is in danger. Knights under the command of the third prince are targeting her.”

All the villagers, the duke included, were at a loss for words. Yoto’s expression didn’t change, but her face went pale.

“She’s being specifically targeted?!” the duke shouted, finally finding his words. “That’s far worse than just running into them by chance! The children

are in danger too!”

“I told you to calm down, didn’t I?” Gilmeus rolled his eyes. “No one in the kingdom can match Princess Albrea’s skills as a swordswoman. Ten or twenty soldiers shouldn’t be an issue. On top of that, she has an ace up her sleeve.”

“And what might that be?”

“I assume you witnessed it yourself. I could even see the waves from her massive sword of light from outside the village. That special manastone connects its wielder to the heavens and the earth, allowing them to use a supercharged attack. Magic sword Sacred Punishment!” Gilmeus dramatically shouted the name of the magic sword like he was the leading actor in a play. “It’s capable of blowing away an entire squad of heavily armored knights!”

“Oh, that?” The surrounding villagers nodded their heads. However, there were three people whose faces grew even paler at the bard’s exaggerated words. The duke, Yoto, and Father Blutgang.

“Princess Albrea’s Sword Boost is especially good at mowing down crowds. Of course, her magic is no match for the duke. I’m sure you were able to settle things peacefully and humble the rambunctious princess—hm? What’s the matter?”

“Well, you see...” The duke fumbled over his words.

“It’s not really anyone’s fault, but, uh...” Father Blutgang wasn’t much help either.

“I broke her sword,” Yoto bluntly declared. It was very slight, but she sounded defiant. The duke reluctantly held out the sheathed blade he’d just completed.

“Broke? I’m sorry, Yoto, but I think my ears got clogged from being tied up for so long. What did you just say? What happened to Carnwennan, the royal treasure the princess received directly from His Majesty?”

The duke covered his eyes upon hearing the sword’s name. Truth be told, he had already guessed it was a gift from the king. Magic swords were one of the treasures passed down through the royal family. Developed by humans one thousand years ago, they allowed knights to use magic that was just as powerful as a sorcerer’s.

The swords served as magic catalysts, and were only given to those who had earned the king's trust. Carelessly adjusting one to increase its output would cause all sorts of problems. The duke used repairing it as an excuse to reforge it with an alloy and turn it into a magic weapon in the truest sense of the word.

"Your ears are perfectly functional. I'll say it again. I broke it. This is my new little sister."

Trembling, Gilmeus pointed at the sword Yoto held out. "Ahhhh! Carnwennan! What did you do to it?!" The situation seemed to be outside his expectations.

"It was pointed at Master, so I did what one does on the battlefield. Now she's been reborn as a cute little shortsword. Look at how smooth her skin is. The wood grain pattern is so pretty. Good girl."

"You completely changed it! It's short now! And there's a crazy amount of magic pouring out of it!"

"She's my precious little sister." Yoto puffed her chest out with pride. She seemed surprisingly attached to the sword, poking at the guard like it was a baby's cheek.

"That's nice and all, but that means the princess doesn't have her magic sword right now! This is bad! If you'll excuse me!" Gilmeus dashed off in the direction of the castle at a full sprint. As he ran, he suddenly gained an inhuman amount of speed, presumably from an acceleration spell he cast with his harp.

"Ah, he ran off," said Yoto.

"Forget about him for now," the duke said. "We need to hurry, Yoto! Blut, can you handle things here?"

"Sure can. Don't you worry 'bout a thing." Father Blutgang and the other villagers nodded reassuringly.

"I'm counting on you." The duke immediately took to the skies with the spell Fly High, and headed to the castle with Yoto in tow.

★

Albrea bit her lip. Black knights with varied equipment stood all around her.

They were no slouches either. Their skill was plain to see, and they numbered around thirty to forty. Not one had the slightest hesitation in their eyes.

If she could use her magic sword, she might have been able to make it out of the situation, but her beloved sword wasn't with her at the moment. Without that sword and the manastone embedded in it, she couldn't use her technique. "What is your goal? There's nothing to be gained from killing me."

"There is for us," the leader replied. "But I'd like to keep the pointless chatter to a minimum."

By Albrea's side, someone suddenly made a move. She immediately drew her sword and swung it in one fluid motion.

One of the lightly equipped soldiers who had dropped from the ceiling had approached her. He was dressed head-to-toe in black leather armor, and had silently snuck up on Albrea with a large knife drawn.

"Gwah!" Albrea's sword caught the soldier's glove, sending his hand flying. The children screamed and raced behind the throne. It was likely something Yoto had taught them. Given the castle's layout, behind the throne was the safest place to be in the event of earthquakes or other disasters, but since they were surrounded, it just made them a target.

There was another sudden move. "Over there! Agh!" Albrea shouted. This time a lightly armored soldier had appeared from the shadow of the nearest pillar, sword drawn, and let out a roar as he charged at Albrea. "Damn it!" Albrea rested her sword on her shoulder, then used her right foot to pivot around.

The moment the soldier was on top of her, Albrea swung her sword straight out. Her timing was perfect. Although she sliced downward through the soldier's shoulder, she could tell from the feeling of the impact that it wasn't enough.

"They've got chain mail underneath!"

As the name implied, chain mail was armor made of small chains. It was worn underneath armor to increase defense, but due to its weight, Albrea hadn't expected to find it on scouts or lightly armored soldiers that specialized in

speed. Despite that, her sword struck true, the shattered chains at the soldier's shoulder demonstrating its power. The soldier quickly retreated back to the black knights, a look of anguish on his face.

"Kids! Run to the armory! They shouldn't be able to get inside!" Albrea shouted.

"No can do, princess knight," said Egmort. "They've cut off our exits. These guys are pretty thorough."

Albrea glanced towards the hall, and found that they had indeed been cut off. They were completely surrounded. "You're right. When did they get around us? Was that the reason they made a show of breaking the skylight right before our eyes?" Albrea paused for a moment. "Wait, what are you doing over there?!" Egmort was hiding with the children. Not only that, but he was shaking and clinging to the throne. "Aren't you one of the duke's demonic armaments? Back me up!"

"You know, I'd love to, but I can't use my power without a pact. Right now putting up this small Kon Shield is the best I can do!" Upon closer inspection, there was a magic circle covering the vicinity of the throne. Judging from the look on Egmort's face, protecting the children really was all he could manage.

"Fine! I'm sure the duke is on his way! Just take care of the children and—"

"Look out in front of you!" Albrea's body moved just as Egmort shouted. Two heavily armored black knights were charging straight at her, claymores longer than her old bastard sword held above their heads.

Ordinarily, Albrea wouldn't have even considered taking them on. Knights in sturdy, full plate armor weren't the type of opponent one could take on with a single shortsword. Her sword would bounce right off, and might even break if she used all her strength.

But right now, their armor class didn't matter to Albrea. "You're nothing compared to the duke." She stepped forward without hesitation.

Expecting her to pull back, the black knights were caught off guard. Perhaps they had expected to cut her down from behind when she retreated in light of their heavy equipment. Regardless, they certainly hadn't expected her to be the

one on the offensive.

Albrea lowered her body and immediately closed the distance, preventing them from swinging their long swords. The knights stumbled, letting Albrea get behind them and drive her blade into their unarmored inner thighs.

They let out small, muffled groans, and their claymores clattered on the floor. Then Albrea followed up by striking the backs of their heads with the pommel of her sword as they kneeled on the ground. After the heavily armored knights collapsed from the bludgeoning, Albrea turned to face the commander of the black knights and pointed her sword at him.

She was still faced with an insurmountable number of enemies, but for some reason she hadn't lost hope. On the contrary, her field of vision expanded, and she could hear each breath of the men trying to kill her. Her mind was clear.

"We got a little ahead of ourselves because you didn't have your magic sword, but I suppose you're called the Sword Princess for a reason. What was that technique? It seems similar to the Bilegga style's Initiation Stance, but it's clearly different. It's exquisite," said the commander.

"Don't act like you know me, lowlife. What are you playing at, toying with me by only sending a few men at a time? Your hubris will cost you. If you want to make it out of here, you're going to have to come at me fully prepared to die!"

"That I must decline," the commander replied, shaking his head. "Our lives are valuable, for we too are offerings."

"Offerings?"

The commander raised his sword and Albrea saw the lightly armored soldiers pull out crossbows behind the defensive line formed by the knights. And they were no ordinary crossbows—there was a faint magic glow coming from the bolts.

"Don't you dare! There are children behind me!" Albrea shouted.

"We will use every tool at our disposal. I see now that facing you with a blade is a futile effort. Instead, we will chip away at your strength through countless bolts. I am aware the path we walk is unjust, but it is all for our lord."

Upon hearing those words, Albrea realized something. They had fallen into depravity not out of selfish desire or for personal gain, but for the sake of their lord. Moreover, that they were using the tactics of the kingdom's knights could mean only one thing—they were knights who served the royal family.

There were only a few individuals who could inspire such devotion in their men. Excluding the king who was currently attending a peace conference, there was but a single person who came to mind in the entire Kingdom of Bilegga.

"Are you Brother's knights?! That can't be! The third prince would never order something like this! Why are you doing this?! Are you trying to tarnish his reputation while he's incapacitated?!"

"No. It is all for his sake. If he is to ever open his eyes again, we must offer up both our own tainted souls and the head of his cherished sister. Then we'll be able to activate the forbidden resurrection spell Sacrifice. Our souls will serve as payment to the devils, while your soul will be overwritten by our lord's."

Their hardened resolve made Albrea shiver. If what he said was true, then the third prince was already dead. They were going to use forbidden magic to call his soul back, and she, his blood relative, was going to be sacrificed.

She shook her head at their foolish plan. To start with, the forbidden spell they spoke of should have been sealed away. "Enough of this nonsense about sacrifices and souls! The forbidden spell you speak of is sealed in the depths of Porion's labyrinth!"

During her time in the royal court, rumors about former court magician Porion had reached Albrea's ears whether she liked it or not. They had almost all been negative, but one rumor in particular stuck out to her as potentially credible.

It was said that an elderly noble had approached Porion and shown her a parchment scroll with a forbidden spell on it. It contained a technique for reviving the dead by consuming the lives of others, sealed by elves long ago. The nobleman had boasted that he paid a hefty sum for it in order to extend his own life, but horrified by the existence of the scroll, Porion stole it from him. She then hid it inside her labyrinth and left the court.

Albrea was now convinced that rumor was the truth. Porion's character was

far different from how the rumors had described her. She was definitely a troublemaker, but Albrea could say with confidence that she would never willingly unleash a calamity upon others.

“That’s right. The forbidden scroll was said to have been sealed by the Labyrinth Witch. But what would you do if I happened to have it right here, sixth princess?” The commander pulled something from his waist. It was black and warped, brimming with ominous magical energy.

Albrea could tell immediately it was undoubtedly the real thing. Even at a distance, it was sinister enough to make her furrow her brow. It had the shape of a parchment scroll, but as far as Albrea was concerned it was a contract with a devil.

★

“What is this?! We keep slipping and can’t advance! There’s soapy water everywhere!”

“A pitfall?! Hey, are you all right? Agh, it reeks! It’s a cesspit! Damn you!”

“The street is narrow! Only two people can advance at a time... Whoa! The walls are all sticky! I can’t move!”

“Retreat! This street is crawling with wood golems! Gah! A bear trap!”

“This is absurd! Shurikens can’t pierce plate armor! Gwaaaah!”

“They’re really goin’ at it.” Father Blutgang was sitting cross-legged atop the belltower in the center of the village, laughing at the knights’ screams as he observed the village through a telescope he had borrowed from Porion. “Guess now’s as good a time as ever,” he said, pulling himself to his feet.

The building was more than ten meters tall, yet Father Blutgang stood just as casually as he would getting up from his seat at a bar. He looked out and saw several other villagers scattered across the rooftops in similar fashion. They were all waving or giving thumbs up to signal the priest.

“Perfect. The advance squads have been crushed. These knights seem like well-mannered folks, but get ’em riled up and that all goes out the window.” Glancing over at the main road, Father Blutgang saw black knights flying

through the air. It seemed like Meikris was blowing them away with her ax. After she finished up, she raised her ax overhead in excitement.

“All right, now she can go all-out. Time for us to move into the next phase too. Signs!” At Father Blutgang’s signal, villagers who had been hiding stepped out of their homes and began setting up small signboards. They were placed at the end of each street, facing outwards.

“Heh heh. Now that they’re all riled up, they aren’t gonna notice the small stuff. And they’d have no reason to be suspicious of a sign warning them to pay an entry fee.” After confirming that all the signs had been set up and the villagers had retreated, Father Blutgang jumped down from the belltower without the slightest hesitation. His landing was completely silent, avoiding altogether what should have been a hip-shattering impact. “We’re all set Porion.”

“...” The witch didn’t respond.

“Porion? You spacing out? Another stomachache? Stiff shoulders, maybe?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m just wondering about Gilmeus.”

“Gilmeus?”

“He seemed legitimately worried about Albrea, but is that really all it was?” Porion’s voice sounded drowsy, but her face was unusually serious. “Don’t you think it’s weird how his expression completely changed when he took off?”

“So he didn’t lie, but he didn’t tell us the full truth either,” Father Blutgang replied. “Y’know, that look on your face is the same one you had when you first came to the village.”

“Is it? Well, that’s fine. Whatever happens, I’ll do my part.” Porion closed her eyes and raised her prized staff. It was carved from a branch of the World Tree, and the top was shaped like a crescent moon. The interior of the crescent was embedded not with gemstones, but green dragon scales. Of all the dragons that lived through eternity, only the scales of the emerald dragon—a beast famed for the excessive magical energy it wielded—could withstand the spells she cast. “Eh heh heh. I’m going to make a lot of money today. Do watch my back, Father. You have a front row seat.”

“Is protecting you one of the perks of the seat?” Father Blutgang said, rolling his eyes. “You don’t have to worry. But make sure you leave their swords. They look like knights.”

“Sure, sure.” Before long, Porion began to dance. Her spell couldn’t be cast through an incantation alone. The graceful lines she traced in the air and the alluring movement of her long legs were all part of the spell.

“This is my secret. It is an abyss, a labyrinth, and the underworld.” Porion began to float just off the ground. Each step she took created a golden ripple, her staff glowing even brighter green. She jumped and spun, bending her body in exotic ways. However, it was not to be mistaken for something crass. She was like a shrine maiden making an offering to the gods—elegant and divine.

“I command. I inscribe. And I am lost in the labyrinth. Open the gate to the underworld. The afterlife seeks your silver coins, and you stand before it. Where is the ferryman? Where is the ancestral call? Drifting and flowing, you arrive at the tower from which there is no return.”

“There they are! In the square!” The black knights noisily clamored into the square, but Porion paid them no mind and continued dancing and chanting.

“Were you the ones who took out the advance squads?!” one of the knights shouted. “You’ve got some nerve for a bunch of country bumpkins!”

“Big talk coming from the ones who barged in here uninvited.” Father Blutgang looked over his shoulder and stowed away his favorite sunglasses in a leather bag. He calmly cracked his neck in the face of the more than fifty fully armored knights. The knights responded by loading the crossbows, each of the bolts glowing with magical light. “No talkin’ things out, huh? Figures you’d be mad after we made fools of you.”

“Damn you,” the knight who seemed to be in charge shouted.

“Vice-commander! The mage behind him is casting a spell!”

“No matter! Fire!” At the vice-commander’s order, the magic bolts flew at Father Blutgang all at once.

“Hrmph!” With a stomp, a crater appeared beneath the priest’s feet, followed by a low rumble. Father Blutgang surrounded himself with an intense aura, and

just as the magic bolts were about to strike him, his arms became a blur.



Something unimaginable occurred. The deluge of bolts disappeared like they'd been snuffed out of existence. Father Blutgang, who should have been

shot full of holes, was completely unharmed.

“What?!” the knights shouted in disbelief.

“This takes me back. I used to practice catching arrows all the time.” Bolts clattered to the ground out of Father Blutgang’s hand. The priest had caught and destroyed every single magic bolt fired at him. The black knights gasped in shock.

“Those bolts were moving faster than a bird in flight... That isn’t possible...”

“It’s a piece of cake for anybody from Mt. Eirimt,” Father Blutgang said, smirking.

“Mt. Eirimt? Are you an ex-monk?! Identify yourself!”

“Sure you wanna waste time with that?” Father Blutgang pointed his thumb behind him. “She’s almost done with the incantation, y’know.” As she neared the end of her incantation, Porion coiled mana around her green staff like cotton candy.

“Another volley!” the vice-commander ordered. “Reload and aim for the woman!”

Father Blutgang spoke before the knights could even move to reload. “Too late. I’ve just got one question for you guys. Did you pay the entry fee?”

“Huh?!”

“The entry fee. There should have been a bunch of signs near the entrance that said ‘Labyrinth Ahead. Pay 100 yenny to enter.’ You didn’t see ’em?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Sounds like a no. Porion!”

“Prepare yourselves, you who lack prudence! You who lack reverence!” Porion shouted. “You are but thieves. Upon you sinners, I shall bestow a single word, and through it, a life of wandering through transactions. Labyrinth Levy Magic: Labyrinthos Mea!” A column of magic rose from Porion’s staff. The blue light shot up like a firework, then came right back down and landed in the middle of the square. It seemed to seep in between the stone pavement, and then...

“What happened to my armor?!”

“The crossbows too! What’s going on?!”

“Wah ha ha ha!” Father Blutgang roared with laughter, holding on to his sides. It was the natural response, given that the black knights who had been so intent on killing him just a moment ago were now stripped of their armor and standing in their underwear. Their drawn crossbows had all been confiscated, leaving them with only the shortswords at their hip as an act of pity.

“F-Fall back and regroup!”

“Not gonna happen,” said Father Blutgang. “Mordan!”

A dull “You got it!” was heard from off in the distance. With a thunderous roar, walls of earth rose up from the ground to cut off the knights’ escape. The barriers were easily more than two stories tall.

“How’s that, Father?” An orc in a straw hat waved from atop Ogre Produce. He was slender for an orc, and his features were gentle and kind. Although he was dressed like a farmer, in his hand was a sage’s ebony staff. The blue gem embedded in it glowed with magical energy, identifying him as the one who had created the walls of dirt.

“Earth Wall?!” one of the knights shouted.

“Hey, it’s about time!” At Father Blutgang’s signal, the doors of the Chimera Tavern burst open like a dam, and villagers poured out. They all seemed highly motivated, and some were even a little drunk. They must have had a few pints to kill time while waiting. A crowd soon formed behind the priest, all letting out loud battle cries. There were enough people to make one wonder how they had all been hiding in the tavern.

“A trap?! This backwater village tricked us?!” the vice-commander shouted.

“You picked the wrong village to attack, gentleman. We’re all used to this. I’ll go ahead and give you my name now. I’m one of the Eight Flowers of Eirimt—Dragon Spirit Blutgang!”

“Dragon Spirit?! The priest who killed a dragon with his bare hands?!”

“And not just me. Why don’t you all introduce yourselves to the good knights

here?” The other villagers followed Father Blutgang’s example and gave their names. With each one, the knights’ faces grew paler and paler.

“This is ridiculous! They’re bluffing! Those heroes are all missing or presumed dead!”

“Vice-commander, we’re in trouble! They’re telling the truth! They’re all beyond what we can measure with Library!” The shaking soldier had seen something terrifying—the skill levels written in the statuses above the villagers’ heads. Each and every one of them had reached their limit and earned the title of “maxed-out.”

“What in the world? I’d heard there was a village somewhere in the kingdom where great heroes were living in hiding, but to think it was here... That damn bard! No wonder!”

“You have my condolences. Now, what’s it gonna be?” asked Father Blutgang. “You know we left you your swords on purpose, right? Drop them and surrender.”

“Nevertheless, we can’t turn back!” the vice-commander immediately shouted in response.

Father Blutgang’s eyes went wide, shocked that their morale hadn’t broken. The surrounding villagers exchanged looks that said, “are they really still fighting?” It was clear they should surrender. There was no shame in a knight laying down his sword. So long as it avoids unnecessary conflict and the leader accepts responsibility, their honor would not be tarnished.

On the contrary, it would have been far more shameful for their swords to be taken from them while in perfect condition. Had they been defeated like that, they would have been disparaged as fools and their renown would have plummeted. That was why Father Blutgang had instructed Porion to leave their swords.

And yet the black knights refused. They knew exactly why they had been left their swords, but despite their trembling hands, their eyes were filled with the will to fight.

“We may have given up our names, but we remain knights! We’ve been

prepared from the very beginning to give up our lives to repay our lord! So long as we have our swords, we can complete our mission! If there is no retreat, then we can only push forward! Draw your blades!" The black knights unsheathed their swords all at once. Not one had any intention of surrendering.

"Oh, my. They're surprisingly gutsy, aren't they?" said Porion. "Maybe I should have taken their swords too."

"Stand back, Porion. Everyone else too," Father Blutgang warned. "They just threw away the white flag we went out of our way to prepare for them. They aren't playing around. Seems like this goes deeper than we thought." Father Blutgang took up a unique stance, lowering his hips and spreading his arms high and low, resembling a dragon's maw. The air of intimidation around him made it seem like the dragon was about to unleash its breath at any moment. "I have no intention of apologizing for our rudeness, but I do acknowledge your conviction. As such, I'lll bring you salvation and correct your mistake with this fist of mine."

"Attack!" The black knights charged at Father Blutgang. They looked ridiculous in their underwear, but their toned bodies were proof of their diligent training.

"I won't ask your reasons. But no matter your situation, there's no justification for trying to take our lives! Time to cool your heads!" The priest was clad in a draconic aura, growing ever larger until even the villagers watching could perceive the form of a giant dragon behind him. He had indeed invoked the spirit of a dragon. "Secret technique: Phantom Dragon's Roaring Blossom!"

Father Blutgang's secret technique enveloped him in a draconic aura, imitating—or rather, becoming one with the power of a dragon. His stomping feet were a dragon's stride. His outstretched fists a dragon's claws. And his sweeping kick was akin to a dragon's tail.

He charged at the knights with a shout, unleashing several strikes and kicks. The nearest black knight was hit by a backhanded strike, the crown of his head hit before he could even bring up his sword. A moment later, the impact surged through his body and his legs gave out. The black knight's eyes rolled back in his

head and he collapsed onto the ground.

Each knight went down with a single blow. Fists too fast for the eye to see struck all their vital points. The impact passed through their bodies, the skin opposite the blow turning red and swelling up. Some knights tried to block his fists with their swords, but it proved equally futile. Clad in his draconic aura, Father Blutgang's body was harder than steel. His fists broke right through their swords, evoking pure fear in the knights.

"Hraaaaaaah!" Father Blutgang struck the ground as though to put an end to their fight. His draconic aura seeped into the earth, then surged out of the ground a moment later in the form of countless dragons. It was a breathtaking technique. The black knights were launched into the air, then fell back to the ground, motionless.

Father Blutgang let out a sigh of relief and took a cigarette out of his pocket. "You all need some more training. But don't worry, I didn't hit anything you need to survive. Make sure you toughen up a bit before you come back next time," he chuckled.

Chapter 10

The princess knight and the demonic armament made a choice. They would join together.

“Damn it!” Albrea panted, out of breath. Crossbow bolts whistled through the air as they flew at her. Boosted by magic, they would have been difficult to track with the naked eye, but by casting the sensory enhancement spell Accelerate, Albrea narrowly managed to repel them.

Clang! Albrea’s hand went numb. It felt like she had just slashed a solid iron cannon ball. Having already repelled dozens of bolts, her hand was soaked with blood from the constant impacts.

“Princess!” the children shouted.

“Stay hidden! Don’t step out of the magic circle!”

“Keep firing,” the black knights’ commander ordered, his voice utterly devoid of mercy. The knights loaded their crossbows in response, aimed, and fired. They staggered their timing, slowly chipping away at Albrea’s strength.

Nearing her limit, Albrea faltered. She couldn’t raise her arms properly. The blade of her sword was chipped and no longer usable. The more bolts she repelled, the more her chances of survival were whittled away.

“Fire.”

“Agh... Ah!” A jolt of pain ran through Albrea. Her leg had finally been hit. Though she twisted around, the spell on the magic bolt made it dig deeper into whatever it touched. A bolt fired into her left shoulder and shattered the bone, causing her immense pain.

“Cease fire. It’s time.” The commander drew his sword as he slowly approached Albrea. The shine of his claymore was like the cold gleam of an executioner’s ax.

Kneeling, Albrea pointed her sword at him with her shaking hand. She was

clearly exhausted. Her hair was a mess and blood was running down her cheek, but she glared coldly at the knight.

“You were magnificent,” he said, looking down at her. “However, this is the end for you, sixth princess.”

“I’m not finished yet...” Albrea panted.

“Surrender and accept your fate. Your soul won’t go to waste. You will live on within the soul of our lord.”

“I’d rather not. Have you no shame? You even aimed at the children to distract me!”

“I told you we would use any means at our disposal. This is all for our lord!”

“You know doing this would never make Brother happy!” Albrea shouted, exasperated and angry.

The commander stopped his blade for a moment and stood silent, hesitating, but soon the gleam returned to his eyes and he raised his claymore above his head.

Albrea was cornered. She didn’t move. The knight said nothing else. Once he brought down his sword, her head would be separated from her body. She had no armor to protect her, and only a borrowed, battered shortsword. It was the end.

Albrea closed her eyes, and for some reason, she recalled the duke’s smile along with the gentle words he had told her.

You have to watch for your opponent’s strike.

Albrea’s eyes went wide. As she looked up, the approaching claymore felt like an assassin’s dagger. Riding on its blade were regret, humiliation, and shame. It was sorrowful, as though the stifled roar of a man was overflowing from the edge.

Everything was clear to her. The commander’s breathing, the creaking of his muscles and bones. She could see it all, down to the drops of sweat pouring out of him. She could see the rapidly approaching future where it sliced through her neck, beheading her.

But she also saw numerous means of defense leading up to that final moment. That must have been what the duke meant. The moment she understood, Albrea's body had already taken action. She raised her sword, catching the oncoming claymore with the edge of her blade. Then, with a slight push to the side, she heard that sound again: the sound she'd heard the only time her wooden sword had clashed with the duke's.

The coming future had been overwritten. The claymore that should have sliced through her neck had been deflected to the side and pierced the ground instead. She could see the astonished look in the commander's eyes through his helmet. Without thinking, Albrea released her sword and made a tight fist, channeling her little remaining mana into her hand just like she would her magic sword.

Then you need only use the skills ingrained in you to turn the tables on them.

"Oooohhhhhh!" The next second, a thunderous impact echoed through the hall. Albrea's fist connected with the commander's face.

She put everything she had into the blow, then fell forwards and collapsed. The commander was sent flying into his knights. His men were momentarily stunned, but quickly formed a defensive line around him. Yet they trembled with fear and were too overwhelmed to fire their crossbows at her.

The sight of Albrea standing back up like an undead must have been terribly frightening. Blood continued to flow from her shoulder and leg. She was so badly wounded it was a miracle she could even stand. Fire in her eyes, she lifted up her sword and pointed it at the black knights.

"You shouldn't be able to move!" one of them shouted. "Wh-Where is that strength coming from?!"

"There is but one thing that drives me—my oath as a knight to protect innocent lives!" Albrea's voice was as clear and passionate as a choir's song. The light pouring in from the ceiling shone on her, making her look almost divine. "One thing is clear to me. Your hearts are not corrupted. The hesitation in your blade is proof of that. There's still time! Stow your blades before you truly become the monsters you claim to be!"

"Silence. We have already fallen," the commander said. "This is all we can do

for our lord who uplifted us from outcasts to knights!”

“You’re mistaken! None can escape death. It was *because* Brother knew his fate that he strived so hard to be a good leader. He was known as the wise king despite being only a prince. He even encouraged a failure of a princess like me!”

“Enough! Don’t you dare speak of fate!” the commander howled. Fate. That was his true foe. “We don’t believe in fate! His Highness the third prince should be the one to rule this kingdom! He can’t die of some disease with his dreams still unachieved!”

Albrea was appalled. “So you would target not only me, but children as well? Think of how terrible Brother would feel if he heard about this!”

“Don’t act like you know his desires! He would want to be revived! And if all it takes is the life of his talentless sister, this is what he would order me to do!”

Albrea couldn’t help but take pity on him. He was just like she was before she met the duke. She saw her impatient, lost, distorted self. Nobody had wanted that from her, yet she thought it was how she had to be.

Albrea couldn’t help but laugh. Had she truly been so foolish and unsightly? She felt nothing but gratitude towards the people of Montt who had warmly accepted and guided her in spite of that. “It’s not too late! Sheathe your blades! Please! I’ll say it as many times as it takes! Brother wouldn’t want this!”

“Quiet, quiet, quiet!” the commander shouted, shaking off Albrea’s pleas. “What hunter would stow away their bow when their prey is right in front of them?! Take aim!” Their crossbows were pointed at Albrea, the bolts glowing with magical light. They were likely at maximum output, capable of piercing straight through iron. The commander seemed to have lost sight of his objective and was now intent on fully crushing her.

Albrea was powerless. She fell to her knees, realizing that her words wouldn’t reach him. Still, she had promised the duke she would protect the children.

“Wha?!” Albrea was taken aback by what she suddenly saw before her. The children were standing in front of her, arms outstretched, using themselves to shield her.

“What are you doing?! Hurry up and hide!” Albrea exclaimed.

“S-Stop bullying the princess!” said Nito.

“Ganging up on her isn’t fair! I’m gonna tell my dad!” the short-haired boy shouted.

“Meow! We’re not giving the princess to you! Bring it on!” Mill yelled.

All of the children, both boys and girls, were protecting her. The black knights faltered for a moment.

“You guys—”

“Pay them no mind!” the commander ordered, cutting Albrea off. “Fire! We’re going to slaughter all the villagers anyway! It doesn’t matter if it comes now or later!” Putting their hesitation behind them, they seemed to have made up their minds to truly become villains. The knights once again took aim.

Albrea closed her eyes. There was nothing to be done. The situation was hopeless. Even if she offered up her head, she knew they would still kill them all. “I’m sorry, Duke. I really am all talk. I couldn’t even protect the children.”

Just as she’d given up hope, a lighthearted voice echoed through the hall. “I beg to differ, princess knight.”

The moment the crossbows fired, a magic wall was deployed in front of Albrea with incredible speed. Just as the magic bolts made impact with the purple, multi-layered barrier, countless glowing arms reached out, snatching the bolts out of midair and disappearing back into the wall.

“What in the—huh?” The surrounding area grew dark. For a moment, Albrea thought she had died, but she still had her head and all her limbs. Everything around her seemed sluggish. She was the only one who could move. “What is this?”

“My trump card. Though without a pact, it took a while to set up.” Egmort approached her from behind, moving normally as well. Casually strolling past the astonished faces of the black knights, he stood in front of Albrea. “Man, this takes me back. It reminds me of the thing Al used to do when he was cornered.”

“Th-This was your doing?”

“Yep. Impressive, huh? I’m a shield. Just as I can take blows, I can also repel

them. I can even repel time itself, though only briefly.” He said it like it was no big deal, but magic controlling time and space was borderline forbidden. Not only was it dangerous, but the vast amount of mana required was said to kill the user on the spot. “Sorry, I really should have stepped in sooner, but I was captivated. And I had a decision to make.”

“A decision?”

“Yeah. Now, don’t speak.” Egmort created a green magic circle—healing magic. “This comes first.” The magic circle burst, and gentle spheres of light sunk into Albrea’s wounds. The pain soon faded, and her swollen face quickly healed. Even her fatigue seemed to disappear alongside her injuries.

“My wounds! I can move!”

“Hee hee hee. I need you to look your best if I’m going to welcome you.”

“’Welcome me’? I’m not following anything you’re saying”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’ve fallen for you. I knew it the moment you touched me. We’re meant to be. And you’ve proven you have the qualifications to wield me. So I want to offer myself up to you.” Egmort gave an exaggerated bow and kneeled down, hanging his head before Albrea.

“I am the Fortress of Seclusion, Egmort. One of the seven demonic armaments forged by Demon Duke Tyrfing. That name means I stand in hazy seclusion, rejecting all things in this everlasting world. But now, captivated by your heart, I shall open the gates that have been eternally shut. My master. My beloved princess knight. I welcome you into my secluded palace. Please, tell me your name.”

Albrea hesitated. “No, I don’t deserve to wield one of the legendary demonic armaments...”

“You have what it takes. I’ve acknowledged you. Or do you not want me?” Egmort smiled, his head still lowered.

While Albrea was unable to answer, a glowing light shot out of Egmort. It appeared to unravel, becoming thin threads and floating through the air. Then Albrea finally noticed it; Egmort’s arms and legs were gradually rusting over.

“You’re rusting! No...you’re crumbling!”

“Do you remember what I told you? If I use up my power without a pact I turn into scrap iron. To be honest, I’ve been kinda pushing myself. Charm’s not a big deal, but all those Kon Shields made my pinky finger crumble away already. Their magic bolts really hurt.”

Albrea shook her head in disbelief. “Why would you go so far for me? I’m all talk. I can’t even protect a few kids.”

“I disagree. Consider this a show of good faith. You have what it takes to be a hero. That’s why you were led here—to an old empty castle outside a village in the middle of nowhere. That’s gotta be fate, don’t you think?” Egmort was rusting and crumbling away from the knees down. His face remained composed, but he was undoubtedly under immense strain.

Albrea was flustered, unsure why he chose her, but one look at the children’s faces and her doubt faded. They were powerless, yet they were risking their lives to protect her. Egmort was the same, crumbling away in order to defend her. They had decided she was worth protecting.

There was only one thing to do. A demonic armament pact. It was the only way to escape the situation. Certainly, she was afraid of becoming a fiend, but the demonic armament himself had said he’d fallen for her and offered up his very life. He had made the absolute worst possible first impression, but the look on his face as he awaited her answer was genuine.

It was the first time a member of the opposite sex had ever looked at her so sincerely. All she’d ever done was swing a sword, so she didn’t know how to respond to his straightforward affection. But what kind of knight would she be if she didn’t answer the resolve of a man who’d sacrificed himself for her? How could she call herself a knight if she didn’t protect the people? The children? The one to whom she owed her life?

Albrea made up her mind. “I’ll gladly become a fiend!” Without a second thought, and without being told what to do, she held her right hand out in front of Egmort’s lips. “You shall have my answer. My name is Albrea van Bilegga. A knight entrusted with the blessing of the west in defense of the kingdom. I cut down evil, and even myself, to prevent injustice. I fight to protect the people!”

A gust of wind rushed between the two. It was ominous and purple, yet the mana running through the current sparkled like a gemstone. Time returned to normal.

Sensing that something was amiss, the black knights rushed to reload their crossbows, but it was too late. The pact had been formed. Fate had begun to move.

“You have my answer! If you claim to have fallen for me—if you will offer me your life, then I’ll have you accompany me to the end, Egmort!” Albrea’s eyes opened wide. “I am a knight! The one who caught the eye of the Fortress of Seclusion! I am no longer a knight of the kingdom, nor am I blessed by the west! I am a fiend! My name is Demonic Armament Knight Albrea!”

“Woo! Awesome! Let’s do this, Master!” Egmort cheered.

A black veil engulfed Albrea and Egmort. After a brief moment, it opened up like a lotus flower, revealing the form of a knight. Egmort had become a shield, held by Albrea, who was now armored and clad in sinister purple flames.

“Wh-What?! Demonic armament?!” the commander shouted in fear. “D-Don’t falter! Fire!”

Albrea didn’t so much as flinch, simply standing there and cracking her knuckles. A magic barrier instantly formed around her, stopping the bolts and sending them clattering to the ground.

“Sh-Shit! A devil! She’s a witch who formed a pact with a devil!”

“Wrong,” Albrea’s voice boomed. “This shield is the son of Duke Tyrfing, the father of our kingdom who revolted against the Demon Lord one thousand years ago. He’s one of the heroes who fought alongside Lord Alberzeit!”

“What nonsense! As if the demonic armaments from a thousand years ago actually exist! Activate the golems! Kill the witch!” The commander’s order was accompanied by the rumble of destruction. The castle doors were broken down, and three stone golems emerged.

“You even had golems prepared?” Albrea was shocked. The golems were official weapons of the kingdom, but the commander was likely using them without authorization. “You were planning on destroying the village from the

start!” she shouted.

“We always see things through. That’s how the third prince’s personal knights, the Shadow Hounds, operate. Now go! Crush them!” The commander barked out another order and the stone golems began moving into the castle, the ground shaking beneath them.

Albrea broke out in a cold sweat when suddenly the foremost golem stopped in its tracks.

“What’s going on?! What are you doing?!” the commander demanded.

“I don’t know! Golem one suddenly stopped working! It’s not responding!” As the black knights were panicking, a loud crash came from the golem.

“The stone golem is...crumbling?” Albrea said in wonder. A crack appeared in the golem’s head, traveling down its body until it split in two. It soon collapsed into pieces, an avalanche of rubble falling on the black knights.

“Looks like we made it in time.” A solitary figure stood amidst the thick cloud of dust. With wings outstretched like the Demon Lord, it was clearly inhuman. Its tail whipped back and forth, powerful enough to slice a human in half. The horns atop its head shone gold in the light. In its hand was a blazing, pitch-black greatsword.

“Duke!” Albrea cried out.

“We’ll talk later, Albrea. I’ll handle the other two golems. You take down the leader!” His back to Albrea, the duke snapped his fingers.

A moment later, a sword appeared in front of her. The pommel and grip were familiar, but the blade was shorter than the one she knew. Unsheathing it, she discovered a beautiful wood grain metal. “Wow. It feels like it’s overflowing with mana.”

“Papa must’ve gotten carried away again,” said Egmort. “He’s the same as ever. Speaking of that, it doesn’t look like Yoto’s changed a bit either.” An arm stretched out from Albrea’s shield and pointed.

Yoto was already in her demonic sword form, mana rising out of her as though to show her rage. “What the hell do you think you’re doing destroying

someone's home?! You even broke down the door! Do you assholes wanna die a million times over?!" With a swing of her blade, a wall of fire appeared, separating Albrea from Yoto and the duke. From the other side of the flickering wall, the terrified black knights watched as the stone golems were overwhelmed, unable to put up a fight.

"Sis is just as scary as ever," Egmort sighed. "Apparently, she's called the Demonic Sword of Frost because she can even melt an iceberg into a frosty mist when she gets angry...but she seems more like the pissed off Demonic Sword of Hellfire to me."

"Shh. Don't be rude to Yoto. You'll get burned to a crisp," Albrea chided.

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience. Nice."

The commander was standing motionless. It seemed he had been blown away when the golem was destroyed. "It can't be. A greater demon and a demonic sword. Is it really true?" He watched dumbfounded as his men and the stone golems went down one after another on the other side of the wall of flames.

"I told you," said Albrea. "And this shield is the duke's son. The legend still lives."

"I see. Not only do you refuse to fall, but you were chosen by a demonic armament. It seems fate has smiled upon you from the very beginning."

"If fate had smiled upon me, none of this would have ever happened. I'll ask you again: stow your blade. Nobody has died yet. The duke will—"

"No! Someone *has* died!" the commander yelled. "And we won't allow our lord to die alone!"

He was so pitiful it was difficult to watch. The commander was no doubt wallowing in the depths of hopelessness. He had probably sacrificed a great deal just to get his hands on the forbidden spell. The decision to target Albrea, and then to burn down the village must have been causing him great pain.

The commander was just like her. Honest to a fault. He was more than just talk—he had gotten to where he was by struggling and relentlessly pursuing his ideals. His actions may have been heinous, and nearly resulted in her death, but Albrea couldn't bring herself to hate him.

“There are some things that can never be undone, but it’s not too late for you,” Albrea said.

“I’ve exhausted all the means at my disposal. At the very least, I can prove myself as His Highness’s strongest knight by taking the Sword Princess’s head!” the commander roared.

“Hold on... I know I’m not one to talk, but this is crazy!” said Egmort.

“Enough, Egmort. We are knights. We speak through our blades,” Albrea said. She patted her shield, then readied her blade. She took an intuitive stance, not one she’d been previously taught. She held her shield in front of her, hiding the length of her sword. Despite her exhaustion, she stood with her legs bent, facing the black knight head-on.

The commander hefted his claymore on his shoulder, rubbing his hand over a pattern on the guard. A moment later, a magic circle appeared behind him and his claymore began to glow, its blade extending ever so slightly.

“Is that a magic sword?! Did you steal it from Brother?!”

“No, it was a gift from His Highness! The magic it contains is a Sword Boost focused solely on slicing. It can cut through anything within its range, even blessed metals! You may have a demonic armament, but Aegis Eater will still reach you!”

His pale blue blade had an air about it that matched his determination. It let out a high-pitched hum, sparks crackling out of it and bursting into glowing light. To demonstrate his point, the commander thrust his sword into a golem finger that had rolled to his feet. It sank right into the stone the size of a human leg without the slightest resistance.

Albrea’s magic sword was effective against large groups and armies, while the commander’s was specialized in efficiently cutting down a single target. Its activation speed and duration were the exact opposite of her sword’s.

“That thing might be a problem,” said Egmort. “It’s like a saw made up of Dispel magic. It’ll probably be really effective against a lump of mana like me.”

“But a shield isn’t just for blocking blows, is it? It’s a weapon that repels, conceals, deflects, and creates an opportunity for victory. I won’t let you get

hurt," Albrea replied.

"You said it, Master. Make sure you protect me, all right?"

"That's my line. Let's go!"

There was no signal to begin the battle, but both sides collided as though launched by some unseen force. The commander swung his sword, his magic remaining active. Although his magic sword was capable of cutting through anything without the need for excessive force, he still let out a battle cry as he slashed.

Even Egmort wasn't sure how he would fare if he took a blow like that head-on, but Albrea didn't falter. She stared right at his sword, then a clanging sound rang out between them.

"Wha?!" The commander was in disbelief. He was certain he had been in range and should have cut right through Albrea. It was as though spacetime itself had warped, throwing his strike off course.

The moment his claymore was about to strike her, Albrea had aligned Egmort not against the edge of his blade, but the flat side, quickly pushing it off course. His sword was certainly formidable, but only its cutting ability had been enhanced, meaning the edge of the blade was all Albrea had to fear. As a result, it missed her head, swinging harmlessly past her.

"It's over!" Albrea thrust forward, aiming her blade at the base of his throat. Normally his armor would have blocked such an attack, but he was leaning forward, leaving his neck exposed.

If she could break his collarbone, he wouldn't be able to swing his sword anymore. Albrea planned on ending the fight then and there, but this time it was her turn to be surprised. With seemingly superhuman reaction speed, the commander ducked, avoiding her thrust entirely. No ordinary person could have performed such a feat. He must have cast strengthening magic on himself without her noticing.

"Let's see if a woman can withstand this!" Naturally, a longsword user had a plan for when his sword missed the mark. His head still lowered, he attempted a shoulder tackle using the weight of his armor. Being hit by a large man in full

plate armor was akin to being struck by a charging carriage.

“You didn’t forget about me, did you, old man?” Egmort’s arm, full of conviction, extended out from the shield and struck the commander’s face with the back of his fist. Though it was slender, the impact of his metal hand was enough to dissuade the commander from his tackle.

Both combatants put some distance between each other. Bursting with energy, countless strikes seemed to fill the space between them.

“Thank you for the assist, Egmort.”

“Of course. You’re my fated partner. I won’t let you get a single scratch on your face.”

“In that case, I suppose I can get a little reckless. Keep your guard up!”

Albrea and the commander collided once again. The commander’s pale blue sword flashed, followed by echoing clangs. Despite being heavily battered, every strike seemed to reinvigorate him. He roared fiercely as he swung his sword, but Albrea could see every trajectory it took and continued to parry it with her own blade.

“Take this!” Slipping through his rain of blows, Albrea delivered a sharp strike. The black knight blocked it with his sword and responded with a slash that seemed to drain the life out of him. Neither of them took a step back, their strong wills colliding into each other.

The commander’s skill was formidable, rivaling Albrea, the kingdom’s foremost knight. Had she been alone, she might well have been overwhelmed by the difference in their physical strength. But she wasn’t alone anymore. She had Egmort by her side, as well as her new sword. There wasn’t a single reason she should lose.

Her sword bounced and flew. Thrusts like darting birds, hidden slashes like mist. Spinning horizontal strikes unleashed like tornadoes, downward slices like splitting bamboo. She put her whole body into her blows, painting a picture of her determination, her hope, her despair, and her very way of life.

Her sword danced and howled. Her shield responded in turn, fending off every blow directed at its master. She held up her partner and swung the blade

that had become one with her arm. Gradually the balance started to crumble.

“Gwah!”

Albrea’s sword began to reach the commander. She whittled away at his armor, sending the joints flying and cutting deep into the exposed chain mail. His hardened defenses were being chipped away bit by bit. Albrea wasn’t doing damage deliberately, but her sword seemed to have a mind of its own, running wild as it pleased.

Think of swords like cats. If her shield was like a man cuddling up with her, then as Yoto had said, her sword was more akin to a cat. It made strikes Albrea herself hadn’t even intended, yet her body flowed in harmony with it as though she had. As she entrusted herself to her sword and relied on her shield, Albrea grew sharper with each passing moment.

“Don’t play with me!” the commander roared. He seemed to have realized he couldn’t win. Determined to put an end to their fight in one final move, he traced the pattern on his magic sword’s guard multiple times, making the sword grow even larger. He increased the output of the spell beyond what was intended, unfazed by the possibility of his sword breaking.

“How reckless!” Albrea shouted.

“Master, hold me up,” said Egmort.

“Like this?”

“You stand before the indistinct haze,” Egmort began chanting. “A desolate tranquility none may traverse. The sealed black gates of the fortress. Not even fleeting time itself shall cross this barrier. Demon’s Wall!” Squirming, translucent arms emerged from the purple, hemisphere-shaped defensive barrier Egmort created, clinging to Aegis Eater. They seemed to absorb its mana, shrinking the magic sword and erasing its spell.

“Argh! Again! As many times as it takes!” The commander rubbed his magic sword once more. The manastone embedded in the guard popped out as he filled the sword with more mana than it could hold.

“He’s gonna get himself killed doing that.” As Egmort said, the commander seemed to be at his limit. He had maintained his spell for a long time, and was

pushing its output beyond its capacity. Judging from the red liquid dripping from his helmet, he was likely coughing up blood. It seemed to be willpower alone that kept him going.

However, Albrea couldn't get careless—willpower sometimes defied logic. His strength may not last forever, but the commander hadn't gotten any weaker just yet.

"We'll settle this before that happens! Seal Purge!" Albrea's magic sword extended in an instant, its speed incomparable to how it was before Yoto broke it. The sword of light appeared without even needing an incantation. "Whoa! What is this?!"

"Papa's handiwork," Egmort explained. "The wood grain pattern bypasses the need to gather mana from the earth and sky."

Though Albrea didn't know exactly how it worked, she understood that she didn't need an incantation anymore. Long incantations served as a safety measure, yet the duke of all people had removed it. "But this is exactly what I need right now! Let's go!"

The sword of light soon reached its peak, surging with mana on a completely different scale than it used to. "My guidance is complete and I have traversed the west. I shall cut through curses far and wide, clearing up dark clouds and drawing a rainbow halo!"

The sky shook and the light reflected Albrea's heart. A singular light composed of all the colors of the rainbow. The colors represented the smiles of all the people she must protect, and the halo was the peace the village had taught her.

"Magic sword—Sacred Overdrive!"



Albrea fired off her magic sword, the commander unleashing his own in response. Two pillars of light collided, making the air itself vibrate. For a

moment it seemed like a deadlock, but the outcome had already been determined.

The black knights were not even truly fighting for their beloved lord, but Albrea was fighting for the people. Their strength was evenly matched, so if there was a difference between them, it laid in their intent. A sword that had engorged itself on fiction could never overcome one forged in reality.

Albrea's sword was cutting through the commander's. Aegis Eater, the magic sword that sliced through magical and physical material alike, rejecting even blessings and spells, creaked as her sword dug into it.

"This can't be! I received this sword from His Highness!"

"It's over!"

Their clashing mana expanded, unleashing a blinding light. Finally, after a sharp crack, the light suddenly dissipated. The two emerged with their swords pointed at each other, but the commander's was missing its blade. It had shattered at his feet.

"Your Highness..." The commander dropped to his knees, then fell motionless. His will to fight had been broken along with his sword. The wounds and fatigue he had been ignoring finally took their toll.

Remaining vigilant, Albrea checked his neck for a pulse. Though on the verge of death, he was still alive. Breathing a sigh of relief, she sheathed her beloved sword.

"Woo! Not bad for our first fight, huh, Master?" Egmort praised Albrea, but she shook her head in response.

"No, I still have a ways to go. Had I ended it in one strike, his life wouldn't have been in danger. I'm still nothing compared to the duke."

"Now, now, you did a great job. Thank you for protecting the children." Albrea turned her head and saw the duke with the children clinging tightly to his legs. They all raced towards Albrea and gave her a big hug.

"I'm glad you're all safe," said Albrea. The children all looked up at her with sparkling eyes.

“You were so cool, Princess!” said the short-haired boy.

“Meow, meow! That was amazing! You’re like a hero from a story!” Mill cheered.

“Thank you, Princess! You truly are incredible!” added Nito.

The children were in high spirits, looking at Albrea with envy. Even after the trauma they had just experienced, they were still full of energy. Perhaps it was because they were the children of heroes.

“Duke.” Albrea finally spoke to the demon.

“We’ve finished up on our end as well. Yoto was about to go on a rampage. It was quite troublesome.”

“Of course I was angry. Who do you think maintains this place?” Yoto fumed, hands on her hips. Faint screams of anguish could be heard coming from behind her. She was probably subjecting the knights to some sort of harsh magical torture as a means of punishment.

“Miss Yoto...” Albrea paused.

“I told you, just call me Yoto. Good job protecting the children, Albrea. I see Master acknowledged you for a reason. I’m sure the war would have ended much faster had you been around a thousand years ago.”

That was the highest praise Albrea could receive, especially coming from someone as straightforward as Yoto. She measured up even to the standards of one thousand years ago. Albrea was so happy she wanted to cry. “You flatter me. I’m just lucky to be alive.”

Yoto rolled her eyes. “You’re being overdramatic. But I must ask, why is Egmort of all people with you?”

“That’s right! What is the meaning of this, Egmort?!” the duke demanded. “You went and formed a pact!”

“Hey, Papa! Sis too! I woke up from a long nap and met a lovely lady!” said Egmort.

“I’m sorry, Duke,” Albrea apologized. “This was our only option. Is it a problem?”

“Hmm... Well, if you’ve been chosen, then I suppose it was fate, but there is still one problem.” The duke looked seriously at Albrea. “Do you feel strange at all? A feeling like... How should I put this? Hmm...” He stumbled over his words.

“What Master is trying to ask is: do you feel aroused?” Yoto said flatly.

“Aroused?!” Albrea asked in disbelief.

The duke covered his face with his hands. Yoto had come right out with it. “Yes, aroused. When you form a pact with a demonic armament, the synchronization between the two of you leads your thoughts to take after his. Originally, Lord Alberzeit only had a gambling problem, but after his pact with Egmort, he turned into a lecher as well.”

Albrea just tilted her head. “Not particularly... I don’t feel anything out of the ordinary.”

“Oh? That’s odd...” Yoto tilted her head the same way, then seemed to have a realization. Her face turned pale, then flushed bright red. “Egmort! You didn’t!”

“Bingo!” Egmort was beaming. “It’s not a pact, it’s a subordination agreement! She has all the power, so there’s no synchronization! Because I’m in love with her! My master’s the most beautiful woman in the world!” Egmort laughed as the duke’s mouth hung open and Yoto’s face flushed so bright steam was about to come out. Unsure what was going on, Albrea could only look around in confusion.

“Y-You moron! How could you do that without telling me?! You’re practically married now!” the duke shouted.

“Married?!” Albrea asked in a panic.

“What should I do? I’m not ready to be called sister-in-law yet. My heart isn’t prepared.” Albrea had never seen Yoto act so embarrassed before.

The duke was distraught. “You’ve never been one to do what you were told, but this is too far. I think I’m going to cry.”

“Now, now, my friend, no need to be so uptight. If you love something, set it free. Isn’t that what they say?” From the rubble emerged none other than the mastermind behind the entire series of events, Gilmeus, wearing a mischievous

smile.

“Gilmeus! Where have you been?!” the duke demanded.

“Do forgive me. I can only use a little bit of magic, so I’m not really cut out for battle. Besides that, I had some work to take care of. I still do, in fact.” Gilmeus ignored the looks of disapproval aimed at him and lightly approached the commander of the black knights, who was incapable of moving due to mana depletion. He fiddled with his armor and a leather pouch at his side, before pulling out a scroll. Given the ominous mana oozing out of the parchment, it could only be the forbidden spell.

“What is that?” the duke asked.

“The cause of this whole incident. He was trying to use this to revive the deceased third prince. They were planning on using Princess Albrea’s body as a catalyst, and their own souls as compensation.”

“A forbidden spell?! Why didn’t you mention that sooner?!”

“As if I could. Have you forgotten the situation the kingdom is in right now? It should have been written in Master Daltorion’s paper. And I’m sure she mentioned it to you personally before publishing it. That’s just how she is.”

“Oh! You mean the peace negotiations with the country to the south?” the duke recalled.

“Correct. It may not have grown into a full-blown war, but we’ve had disputes with them for a long time. Imagine if word of a scandal involving a forbidden spell were to get out now. The king’s reputation is on the line. Worst-case scenario, it could have even resulted in negotiations being broken off. Wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

The duke groaned. Now that he knew Gilmeus’s true objective, he was in no position to object. In his own way, Gilmeus had been acting out of concern for the kingdom. Things would have been even worse if Albrea had encountered the black knights while still in the royal palace. And if he had asked the duke to evacuate from the start, the black knights may well have grown suspicious and hidden the forbidden scroll.

“So in order to settle things quietly and hopefully find the source of the spell,

you sent Albrea to the village, knowing she would only cause more chaos if she remained in the royal palace. Then you sealed your own lips to prevent anyone from finding out." After the duke finished speaking, Yoto pulled on his arm as though to say "that's enough." The oblivious duke was confused for a moment, but upon seeing the embarrassed expression on Albrea's face he understood. Everyone knew things would have turned out much worse had she remained her old self. Yoto was reprimanding him for tactlessly pointing that out. "Ahem. Anyway, all's well that ends well. My castle is a small price to pay to keep the kingdom at peace."

Yoto, however, wasn't so pleased. "Well, I happen to be very irritated. Where am I even supposed to begin cleaning all this up?"

"Sorry about that, Yoto, and I appreciate your understanding, Duke. Well, I'd best be on my way. The hero's triumphant return calls for a banquet. I'll of course be joining as a friend. Yes, yes, what a happy ending!" Gilmeus concluded the conversation on his own and began his return to the village, forbidden scroll in hand.

It felt like he was running away, but he had at least provided a proper explanation. The duke sighed, still feeling somewhat unsatisfied. "I suppose there's nothing to be done."

Chapter 11

The con man sighed. The finale was still a ways off.

“Ah, Duke. Welcome back.” When the duke and the others returned to the village, the battle was over and Porion’s sweet voice greeted them. The unconscious black knights had been stripped of their gear and piled up in the square. She was speaking with employees of Fairy Equipment, calculating the value of their belongings. A greedy look in her eyes, Porion let out a vulgar laugh every once in a while.

“What in the world is this?” asked Albrea.

“Porion’s labyrinth magic,” the duke answered. “The village is temporarily designated as her labyrinth, allowing her to charge an entry fee.”

“An entry fee? But from the looks of it...”

“The rules are simple. Any scoundrels who enter without paying the fee are punished. Their debt racks up as they advance, and by the time they make it here they’re stark naked. Then all we have to do is round them up.”

“So that’s why the village is laid out like a maze.”

The duke smiled. “You have a good eye. Though it’s also because Porion is a bit ill-tempered. She modified the magic such that the bill arrives all at once when you reach the square. Once stripped to their underwear, they are but normal humans. Then the Holy Fist who can slay dragons with his bare hands finishes the job.” The duke pointed at a shirtless Father Blutgang, enjoying a midday toast and drinking boisterously with the other villagers.

Porion came skipping over in high spirits. “Duke! Look, I made a killing! There’s enough here to hold two festivals! Hee hee, this is why I just can’t quit.” At times she seemed to be devoid of attachments, but in reality she was quite the cheapskate.

“Good, good. Well done, everyone! Give your thanks to the Creator! Your blessings to Albrea! We’re going to celebrate today!” The village came alive at

the duke's words, quickly changing into a festival ground with people drinking, singing, and roasting meat.

Albrea looked around in awe. When her focus returned, Egmort had disappeared from her side. After looking around, she found him in the shadow of Porion's magic item shop, hitting on a village girl.

★

Before long a feast was prepared, the merrymaking began, and the square became a place of chaos. The villagers drank and danced about with enough energy to make one wonder where it all came from. However, Montt was a refuge for living legends—their stamina was limitless.

When Egmort had been discovered trying to slink away with a village girl, his older sister Yoto dragged him away for a harsh scolding. When he returned, he was on the verge of tears, so Yoto had no doubt raked him over the coals. Despite that, he was undeterred from slipping away to try and lay his hands on another girl, this time resulting in Albrea knocking him unconscious.

The hero of the hour, Albrea ate, laughed, enjoyed herself, and in the end drunk herself into a stupor at the encouragement of the villagers. Yoto and an exhausted Egmort carried her on their shoulders back to her room, and she was probably in bed relatively early.

The duke quietly drank his ale, listening to the villagers' happy voices and watching their smiles. Nothing made the old man happier than seeing other people filled with joy. But he couldn't stop his thoughts from drifting back to the black knights. They were just like the Demon Lord's army of old.

A thousand years ago, the Demon Lord's army had been a powerful force united by their leader's charisma. Demons originally had an insular culture divided into small clans, but realizing that they couldn't compete in the war separately, the Demon Lord had brought them all together. The Demon Lord visited each clan one by one, persuading them and striking deals. Demon culture was drastically reformed, and soon they raised an army.

That achievement stole the hearts of the demon youth at the time. The Demon Lord was akin to their savior. After becoming the arms and legs of the Demon Lord, the demons gradually lost control of themselves. They swore

revenge in the Demon Lord's name, and as a result many committed heinous acts of violence. In the end, it became common for them to treat other races as lower than livestock.

The duke had understood the feeling, but the demons were doing the very same thing the humans had. By the time he tried to warn the Demon Lord, the entire continent had been engulfed by jet-black malice. The duke's pleas had fallen on deaf ears as the desire for revenge clouded the Demon Lord's mind. In fact, he was even criticized for lowering the morale of the army.

Unable to bear that treatment, the duke had retired from the Demon Lord's army. He had been living alone in hiding when he met the hero Bilegga. It could only be called fate. As a result of that chance encounter, the duke rose up in revolt against the Demon Lord.

He took the hero's hand and fought alongside him as the other Sacred Black Sword. He wanted to cut off the voices of resentment that had taken hold in the world. He wanted to stop the Demon Lord from committing any more atrocities, so with his own two hands, he killed her. He slew the woman he loved.

"Oh, so this is where you were, my friend." The duke looked up and found the instigator of all the recent drama, Gilmeus, standing there. He drunkenly stumbled over to the duke and sat next to him, letting out a foul belch. "Close call this time. Even I didn't know how it would turn out. I'm glad the princess was strong enough."

The duke side-eyed the bard. "Don't give me that, you con man. You expected things to turn out like this from the very beginning, didn't you?"

"Certainly not. I lack the ability to paint a picture of the future like Master Daltorion could in her prime. This was a bit of a gamble, but I tried to mitigate the risk as best I could. Don't you think that's worth some praise?" His face bright red, Gilmeus took another swig of ale. He let out a long breath after, seemingly a little out of it.

"Hmph. That's the best the kingdom's top spy can do?"

"I apologize if I upset you, friend. And I apologize for all the trouble I caused. I'll admit I neglected to mention a few things so it'd make a better story, but the

Shadow Hounds really did take action faster than I anticipated."

"You're a real piece of work. Now the princess is stuck with that foolish son of mine for the rest of her life. As a father, I couldn't be more ashamed."

"What's the harm? Egmort tends to drain the life of his wielder, so he's never grown attached to anyone besides Bilegga's companion Lord Alberzeit. It's a shame to let the demonic armaments waste away in that old castle. The princess seems to have him under control, so who knows, they might make a pretty good pair."

"You make it sound like it's not your problem. I suppose at times like these I'm just supposed to give them my blessing. I'm not too used to this." The duke was at his wit's end. His self-proclaimed friend couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the mighty demon worrying over trivial human concerns. "Anyway," the duke continued. "Tell me the truth. Who really set all this up?"

The bard chuckled. "Who do you think?"

"I highly doubt it was the king. Quit the act and come out with it already. Unless you want me to tell all the villagers who haven't realized it yet that you're a spy."

"That would be quite problematic, my friend," Gilmeus shot him a serious look. "Fine, to make up for the trouble I caused, I'll tell you. Try not to be too surprised. The one behind everything was none other than the third prince himself."

The duke raised his head. His eyes opened wide for a brief moment, then narrowed them again as though he had expected as much.

Gilmeus continued, "The third prince knew he didn't have much time left. Before he was bedridden, he consulted me on getting his affairs in order. This was quite a while ago."

"I see. That foresight was what made people think he'd make a wise king. But why would someone so talented set this nonsense up?"

"I suspect because he was too kind to admonish the ones who idolized him. The black knights... His personal knight order, the Shadow Hounds, were a rough bunch all with their own scars. The third prince saw talent in them that

would have otherwise gone unnoticed. He even went so far as to make them knights. Their gratitude towards him was immeasurable, and because of that, he realized he wouldn't be able to stop them if they went on a rampage. He knew they would one day try to lay a hand on his beloved sister, so he told me to protect her."

It was a tragic story—the result of corrupted devotion and faith. No one was truly at fault; they were all both victims and transgressors.

Gilmeus had likely been monitoring the Shadow Hounds for a while, and when he sensed they were about to make a move, he had tricked Albrea. Their coordinated actions couldn't be stopped within the palace, and trying would only lead to an internal conflict that would destroy both sides. In addition, he needed a location where it would neither cause rumors in the royal capital nor reach foreign ears. What better place than the remote village of Montt?

"How ironic that the heir would die before the king. I wonder what the Creator is thinking," the duke mused.

"Who knows? Gods and the like only get in the way of intelligence gathering. It's outside my purview. Letting my pen run wild and treating the whims of gods as nonsense is more popular with the readers." Gilmeus stood up and looked at the stars, his face still flushed. "Sparks of conflict are bound to pop up during a time of peace. You never know when one might ignite into a full-blown war. If there's anything I can do to put them out, then I need to do it, regardless of how I'm thought of as a result. Of course, I'll still be turning it into material for a story as my reward."

"Hmph, just make sure it doesn't come back to bite you. Your little bard act has caused a lot of trouble. Think of how I feel getting pulled in every direction!"

"And who's the one living in retirement when he has enough strength to resolve any problem? The current king may be doing well, but wealth, glory, and even sorrow and hatred can all lead to those sparks. Excess in all its forms is liable to grow into an uncontrollable blaze. Isn't that what happened one thousand years ago?"

"You know how to hit me where it hurts. I suppose I can think it over. When

the capital is aflame and all hope seems lost, I'll come leading a group of heroes, sword in hand."

"The legendary Wild Hunt, eh? I'm looking forward to it, my friend." Gilmeus stood, waved goodbye, and went on his way.

The duke saw him off with a sigh, then lit his pipe. "Eventually the flames of war will be but a memory," he said, taking a puff. "Until that smoke fades away and the world is truly at peace, I'll be here to clean up after the youth."

The duke heard an explosion in the sky as he downed his ale. The pyrotechnist had probably gotten drunk and started launching fireworks. Watching the explosions light up the night sky then quickly fade away, the duke slowly exhaled a puff of purple smoke.

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Gilmeus strolled through the village square in a good mood. Father Blutgang caught him along the way and forced Gilmeus to treat him to a drink, then the woman's association stopped him and demanded to know the latest trends in the royal capital. Finally Meikris grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and reminded him that he still hadn't paid his tab.

"You better not pull anything like this again. Run it by the duke first!"

"Next time bring a sexy older lady from the capital with you!"

Gilmeus received a rough welcome for being such a nuisance, but the people of the village still forgave him.

"Ahh, how lovely," he sighed. "A true happy ending. Maybe I should live here too. Build myself a nice house with a library, eat Lady Meikris's beef stew, tease Yoto a little bit, smoke with the duke. Yes, my own happy ending."

"Heh heh, you're sounding an awful lot like an old man there, Gil."

With a jolt, Gilmeus looked to his side and found an old woman sitting there. Daltorion was wearing her usual smile, but from time to time he saw a sharp glint in her squinting eyes. "Well, hello there, Master."

"I'd say you scored around eighty points this time. I'll overlook you indulging your hobby, but you still have some blind spots. If you were observing more

carefully, you would have anticipated the princess's change of heart. Then things would have been resolved more safely. Be a little more diligent next time."

"Harsh. I'll do my best to score a perfect hundred before you bite the dust."

"Heh heh, I'll be waiting. By the way, where did that forbidden scroll come from?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard from Porion that it was still sealed in her labyrinth, but she said something about the labyrinth itself felt off."

"If you've already inquired that much, then let me confirm that this scroll does indeed contain the same spell sealed by the Labyrinth Witch."

"Hmm..." Daltorion tilted her head for a moment. "It doesn't seem like either of them are forgeries."

"It's possible both are genuine, or at least close to genuine. We'll have to wait for the court magician's analysis to know for sure."

"So, boy," Daltorion said, eager to get to the heart of the issue. "What do you think the crux of this incident is?"

"You're as mean-spirited as ever. Yes, yes, I'll come out with it. How they got the scroll doesn't matter. The issue is that there's a person who passed something concerning the village to the black knights without us knowing."

Satisfied with her student's perfect answer, Daltorion smiled. "I'd expect no less from my best student. Your reasoning gets full marks at least."

"Am I allowed to be happy about that? Well, that aside, I suspect there's more trouble ahead. It pains me to admit it, but I think we have to assume that the mastermind has achieved their goal here."

"Indeed." Daltorion sighed.

Gilmeus shrugged his shoulders as though to say there was nothing to be done. "I just don't get it. From the way things turned out, it seems like the mastermind's objective was to bring Princess Albrea and Egmort together. Or any one of the demonic armaments, I suppose."

“In terms of numbers, of the seven demonic armaments, the second has found a new wielder. Only five remain.”

“...” Gilmeus was deep in thought.

Daltorion patted his shoulder. “Oh, no need to think about it too hard. That was just an old woman’s idle gossip.”

Be that as it may, Gilmeus couldn’t help but feel like she might be onto something. Numbers were always telling. Beyond the obvious changes, there was a broader context behind the scenes. It was none other than Daltorion who had taught him that.

“You’re welcome to call it quits if you’re afraid,” Daltorion reassured him. “This line of work isn’t easy.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m going to continue striving to be counted among the greatest of heroes. I still have a ways to go to match the duke of one thousand years ago. When it comes to putting together bestsellers and happy endings, I’ll gladly give it my all!”

Epilogue

“Listen up,” said the duke. “Don’t you ever forget your discretion. You’ve made an eternal vow with the princess.”

“I know, Papa!” said Egmort.

“Egmort. You better understand what it means to be together forever,” Yoto warned. “If you repeat your shameless behavior from one thousand years ago and make Albrea cry...you know what will happen to you, right?”

Egmort stood up straight. “E-Eek! I got it! I won’t make her cry! I won’t make her sad!” It seemed he was no match for Yoto.

“And you.” Yoto was cradling Albrea’s sword. “Make sure you protect your master. Your big sister will be praying for your safety.” She kissed it, rubbed the pommel, and gave it one final big hug before reluctantly handing it over to Albrea. “Take good care of her, Albrea. She gets jealous like I do, but it’s only because she loves you. Treat her right.”

Albrea nodded, taking the sword that was handed to her. There were tears in her eyes. All the emotions welling up inside her had her on the verge of crying again.

“You really are a crybaby,” Yoto sighed. “Make sure you take care of my foolish brother too.”

“I will. Thank you for everything, Sister.” Yoto’s normally expressionless face seemed to blossom upon being called sister. She wore an uncharacteristically large smile.

It had been one month since the incident. In order to protect the children, Albrea had formed a subordination agreement with a demonic armament. Such an agreement was exceedingly rare—according to the demonic armaments, it was akin to getting married.

Egmort had made such an important decision because he had fallen for Albrea, and his impulsiveness resulted in him getting yelled at by the duke for a week straight. At the same time, Albrea had become a demonic armament

knight and obtained the strength of an evil god. If her new strength was handled incorrectly, she could cause incalculable damage, so she had been training under the duke and Yoto, learning everything there was to know about the demonic armaments.

Needless to say, the incident caused quite the stir in the royal palace as well. Upon learning of it, the king quite literally came flying over on a dragon after concluding the peace negotiations. When he reached the sky over Montt, he dove off his dragon, landing on the ground in a magnificent bow, prostrating himself before the duke. The duke was so impressed he forgave him for the commotion he had caused.

The third prince was laid to rest by the black knights at a villa just outside the capital. There was much debate over both how to handle the black knights and what to do with the body, but in the end, a modest state funeral was held and the body was buried in the royal family's tomb. Thanks to a good word from the duke, the black knights were spared execution, though the investigation into their actions was still ongoing.

Albrea's treatment was also the subject of heated debate, but in light of her receiving a demonic armament from Duke Tyrfing, the father of the country, and preventing disaster from unfolding, she was promoted to the position of knight commander. It was decided that she would return to the royal palace and use her newfound power to defend the kingdom.

Everything was settled amicably, and peace returned to the village. The villagers returned to their normal lives until it was finally time for Albrea and Egmort to depart and everyone gathered to see them off.

"Take care in the capital. You two sure seem to have hit it off. Don't go catchin' a cold," said Father Blutgang.

"Thank you, Holy Fist," Albrea replied.

"I'm still not fond of the royal family, but I guess you're all right," Porion admitted. "Get in touch if anything happens. I know *all* their weaknesses."

"I will. I look forward to having tea with you again, Lady Porion."

One by one, the villagers said goodbye to Albrea and Egmort. Everyone

wished them the best.

“If things get rough, know that you’re always welcome here. This is your home,” said the duke.

“I can’t thank you enough for all the kindness you’ve shown me, Duke.”

“Think nothing of it. Serve the country, the people, and above all, serve yourself. That’s what being a knight is all about, no?”

“Right!” Albrea smiled, tears of joy in her eyes. Her expression was completely different from how it had been a month ago. It was the look of a strong woman and fearsome knight. “All right then. Time to go, Egmort.”

Egmort’s mind immediately went in the wrong direction. “To the capital! I wonder what kind of girls are waiting?” Already used to his behavior, Albrea pulled her sword slightly out of its scabbard, then slid it back inside, making a deliberately loud sound. “Eek! I was just kidding!”

“Would you look at that. She’s already got him trained,” the duke chuckled.

Yoto just sighed. “I’m worried for them.”

“Bye, Princess! Come back soon!” The children shouted after the two as they walked into the distance. Albrea and Egmort waved back, then took each other’s hands and headed towards the highway.

“To be honest, I’m not sure about this,” Father Blutgang grumbled. “Great power breeds conflict whether you like it or not. Maybe she’d be happier here in the village.”

“It’s rare for you to be such a worrywart, Blut,” the duke replied.

“She’ll be fine.” Yoto cut right through the priest’s concerns. She stuck her chest out with pride, her words full of confidence. “Because she’s my sister. And she’s not alone anymore either.”

“Quite right. She has Egmort, her sword, and of course us as well,” said the duke.

“Exactly.” Yoto nodded. “If she comes back on the verge of tears, then I’ll just treat her to another meal.”

“Hah hah hah. How reliable. Now, back to work, everyone. We’ve got to earn tonight’s drinks.” The duke spread his wings, and the children hung from them as though they had been waiting for this moment. Ordinarily, Yoto would have scolded them and said it was dangerous, but she decided to let it slide just for today.

The spring breeze glided over the duke’s horns. Sylphs flew by just as he took Yoto’s hand.

“It’s nice and warm today,” the maid said.

“It feels wonderful.”

How many battles and deaths had they overcome before they could say that? How much pain had the villagers at their side suffered through before they could smile? The children were blissfully unaware. It was better that way.

The fact that they could smile so innocently was their reward for all their struggles. This was Montt Village—also known as the home of people who reached their peaks, the maxed-out village. The paradise the duke had dreamed of so long ago had been built.

The villagers were all legends in their own right, so they understood the truth. People’s strength, ugliness, foolishness, and brilliance were all part of them. You had to accept that and love them, nurture them, then push them into the future anyway. They loved others in place of themselves.

Albrea, too, had been nurtured by them, and they had been nurtured in turn by the budding new hero. Just like the villagers, Albrea would no doubt get hurt and cry in the future, but she would also guide the world with her shining heroism.

“From the heavens to the earth, this kingdom is full of joy. May your journey as a knight be full of happiness, Albrea.” The duke smiled at the blue sky. It was boundless, connecting everything equally, just like the bond built between Albrea and the village of Montt. The demonic sword beside him smiled as well, looking up at the very same sky as her master.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Akinosuke Nishiyama. How did you like *The Retired Demon of the Maxed-Out Village: Blacksmith on the Borde*r? This book is about a greater demon duke with a heart of gold and a bunch of heroes living quiet lives in a remote village, but somehow trouble still manages to find them.

Set in a world of swords and sorcery, it plays with the idea of what happens to heroes after their story is concluded. It has a chill atmosphere, like that of a heartwarming RPG. It's nice, isn't it? The villagers have been through battles and adventures, getting hurt and growing as people, so they're kind and accepting no matter what sort of outsider might show up.

At the center of it all, the protagonist, the duke, is always kindhearted, and his maid Yoto was designed to be irresistibly cute. Influenced by her master's fondness for people, the demonic sword lives her life like a human and has as many traits as I could give her. She's cute, admirable, precocious, and super strong. Despite being a magical weapon, the old duke, the Labyrinth Witch, the outlaw former monk priest, the dwarven proprietress, and all the other villagers see her as an ordinary human girl. That was the sort of kind world I wanted to write.

The princess knight Albrea finds herself in the midst of all those characters and grows by experiencing true strength and kindness. I hope you were able to experience the charm of the maxed-out village through her.

This is a bit of a personal matter, but as a sort of prayer to make this work a success, I purchased the title of duke from the Principality of Sealand the other day. I parted with almost half the money from my second-place prize, but I am a nobleman now. You may call me Lord Nishiyama, Duke Nishiyama, or Your Grace Nishiyama. Ahem.

This is about the point where I should express my thanks to everyone who helped me. I would first like to thank my editors, Tsuchida-sama and Nakamizo-sama. You have truly guided this work, kindly answering my questions and accommodating my eccentricities, even when I had no idea what I was doing. I was constantly amazed at how the quality of work continued to increase as we created it together.

To the illustrator TAa-sama, I never imagined you would actually agree to

work on this project. Thank you so much for your wonderful artwork. Every time a rough draft came in, the editors and I would jump for joy, and when I saw the final versions, I was so moved I almost collapsed. I am so, so grateful.

This work was awarded second place in the 12th GA Bunko Awards, and I am truly grateful to the editorial department at GA Bunko and everyone involved.

To my friends and wife who always support me, I offer my heartfelt gratitude, and to the readers who picked up this book, my deepest appreciation. I will continue to pour my soul into my writing and deliver happiness to you all. Thank you for your support.

-Akinosuke Nishiyama